

Sheets, Hilarie M., "Follow the Light," *Artnews*, June 2014

# Follow the Light

From the World Trade Center to Monet's garden, Spencer Finch records the atmospheric light and weather patterns of psychologically charged places and remakes those conditions using TV sets, fluorescent tubes, watercolor paints, and household fans

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS



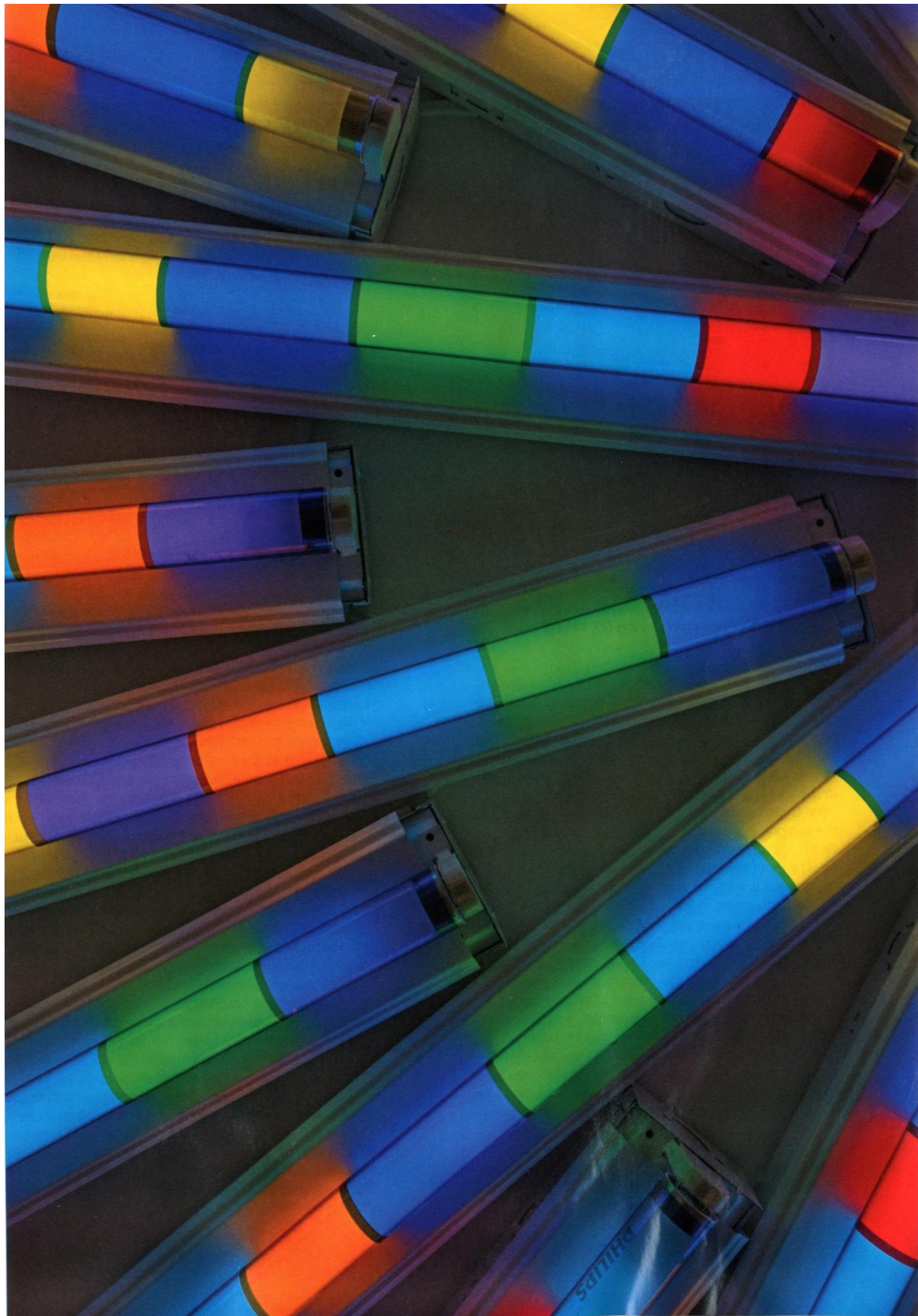
ABOVE Spencer Finch working on *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning*, 2014. Each of the 2,973 shades of blue commemorates a victim of the 9/11 attacks. OPPOSITE A detail of *Shield of Achilles (Dawn, Troy 10/27/02)*, 2013.

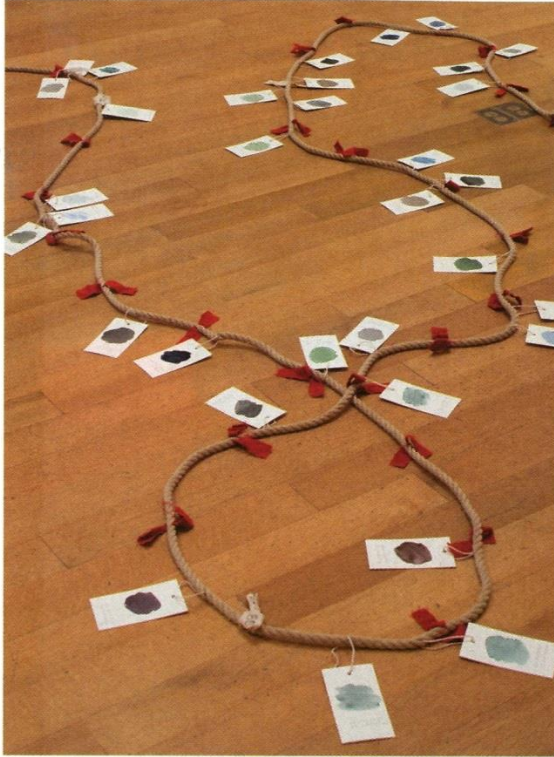
Spencer Finch set out in a rowboat on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, last spring, inspired by Henry David Thoreau's immersive experiment of trying to understand this place of natural beauty in its entirety. In 1846, Thoreau had surveyed the pond, popularly believed at the time to be bottomless, and found its deepest point to be 102 feet. Following in Thoreau's wake, Finch spent three days on the water performing his own set of measurements.

He rowed while his assistant mapped their coordinates by GPS and used an electronic meter as well as a rope—as Thoreau had done—to take depth measurements. At each sounding point, Finch matched the water's surface color—an array of yellows, browns, greens, blues, and grays depending on the depth, reflections, weather, hour, and vantage point—with a book of hundreds of watercolor samples.

Finch then created a kind of three-dimensional drawing titled *Walden Pond (surface/depth)*, which he displayed last year in his exhibition "Fathom" at James Cohan Gallery in New York. He snaked the 120-foot measuring rope circuitously across the gallery floor to reflect the boat's route on Walden Pond. The rope also served as an armature on which to pin 298 paper tags marked with the exact coordinates of each depth reading and a paint dab matching the color of the water at that location. "I was trying to explain the depth of the pond and the color of the pond," says Finch. "At the same time, I was trying to capture the constant variability and the impossibility of making an objective measurement and finally being able to

JAMES COHAN GALLERY





**Walden Pond (surface/depth), 2013 (detail).**

quantify something which is so beautiful and so elusive.”

Over the past two decades, the 51-year-old, Brooklyn-based artist has used scientific methodology to try to pin down the ineffable qualities of light and color, perception and memory, ultimately to expose how they fall short. “Doing a scientific experiment over and over has an analog in the way artists work, which is seriality,” Finch says. “You try to do something again and again to get closer to the essence. Because the experimenter’s perception is a little off, the subjective comes into it, which is fascinating to me. It’s about the attempt to represent something—and in the attempt is where there’s the humanness or poetry.”

Finch uses places of loaded significance in the collective cultural consciousness as his departure points, traveling to sites such as Sigmund Freud’s office in Vienna, the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona, and Scotland’s Loch Ness to collect data—measuring the color and temperature of the light with a colorimeter or the wind with an anemometer, taking documentary photographs or matching colors to Pantone samples. He has done five projects based on trips to Emily Dickinson’s house in Amherst, Massachusetts—most recently recording the breeze blowing through her bedroom window and precisely re-creating it in intervals of a minute and half programmed on a household fan in the “Fathom” show.

“It’s me looking at the world through how I imagine Emily Dickinson looking at the world,” says Finch, whose demeanor is part mild-mannered professor, part fanciful dreamer. “She took things that the rest of us would

ignore—something as simple as this breeze blowing through her window—as a springboard for a meditation on something much bigger.”

Finch is probably best known for his electric-light installations that mimic the quality of natural light. One of these is *Eos (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02)*, 2002, which attempts to reproduce the “rosy-fingered Dawn” that Achilles observed in Homer’s *Iliad*. As part of his research, Finch visited the ancient site of Troy (in present-day Turkey) and used his colorimeter to gauge the light at sunrise. “I wanted to measure the light because I was thinking that was the only thing that hadn’t changed since Homer’s time,” he says. Subsequently, on the ceiling of Postmasters Gallery in New York in 2002, the artist installed 79 fluorescent tubes wrapped with a combination of blue, violet, green, and pink filters emitting the same light reading as he had measured in Troy.

While Finch likes the purity in this piece of reducing a landscape to just its light conditions, his installations using electric lights have grown to be more visually elaborate. At James Cohan, where prices for his works range from \$15,000 to \$150,000, the artist revisited the rosy-fingered dawn in *Shield of Achilles (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02)*, 2013, adding stripes to his fluorescent tubes with theater gels in seven colors that radiate in a dynamic sunburst pattern on the wall. The work is about both the light it creates and the sculpture itself.

“Spencer touches on poetry and art history and history and science while he’s investigating the mechanics of perception,” says Susan Cross, who organized the 2007–8 survey “Spencer Finch: What Time Is It on the Sun?” at MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. “His work is very visceral and people are probably transported subconsciously by the experience of the light or the feeling of the breeze to a place they remember.” Finch always uses matter-of-fact wall labels to note the location and time that each piece represents. The moment of understanding just what he’s attempted to capture—the distance in time and space he’s bridged—can bring both amazement and amusement. “He is attracted to the romance of that quest, but then he knows it’s sort of futile and absurd,” Cross adds.

Finch grew up in the suburbs of New Haven, Connecticut. His father was a chemist, his mother an elementary school teacher, and Finch’s early experiences with museums were in natural history ones, because of his parents’ interests. He studied comparative literature at Hamilton College in Upstate New York and thought he would become a teacher. His first involvement with art came during his junior year in college, when he studied in Japan and worked with a potter. Not long after graduating from Hamilton in 1985, Finch entered the M.F.A. ceramics program at the Rhode Island School of Design.

“At RISD, I was really exposed to art for the first time and understood what all these other ways of making art were,” says Finch, who quickly realized that clay was not his medium and migrated to the sculpture department. He moved to New York after finishing grad school in 1989 and got a job editing social-studies textbooks at McGraw-Hill while trying to make his way as an artist. Information the



**A close-up of 366 (*Emily Dickinson's Miraculous Year*), 2009, for which Finch lit 366 candles to memorialize the year, 1862, when Dickinson wrote 366 poems in 365 days.**

artist gleaned during his publishing jobs, which lasted until 2004, continues to appear in his work today. A map predicting the jet stream over North America, for instance, which he found while researching a book on weather, was the basis for a recent watercolor in the “Fathom” exhibition.

Finch remembers going to the Museum of Modern Art during his lunch hours and responding to the visual impact of works by Andy Warhol and Ad Reinhardt. “I had been doing work that was dry and conceptual,” he says. “I started really thinking about making things that were visually interesting.” He had his first solo exhibition in 1992 at Tomoko Liguori Gallery, which, Finch notes wryly, went out of business right after his show. In 1994, he began showing at Postmasters, where he was represented for 15 years. Upon being selected for the 2004 Whitney Biennial, he was finally able to quit his day job. After years of a slow-building career, he now has broad international representation at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, Lisson Gallery in London, Galerie Nordenhake in Stockholm and Berlin, and Galerie Yvon Lambert in Paris.

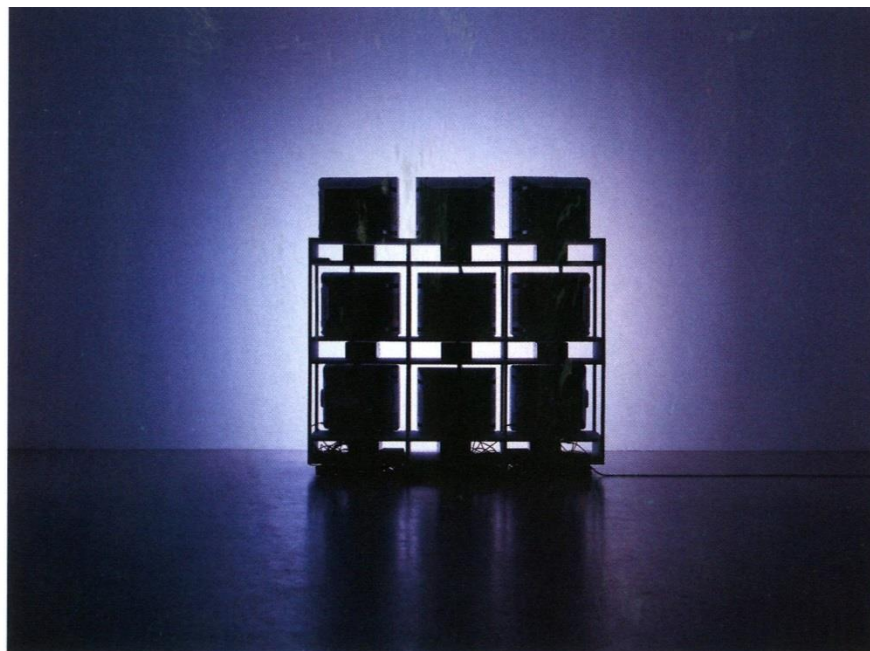
One of Finch’s earliest pilgrimages to a location of significance was a trip to Rouen, France. Monet had painted the cathedral there serially to explore the effects of changing light and weather on its appearance. On arrival, Finch was crestfallen to discover that the cathedral’s facade was obscured by scaffolding. He retreated to his hotel room across the street and ended up painting a series of watercolors showing a patchwork of swatches that matched the color of every

object in the room, including the pillowcase, the desk, and the bedspread.

The resulting triptych, *Interior of Room 4, Hôtel de la Cathédrale, Rouen, May 18–22, 1996, morning effect, noon effect, evening effect* (1995), shows how those colors varied at different times of day. “Up close, you could see I wrote in pencil underneath each swatch what it was, but when you pulled back it was this mosaic of color that becomes abstract,” Finch says. He thought of his piece as an inverse of how Monet’s Impressionistic strokes coalesce into the recognizable facade of the cathedral from a distance but melt into abstraction up close.

The next time Finch camped out in a motel room, it was intentional. Interested in the iconic landscape of the American West, he traveled to Monument Valley in Utah in 2007 to record the slowly fading light of a glorious sunset. He took light measurements both outdoors and indoors as the sun went down. But once he saw how the illumination reflected off the white wall in his motel room, he knew he’d found what he was looking for. “It was a very minor drama,” he says. “That’s the best—when you have the time to just watch the light change in your room.”

Back in his studio, he cut up thousands of film stills from John Ford’s 1956 western *The Searchers*, shot in Monument Valley, and measured the light’s color and intensity in each one. He then stitched together groupings that projected the same hue and brightness of each minute of the sunset he had witnessed in Utah. *West (Sunset in My Motel Room, Monument Valley, January 26, 2007, 5:36–6:06 PM)*, first shown at Postmasters in 2007, is a



ABOVE *West (Sunset in my Motel Room, Monument Valley, January 26, 2007, 5:36–6:06 PM)*, 2007.

OPPOSITE *Following Nature*, 2013, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. The patchwork of filters and glass panes re-creates the light and colors of Monet's famous garden in Giverny.

grid of nine television screens cycling through stills that gradually fade to twilight by the end of half an hour.

Finch followed up his longtime interest in Monet with several visits to Giverny in France, where he felt he gained a new understanding of the artist. "I really had the sense of Monet creating this experimental laboratory for certain optical effects," he says. "The whole purpose of this incredibly elaborate setup—the pond and flowers and gardens and trees—was to explore the transparency and reflectivity of the water."

For *Following Nature*, a large-scale installation in the soaring entry pavilion of the Indianapolis Museum of Art last year, Finch created an abstraction of Monet's garden. He affixed to the exterior glass wall a patchwork of filters in 37 hues of green, yellow, red, purple, and blue based on colors he had observed at Giverny and in Monet's paintings. Dangling from the center of the space, a chandelier of nearly 200 glass panes with different percentages of reflectivity—some more transparent, some mirrorlike—moved gently and created a dazzling play of color and reflection and light. "The goal was to be somewhere between the pond and the painting," says Finch, who did an earlier variation on this theme at RISD two years ago. "It has the artificiality of a painting but the sense of occupying space and constantly changing like the pond and the garden."

These days, Finch is ever more in demand, with permanent installations recently completed at Washington University in Saint Louis and on the facade of the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey, and another in the works for London's Paddington Station. Through September 21, he has a solo exhibition at Turner Contemporary in Margate,

England, where he is showing new sculptures that register the light of that seaside resort town.

This month, he is activating the atrium of the Morgan Library & Museum in New York with a colorful, reflective glass installation that references the library's collection of medieval and Renaissance illuminated manuscripts called Books of Hours. And for the National September 11 Memorial & Museum, which was scheduled to open last month in Lower Manhattan, Finch created a fragile, fluttering mosaic of individual watercolors painted in 2,973 different shades of blue and attached to a monumental concrete wall. Titled *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning*, the piece commemorates each of the victims, and together the watercolors become a picture of that morning's intensely blue sky based on the artist's own memory.

In his time away from the studio, Finch has become swept up in gardening at his cottage in Upstate New York. He recently planted an orchard there and dreams of having a berry farm. While he expresses discomfort with what he calls the "cliché" of the artist retreating to the countryside, his pleasure in nurturing color and variety in his garden seems entirely consistent with his image of nature as a studio and a laboratory.

"One of the great things about working with light analytically is I feel on a day-to-day basis I see the world differently," says Finch. "I'm more sensitive to weather changes and when weird clouds come in—or when the sun is going down and you get these extreme shifts in the color of light. There are certain days when you look at a tree or a flower and it's just more profound." ■

# JAMES COHAN GALLERY

