

# THE MECHANICS OF PERCEPTION

SPENCER FINCH'S MASTERY OF SIMPLE FORMS TO CONVEY COMPLEX  
IDEAS ARRIVES AT MARFA CONTEMPORARY.

by CAROL KINO



**I**T'S MID-SUMMER, and Spencer Finch says he has no idea what he'll be doing for his upcoming fall show at Marfa Contemporary. But that's exactly how he wants it. We're sitting in his Brooklyn studio surrounded by drawings, maquettes, and experiments for some of his recent projects.

In the last two years alone, Finch's sculptures and installations have appeared in places as far-flung as Milan, Berlin, San Diego, and Shanghai. He has worked with media as diverse as watercolor, glass, electrical fans, and theatrical lighting gels, and has created pieces inspired by Monet, *The Wizard of Oz*, the shadows cast by clouds, and the writings of Henry David Thoreau.

Last May, he also unveiled a highly celebrated public commission for the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York. Called *Trying to Remember the Color of*

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*the Sky on That September Morning*, it summons up the powerful collective memory of the title with a grid made from 2,983 pieces of watercolor paper—one for every person killed in the 2001 and 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center—each painted a unique shade of blue. Finch laboriously hand-painted them all, inspired by his own memory and powers of observation.

While the opportunities clearly have been plentiful, so have the pressures. “I feel like I'm on the treadmill sometimes,” Finch says. “I want to do something that's new and unfamiliar and risky. Marfa is this incredibly important

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*Making Worlds*

Fifty-third International Venice Biennale, Italy (2009)

photograph by GERHARD KASSNER



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*Sunlight in an Empty Room (Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004)*

Indianapolis Museum of Art (2013). photograph by ERIC LUBRICK

place for really experimental art. So it's an opportunity for me to get back to doing things that are a little more free."

Early on, Finch recalls, he used to be able to "put a show together in a suitcase, take it to Europe, and make the show there in a week." But as his career has burgeoned, his projects have grown more complex, necessitating an increasing number of people, input, and fabricators to pull them off. Take the installation that opened in June 2014 at New York's Morgan Library, *A Certain Slant of Light*, which transforms the building's austere atrium into a shimmering light box, using colored gels and panes of reflective glass. Inspired by the library's collection of medieval books of hours, the piece, in its aesthetic, lies somewhere between the luminosity of Monet and the purity of Mondrian. But it couldn't have happened without an exhibition producer, glassmakers, and window-tint specialists.

"The work I make now requires so much more time, but I don't think it's necessarily any better," says Finch, who at fifty-one still seems boyishly disarming. So, for Marfa, he planned to ruminate throughout the summer and let his ideas arise more spontaneously. "I just want to sit and read and look at things," he says. "I'll figure it out."

"The various recent projects have involved lots of people," says Isabelle Dervaux, the contemporary-art curator at the Morgan Library. "He wants to go back to something that he can manage without so much technical help."

Yet, if you look around Finch's studio, which is filled with photographs of shadows and clouds, and row upon row of carefully labeled watercolor and pastel color swatches, it's hard to believe he doesn't always feel he has plenty of breathing room.

A sense of space, wonderment, and freedom—the kind that arises when your imagination lights up—is what you're likely to feel when you encounter his work.

Overhead, there's a puffy cumulus-like mass made from crushed translucent plastic that's been shaped with clothespins—the maquette for *Passing Cloud (After Constable)*, a 2014 sculpture that was on view through the summer in Finch's solo show at Turner Contemporary in



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SPENCER FINCH in his studio  
photograph by LUKE STETTNER

Margate, England. The windows are filled with a checkerboard of pink- and russet-toned gels, tests from a recent installation made for the windows of the American ambassador's residence in London, which transformed the cool English sunlight into the warmer hues of a moonlit New Mexico night. The colors were derived from Finch's own precise measurements, taken with a colorimeter—an instrument that measures chromatic intensity—on a long-ago road trip through the Southwest.

On a table, there's a maquette for a solar panel—an entry for a Scandinavian commission he didn't win—whose cells echo the whorls of a sunflower's petals. "Isn't this so amazing, the pattern?" Finch asks. "I'll do something with it eventually." Nearby are some intriguing drawings for an installation that will soon live in a new Seattle office block. Made with 150 artificial reeds and 150 greenish-amber light-emitting diodes, it will appear to fill the building's garden-like courtyard with clouds of twinkling fireflies at dusk.

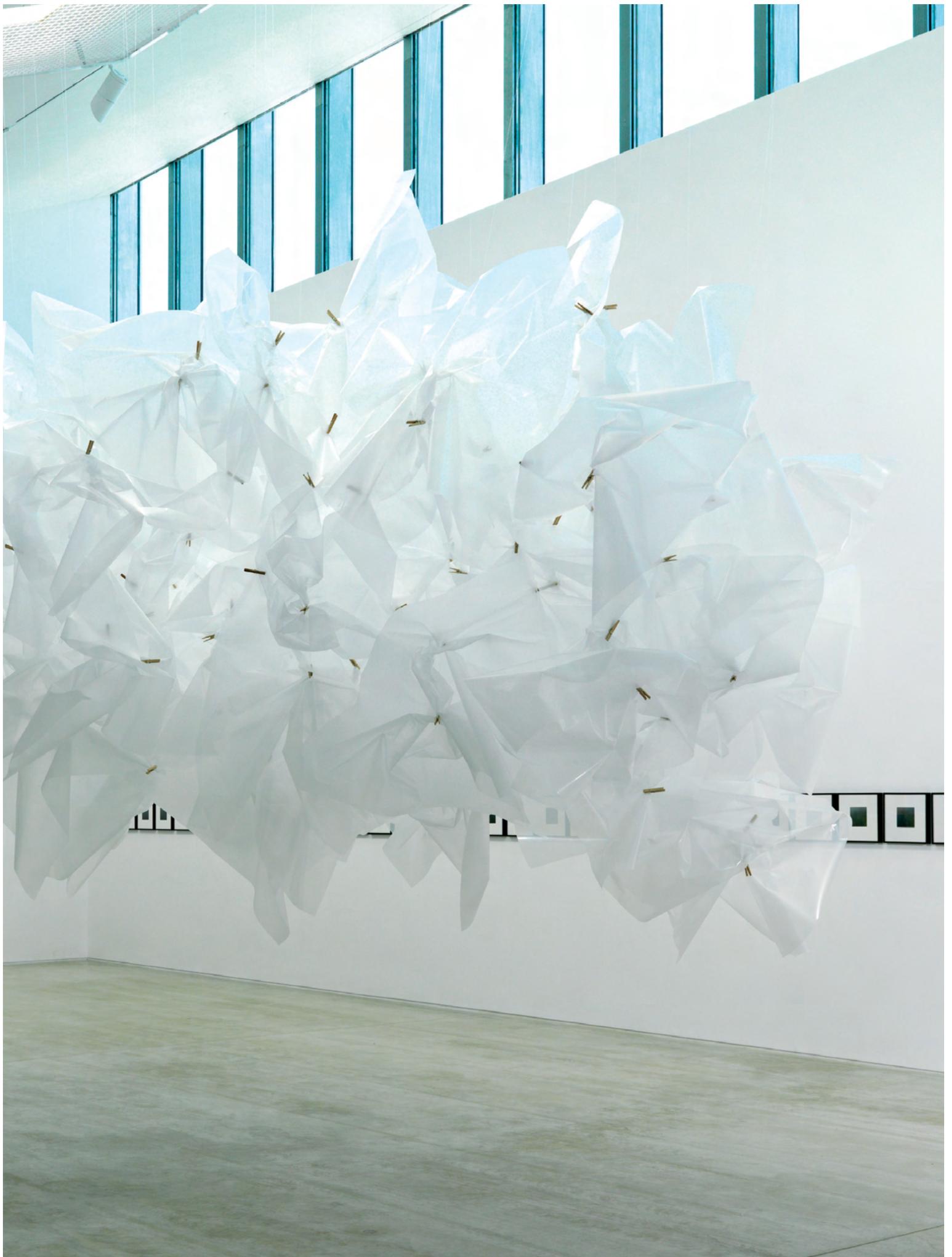
While explaining this piece, which he describes as a "firefly ballet," Finch starts laughing. "I don't even know if they have fireflies in Seattle," he says.

It's Finch's curious ability to conjoin seeming opposites—science and romance, careful observation and invention, the heartfelt and the gently absurd—that keeps curators and viewers so enthralled. It also makes it extraordinarily difficult to intellectualize about his work.

"What Spencer is doing is very unusual," says Susan Cross, senior curator at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, which gave Finch a retrospective, "What Time Is It on the Sun?," in 2007. "He's working in what seems a very abstract mode, yet it's also highly representational. It's the act of trying to represent our actual experiences."

Cross describes a series of seven encaustic-and-oil elliptical paintings that Finch made in 1997. Called *Sky Over the Ikarian Sea*, they aim to pinpoint the place where the Greek mythological figure Icarus, his wax wings melted by the sun, fell from the heavens into the Aegean Sea. (Ironically, six of these works were themselves damaged when the wax encaustic melted, and they have since been destroyed.)







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*A Certain Slant of Light*

The Morgan Library & Museum, New York City (2014), photograph by GRAHAM S. HABER



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*Night Sky (Over the Painted Desert, Arizona,  
January 11, 2004)*

“Spencer makes these very beautiful attempts to capture something that seems miraculous, while acknowledging that it’s impossible,” Cross says. “But he has that same ambition to reach the sun.”

James Rondeau, the head of the contemporary-art department at the Art Institute of Chicago, says that “a Spencer Finch idea is where color and history and memory intersect.” Rondeau has been fascinated by Finch’s work since the early 1990s, when he first saw the artist’s drawings of irises—“not the flower, but the eye,” he notes. He also organized Finch’s first solo museum show, at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1997.

More recently, the two worked together on *Lunar*, a 2011 outdoor sculpture for the roof of the Art Institute. Shaped like a “Buckyball” cross between a lunar-landing module and

a geodesic sphere, the piece collected solar energy during the day and emitted it at night, causing the piece to glow palely like the full moon. In fact, its glow is precisely the color of the July 2011 full moon over Chicago, as calculated by Finch’s handy colorimeter.

“Spencer is able to be endlessly inventive with a relatively narrow playing field,” Rondeau says. “He’s always responding to site, to context, to ideas that are percolating in the studio.” And, he adds, “once I got into his studio, I was hooked for life.”

Today Finch is often seen as a light-and-color artist—sort of a twenty-first-century variant of Dan Flavin or James Turrell. But when he first came on the scene, in the early 1990s, he was known for drier, more conceptual work, colored largely by the critical theory in vogue at the time.

Raised in the New Haven suburbs by parents “who didn’t know any people who were artists,” as Finch puts it, he arrived at art somewhat circuitously. He was studying comparative literature at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, when he suddenly decided to take pottery lessons out of the blue during a junior-year exchange program in Japan. Making pottery “really appealed to my Marxist sensibilities in the mid-’80s,” Finch says. “This idea of controlling your means of production, and making something functional, seemed really great.”

After graduation, he entered the ceramics MFA program at the Rhode Island School of Design. But it was never a great fit. “I was supposed to figure out what I wanted to do, and I was really experimenting,” Finch says, often with performances that seemed a far cry from ceramics. For one celebrated piece, he recalls, he wore a sandwich board that read, “Get Out Your Postmodernist Aggressions,” while offering passersby the chance to smash a Twinkie with a mallet. The spectacle got him kicked out of the department, so he transferred to sculpture and continued his antics there.

Initially, Finch seems to have regarded art history as little more than a grand opportunity for social critique. But that started changing when he tried to copy Monet’s *The Basin at Argenteuil* (1874), a painting in RISD’s collection that depicts sailboats on the glistening Seine. He says he was dared to do it by the artist Paul Ramirez Jonas, who was then a classmate and who had begun collaborating with him on performances.

But Ramirez Jonas remembers it differently. “Spencer was always like, ‘Painting is the enemy,’” he says, and “there were all these works that attacked painting, like a Rothko made of Post-it notes. He had in his mind that he was going to forge a Monet, and it was going to be so good that he could switch it.”

Unsurprisingly, Finch found that performance harder to pull off than he’d thought. He began thinking differently about Monet—not merely as a vehicle for theory but with admiration.

By 1989, Finch was in New York, sharing a studio with Ramirez Jonas and working during the day as a social-studies researcher for the textbook publisher McGraw-Hill. On lunch breaks, he’d go to the Museum of Modern Art, returning over and over to look at the Ad Reinhardts and Andy Warhols. (“My interest in light came from Reinhardt,” he says now. And of Warhol: “The work is deeply philosophical.”)

But his real breakthrough came when he and Ramirez Jonas collaborated on *Masterpieces Without the Director*, an alternative acoustiguide for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, based on the museum’s own official guide, which had been recorded by then director Philippe de Montebello. They interviewed visitors about the same artworks and substituted those voices for de Montebello’s.

“It was sort of a classic critique-of-the-institution thing,” Finch says. But “a weird thing happened” along the way. “We spent a lot of time there, and I really started looking at things that I hadn’t looked at before,” like Velázquez. “It was a case of wanting to critique something, and then falling in love with it.” After that, he adds, “I became more interested in making things that were visually compelling.”

At first, that involved a lot of drawing—and color. One piece in the new vein was *Trying to Remember the Color of Jackie Kennedy’s Pillbox Hat* (1994), a series of one hundred watercolors, each containing a disc painted with a variant of that iconic pink. With this work, which presaged his 9/11 museum installation, Finch happened onto his sweet spot: using very simple methods and materials to invoke a complex cultural reference point.

Within a few years, Finch was also working with light, as in the 2002 installation *Eos (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02)*, which uses fluorescent bulbs and colored gels to summon up the “rosy-fingered dawn” witnessed by the warrior Achilles in ancient

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Troy. “I’ve always loved *The Iliad*,” says Finch, who has continued to mine the subject. “It feels like this human emotion is just so in sync with how human emotion exists now.”

Finch’s work frequently employs tactile sensations, too. His New York dealer, James Cohan, remembers being particularly struck by a 2007 piece, *2 hours, 2 minutes, 2 seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)*, which uses forty-four computer-programmed box fans arranged in a semi-circle to re-create the breezes blowing across Walden Pond. The title is a playful reference to the length of time Thoreau spent there observing and recording, and to the date Finch took his own measurements using an anemometer, an instrument that measures the speed of wind. More recently, for *Wind (Through Emily Dickinson’s Window, August 14, 2012)*, Finch used a fan to reproduce a summer breeze blowing through the reclusive poet’s bedroom window—one of several pieces inspired by her life and oeuvre.

“Spencer has the ability to engage the viewer with the mechanics of perception,” Cohan says, “while allowing them to experience the sense of awe that inspired the work.”

The turning point in Finch’s career came in 2004, when a lightbulb piece and a group of drawings were included in the Whitney Biennial. Since then, he’s been in the 2009 Venice Biennale, with a window installation that turns sunlight into moonlight, by way of colored gels, and a light sculpture that uses clusters of glowing incandescent bulbs to represent the chemical composition of the moondust encountered by Apollo 17. Finch has also had solo museum shows at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the Frac des Pays de la Loire in Carquefou, France, and his alma mater, RISD—among many others.

And soon he’ll be at Marfa. “With the whole Judd legacy, to do anything that’s site-specific there is so loaded,” says Finch. “It needs to be something that has more of a dialectical relationship with some other place.”

Whatever he makes, it’s likely to be inspired by a concept that this former comparative-literature pupil took away from his studies of Homer, Dickinson, and Thoreau. “You don’t need to know the whole world to make work,” he says. “You take this tiny world, which is in your backyard, and you explode it into the universal.” ✕

