

My Business with Spencer

Spencer Finch, "My Business With The Cloud". Corcoran 2010

Spencer Finch works out of Brooklyn, New York and has exhibited all over the world. His works can be seen in places as diverse as the Hirshorn museum and on New York's Highline (a park converted from raised railroad tracks). He has taken as his some of his subjects- Nabokov's alphabet color system, the color of the light streaming through Ingmar Bergman's window, and the movement of butterflies as seen through the corner of his eye. Finch employs traditional art media like watercolor, oil crayon, photography and "non traditional" art media such as fluorescence, cellophane fixtures and clothespins to extraordinarily innovative effects.

The Corcoran first introduces you to Spencer and his oeuvre with a light piece entitled *Passing Cloud* (2010). He takes as his subject matter a corner in Washington DC where Walt Whitman, who had move from New York in 1863 to tend wounded soldiers, could observe President Lincoln as he made his daily commute north of the city to escape the oppressive summer heat. Spencer Finch explored these moment by hanging what appears to be a mass of crumpled theater gels and fluorescent tubes in the Corcoran's mezzanine rotunda.

However fleeting these observations were, and he never actually met the President, these occasions made a great impression on Whitman. He saw into Lincoln's character, observing the deep lines of his face, "always ... with a deep latent sadness: in the expression. We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones."¹

Washington DC draws visitors every day who desire to connect with history through war graves of war heroes, fashions of the first ladies, and standing in the queue at the Capital and Supreme court. This theme emanates in the rotunda of the Corcoran, where Spencer Finch has tried to capture a moment in time that has historical consequence. Of all the things that change through history, architecture gets torn down, roads repaved; metal corrodes- light is the constant. Spencer Finch brings this idea to life his sculpture that replicates a cumulus cloud passing where Whitman waited for and observed President Lincoln at the of Vermont Avenue and L street. To achieve this, he took light readings, drawings, paintings, photographs of the light and clouds on that particular spot one summer day (the hottest day of the year, mind you) in 2010, and recreated the light that was fused through the cloud with gels and fluorescents.

¹ Walt Whitman, "Abraham Lincoln" No. 45 (August 12, 1863). Quoted in the essay for the Spencer Finch exhibition catalogue by Sarah Newman. Corcoran Museum, 2010

In this and other works, Spencer Finch attempts to reconstruct experience while recognizing the unfeasibility of doing so. Like Heisenberg's uncertainly principle, the more we try to measure one thing, the less we capture is. So Spencer tries to present us with multiple views of the clouds- from the variety of shapes of cloud, their changing hues, the color of their shadows, to survey of their representations by the 19th century English painter John Constable. His works, though often rooted in scientific observation, are not without poetic and humorous resonance. Muted images that look like falling snow turn out to be floating cherry blossoms. Accounts of specific humidity in the northern hemisphere evoke vibrant color field oils. He makes a multi sided sculpture of lights tinted with the colors of depictions of clouds in the paintings by Constable. The sculpture is on wheels, so that it might be rolled around like a true "passing cloud." Other depictions of clouds are set of photographs of clouds reflected in puddles by his studio in Brooklyn, and paintings depicting a water spot on his ceiling that, depending on their rotation, look everything from a bear to Cuba.

Although Finch claims that his works are depart from the Western tradition that priveleges painting and photography as a way of depicting phenomena, I contest that his works are a natural evolution from that tradition.

Since Plato and his cave, we have evidence of the primacy of light and empiricism in Western thought.

Claude Monet recognized that changing light could best be measured over time, just as an artist can best understand an object when it is observed in different lights. Monet, who created multiple paintings Chartres Cathedral over time, attempted to capture the essence of the building and it's environs. He accomplished this through multiple paintings, depicting the same frontal view of the church over time periods that span seasons. Each painting depicts the building in response to changes of atmospheric color, light and weather.

So yes what Spencer Finch is doing is novel; his installations allow the viewer to EXPERIENCE light of a temporal moment. But perhaps he is not novel in the way that he thinks. He is deeply rooted in a tradition. Art exploring experience of light and atmosphere is at the juncture of art and science. Constable himself made studies based on empirical and meteorological research. He noted environmental conditions alongside each of his works when making oil sketches of clouds. Spencer can be considered as an artist who shares similar impulses with artist that range from Constable, Southworth and Hawes, to Gustave Le Gray and to Stieglitz. He is doing what Monet might have done, had he the materials and the light meters. But what sets Spencer apart from the tradition he comes from his desire to make immediate the experience to the viewer. His observations are not merely recordings for his own understanding of place or object. They are meant to help the viewer experience, to step back, to have a moment in which they too become aware of their senses and their surroundings. Sensory experiences give us our knowledge of a time, of a place, of an object. Spencer Finch works broaden our sense of what an experience of art can be.

He does quote phenomenologist and theorists such as Ponty and Barthes. I do not pretend to understand, or even admire these cultural critics. But I feel his works surpass their musings. Ultimately, his work succeeds because it is not gimmicky. He beckons the viewer to think about their sense of the world in subtle ways. At other times he challenges the viewer to recognize and notice the changes in their surroundings. He reminds us, for example, not take the shape or quality of clouds for granted, but to notice the variations between them. I admit Wittgenstein would have loved this.