

The Curiously Dissociative Work of Spencer Finch

Nina Mehta

Spencer Finch is no ordinary landscape painter. Indeed, the moniker hardly suits him. His installations and art across a range of media—from drawings to pieces involving mosaic to fluorescent light sculptures—rarely portray recognizable landscapes and often involve no paint. Still, he assiduously depicts landscapes, shorn of every naturalistic element save one: color.

A minimalist abstract artist, Finch uses color as a conceptual lens. He measures the color of dawn at Troy with scientific instruments and reproduces the ambient light in a Manhattan

gallery. He renders a sunset in Texas as a 40-foot-long grid of colored fluorescent bulbs that cast precisely the same color and quality of light as the sunset.

In a curiously dissociative work called *Night Sky (over the Painted Desert, Arizona, January 11, 2004)*, he depicts the color of the night sky as an extravagant chandelier run amok. Looking at the light sculpture as it meanders across the ceiling, it's impossible to see the correspondence. Yet the sculpture replicates the precise color of the sky via chemical abstraction. The various combinations of different-sized glass bulbs represent the molecules of the four pigments—cobalt aluminate, titanium dioxide, ultramarine violet, and Mars black (an iron oxide)—that Finch would have used if he were reproducing the color of the night sky with paint. This work was included in the Whitney Museum of Art's 2004 Biennial exhibition.

Editor's Note

Light and color have been an essential ingredient in multimedia: from the first time the house lights were dimmed to draw attention to the stage to the real-time mapping of light and music to create a unique and live immersive experience; and from the symbolic uses of color to the realistic graphics of a sophisticated computer game. In computer graphics, realism is achieved by approximating the interaction of light and surfaces. Artistic uses of light to evoke or better tell a story or convey information are emulated with simulated lighting effects.

In this article, Nina Mehta tells us about artist Spencer Finch's extensive use of light and color where, among the works described, science and art merge to recreate moments in time and place, such as the dawn Achilles faced in ancient Troy. Will uses of light like these become yet one more media type that multimedia integrates?

The myriad of wireless controls and sensors will enable us to create, fine-tune, and capture light anywhere. What new applications will emerge leveraging these new technologies? Will places—indoors and outdoors—become more organic through the use of light? Will a multimedia experience include automated lighting in the room, beyond just dimming and increasing the lights depending upon the interaction (for example, viewing a projected presentation or just talking around the table) to actually using light to recreate a place, create an atmosphere, reflect a mood, or even direct a conversation?

—Dorée Duncan Seligmann

Finch and technology

For Finch, an essentially low-tech artist, technology is a tool, another interesting arrow in his quiver. Technology is never central to his work, never the medium through which he communicates, although it enables him to quantify aspects of the subjective, affect-laden vistas he seeks to reproduce.

Finch is a far cry from artists who turn to the world of electronic data mining, computer algorithms, streaming technologies, and bitmaps to represent anew the world around them. He isn't interested in breaking down narrative time. And he isn't driven to document the frenzied pace of contemporary life or the kaleidoscopic assault of images and information on our senses. His aesthetic interests, sometimes abetted by technology, pivot around the perception of color and what color is able to reveal about the truth and subjectivity of an experience.

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Figure 1. *Eos (dawn, Troy)*, 2002, 79 fluorescent fixtures, lamps, and filters, dimensions variable, edition of 3.

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Eos (dawn, Troy)

Eos (dawn, Troy), was exhibited at Postmasters Gallery in New York City in 2003 (see Figure 1). Named for the Greek goddess of dawn, the lighting installation reproduced the color and intensity of dawn in Troy, now part of western Turkey, on an October morning in 2002. For some time, Finch had wanted to portray what Achilles saw when he looked out across the Trojan plain. What Achilles saw, however, is long gone. All that remains is the atmosphere, the air, adulterated as it may be by tropospheric aerosols. So after considering the possibilities that were artistically and intellectually within reach, Finch traveled to Troy with a borrowed colorimeter, an instrument that measures the color of an object or light source, intent on capturing the “rosy-fingered dawn” that Homer wrote about and ferrying it back to New York.

He did this, although dawn as measured by the instrument turned out to be more blue than rosy. Prior to setting out for Troy, Finch worked with a Philips Lighting scientist, Cynthia Turner, to ensure that he could use the colorimeter to effectively record the color and intensity of early morning light. He conducted tests with other, more local dawns. In Troy, he took a number of chromacity and illuminance readings with the handheld colorimeter. Unlike a more sophisticated spectrometer, which provides detailed spectral data about the light source being measured, a colorimeter provides an average color. The chro-

macity coordinates are calculated on an x - y axis, while a Y coordinate records the brightness of the light source.

Back at Postmasters, his New York gallery, Finch reproduced the Troy light with fluorescent tubes covered with colored LEE filters, which change the spectral quality of fluorescent light. He initially used Philips TL-950 fluorescent tubes, but after experimenting switched to TL-930 tubes, which have a lower intensity and are slightly more yellow. Finch controlled the intensity of the overhead light he was creating through the number of tubes in the installation as well as their arrangement. Configuring the tubes, however, was a trial-and-error process—a haphazard placement of the tubes close together, then slightly farther apart, then in a different pattern altogether—to recreate the sought-after lighting conditions.

The resulting lighting artwork comprised 79 fluorescent tubes fixed to the ceiling in a radial pattern emanating from the east wall of the gallery’s main room, replicating the rays of the sun. The gallery walls had been painted white and the skylight blocked to minimize optical interference. The room was empty except for the filtered lights. What the visitors who milled around the room experienced is impossible to judge. Some may have felt transported or had an eerie sense of dislocation. Perhaps they actually experienced the recreated Trojan dawn. I felt the room had been sucked clean of air, deflated, and hollowed out.

Finch’s re-creation of the specific color of dawn was a jarring presentation of some of the precisely quantifiable aspects of dawn, but without passing what could be called the *skin-fidelity test*—the cool, vaguely damp feeling on your skin of the rising morning air. *Eos* was a strange form of optical ventriloquism. It may or may not have been a sublime experience, but it was definitely landscape portraiture at its most evanescent.

Into abstraction

Finch’s works are abstract and intellectual. They bear no resemblance to the actual landscapes depicted, but they’re nonetheless representational. Finch earnestly pursues the truth of what he sees, even if that truth offers up only the barest slice of a landscape, such as a moment of dawn or a faithful reproduction of the color of an insignificant patch of sky. At the same time, Finch’s goal is more than mere representation. He uses technology to recreate an experience

even as, in doing so, he implicitly and provocatively highlights the futility of recreating an experience that is perceived subjectively.

He's after something sublime, but the meaningfulness of the experience must be perceived in the viewer's head, as the viewer thinks about what's lost and understood through Finch's visual transcription. As he explains, "In the early morning, you have nothing to compare the color of dawn to because everything is dawn, everything is that color." In a gallery, for all of its visual and physical constraints, a viewer can take the time to mull over what's being portrayed.

Tobias Rehberger, a German artist who also works with light, created an installation in Dresdner Bank's Frankfurt headquarters that shares some similarities with *Eos*. Rehberger created a number of discrete "time zones" in the bank's main cafeteria. Each geographic time zone is installed with furniture and lamps that represent a city in that time zone, while the light cast in each section recreates the light conditions in that city. As the light changes in the city, so too does the light in the corresponding "time zone." Data about the lighting conditions in other cities are relayed to the Frankfurt office through computers at the bank's local offices.

But what for Rehberger is an imaginative feat becomes, in Finch's hands, a quest. It's the empirical tradition of natural philosophy that animates Finch's work. Whether he's relying on technology to extract the data in a splash of light, which he then replicates, or simply eyeballing the hue, Finch treats color as a realm of useful knowledge, not as an accessory and not as an object in its own right.

In this framework, color is the well-trod path to perception and memory, but it's also a path of false starts and cul de sacs. Color is Finch's two-way mirror between objectivity and subjectivity, objectivity and perception, perception and science, and so on. "It is the tension between the objectivity of science and the impossibility of objectivity that interests him," says Magdalena Sawon, co-owner of Postmasters Gallery, which represents Finch and other artists who use technology to express themselves.

While Finch increasingly turns to technology and technological instruments to quantify some of the objective qualities of what he sees, it's the inductive trial-and-error process of then translating that information into an artwork that gives life to his work. "It is always the same with me," notes Finch. "The scientific method is the



Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York

approach I like. I approach the same thing in different ways because it is the error, the gap, that is interesting."

After returning from Troy, Finch purchased a refurbished Minolta Chroma-Meter CL-100, which he has since used to try to transport the light of specific places and times to other locales. For *Paris/Texas* (see Figure 2), he used it to record the color of a winter dusk in Paris. At ArtPace, an arts foundation in San Antonio, Texas, he then recreated the winter light by installing a number of different single-color stained glass windows in the studio and gallery's garage door (the gallery is a former auto dealership). From approximately 1:30 until 4:00 p.m. every afternoon for 3 months in 2003, the light that fell through the stained glass windows was precisely the same bluish color Finch had recorded in Paris.

In another work, *Sunset (south Texas, 6/20/03)*, a brightly colored sunset is transformed into a magnificent, 40-foot-long panel of fluorescent tubes (see Figure 3, next page). Again, Finch used filtered Philips TL-930 fluorescent tubes for this piece. The length of the artwork suggests the horizon, while the color of the light cast off the fluorescent tubes, when one looks away from them, reproduces the light of the sunset.

Finch has always played with color. A seminal work for him was a 1994–1995 series of pastels on paper that portrayed 100 gradations of the color of Jackie Kennedy's emblematic pink pillbox hat. There was no image of a hat in sight. Instead, Finch offered a vast plenitude of pink swatches in an effort to close in on both the extraordinary

Figure 2. Paris/Texas, 2003, stained glass, dimensions variable (originally commissioned by ArtPace, San Antonio, Texas).

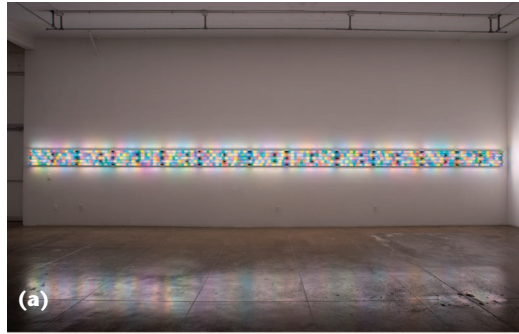


Figure 3. *Sunset (south Texas 6/20/03), 2003, fluorescent lights, filters, 25 inches × 40 feet (originally commissioned by ArtPace, San Antonio, Texas).*



Figure 4. *Blue (Sky over Los Alamos, New Mexico, 5/5/00, morning effect), 2000, CoO*Al₂O (cobalt—10 units), TiO₂ (titanium oxide—19 units), Na₆Al₆Si₆O₂₄S₄ (ultramarine—1 unit), lamps and bulbs, dimensions variable, edition of 3.*

Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York

Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery, New York

and that others have come to remember through television and magazine images. The work forced viewers to question their color recall and notice the subtle gaps between the accumulated hues. It also fueled ruminations on how a simple color can evoke a powerful symbol.

Yet for all the focus on the color and quality of light, Finch's preoccupation is never random or divorced from the image portrayed. His works identify the precise location and moment in time he caught or attempted to capture an experience. His landscapes are local and site-specific, never general. They also often have rich associations. A molecular lighting sculpture called *Blue (Sky over Los Alamos, New Mexico, 5/5/00, morning effect)* portrayed the sky over the site where the atomic bomb was built (see Figure 4). It displayed not only the color of the sky but, symbolically, the splitting of the atom. The bulbs suggest the stars overhead even as they represent the color of the sky.

In other, earlier works Finch also used color to zero in on questions of science and perception. In *Sky (Over Roswell, NM, 5/5/00, dusk)*, Finch offers a nontechnical glimpse of the firmament in the form of a large ovoid aluminum panel covered with sea-blue acrylic paint and rhinestones of assorted sizes. It's a transporting vision of a starry New Mexican night, with the kitschy rhinestones referring to the tourist-trap renown of Roswell as America's mecca for UFO sightings.

Yet Finch did not settle for a humorous rendering of the contents of the Roswell sky. The work has a more subjective and thought-provoking aspect. The lopsided shape of the aluminum panel depicting the sky corresponds to Finch's field of vision. The shape of the artwork itself is therefore a riff on the metaphorical field of vision that produced the UFO sightings in the first place, and which ultimately led droves of visitors to flock to Roswell and look up into the sky.

One of Finch's interesting accomplishments is his Monet-like portrayal of the passing of time in many of his landscapes. In *Western Sky*, a series-in-progress of 12 panels of varying numbers of four-foot-long filtered fluorescent tubes placed vertically next to one another, Finch recreates the color of the sky seen from his studio in Brooklyn, New York. He records the color of the sky hour by hour from dawn to sunset on one day every month. Each panel represents a different month, with the number of daylight hours reflected in the number of fluorescent tubes. The February panel, for instance, has 12 fluorescent tubes ren-

power and elusiveness of a symbol that anyone alive on 23 November 1963 surely remembers—

dered primarily in slight gradations of blue. April's 14 tubes start out white on the left, based on the early morning light, ease into light blue, and then finally into a vivid purplish pink at the right, corresponding to the end of the day.

Lighting the way

For *Western Sky*, Finch did not use his chromameter. But Finch is now anticipating ways in which technology can inject an element of time into his art. He's most excited by dimmable fluorescent bulbs, whose changing light can be used to suggest the passage of time. However, Finch won't think too big. When he eventually turns to dimmable light, it may well be to replicate the shadow cast by a passing cloud, or some other plein-air experience with a similarly slow rhythm and modest scope.

In the meantime, Finch's desire to capture a piece of landscape at a precise time of day and in a particular location, and transport it across time and space, continues to find expression. For Bloomberg LP's new office building in New York, Finch will soon produce a 100-foot-long wall

sculpture that represents the color of a sunrise over the Atlantic Ocean on 4 September 2004. The fixture itself will be a panorama of brilliantly animated colors, while the light cast will be the exact bluish color of the dawn in question.

At the same time, Finch's vision of the ancient past is maneuvering its way through modern sensibilities. *Eos*, the Troy artwork of fluorescent tubes, will be rearranged and installed in the hallway of a midtown Manhattan office building. Once installed, there will be a permanent 140-foot-long corridor of dawn on the eighth floor of the Manhattan Mall, a block south of Macy's department store. This may well end up being one of the more evocative and surprising—and potentially transcendent—indoor vistas in an urban commercial building. **MM**

Readers may contact Nina Mehta at ninamehta@aol.com.

Contact Artful Media editor Dorée Duncan Seligmann at Avaya Labs, 666 Fifth Ave., 11th floor, New York, NY 10103; doree@avaya.com.

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