

## ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 2010

### Spencer Finch

POSTMASTERS

In a darkish room you focus on the outline of a window, cast on a wall by a street lamp outside. Every so often a brighter light sweeps through the space, from the headlights of a car driving past, briefly lifting the room from darkness to a kind of twilight and then disappearing. There is nothing else to see.

This is Spencer Finch's *Paper Moon (Studio Wall at Night)*, 2009. But there is no street lamp, no window, no car; the work is an effect, or series of effects, laboriously re-created with various media, including a model train on a track, to bring to viewers this particular artifact from the artist's catalogue of memories. The endeavor is not unlike what is attempted by the narrator of Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* (2005), who, having lost a great deal of his memory, spends untold millions trying to re-create a feeling of authenticity he once had when entering an apartment building, going upstairs, and smelling liver being cooked—and it is an analogous effort that in part makes Finch's installation compelling. What also contributes is the uncanny universality of what is evoked—the press release may describe *Paper Moon* as “very boring” and “clearly not for everyone,” but this seems a rather cunning dismissal, meaning something very close to the opposite of what it says.

No memory is for everyone—it's very nearly part of the definition. But Finch argues this inarguable territory, grasping at the ungraspable, remaking the fruits of his own perception for consumption by others. In *The Shield of Achilles (Night Sky over Troy)*, 2009, he takes the process a step backward, relying on a historical catalogue of the constellations identified by Ptolemy to create a rendering of the night sky in 384 tin cans, each with a tiny pinprick light, hung from the ceiling in clusters. Here the epistemological catechism of his work involves not just wondering how one's perception of the thing matches or doesn't match the artist's; it involves imagining the artist imagining the original night, some two thousand years ago.

The artist's methods are thorough and scientific—the colorimeter, the digital anemometer—and his ends are poetic. It would be too easy, in his installation *366 (Emily Dickinson's Miraculous Year)*, 2009, to neatly flip the operation and turn poetry into science, but instead Finch mounts an elegant defense against the flattening effects of time and scholarship, with a spiral configuration of 366 candles, in which each candle corresponds to a poem the prolific Dickinson is said to have written in 1862. Each candle burns for twenty-four hours—a gallery assistant lights the next candle in the sequence daily—and contains the color mentioned in the poem; if no color is mentioned, a plain white candle is used. Certainly plain and white are qualities overridingly associated with Dickinson, but the yearlong memorial, which exhorts us to remember the length of the effort as well as its results, is remarkably colorful, with frequent yellows, golds, and oranges.

Finch's work brings to mind James Turrell's installations, in the creation of perceptual effects through everyday techniques; artists such as Steve Roden and Jason Salavon, in the abstraction of information; and Ceal Floyer, in the careful reconstruction of things most people wouldn't look twice at. His practice would be arid if it were simply about the scientific re-creation of things past, but there is a great deal of real pleasure in encountering his work—*The Shield of Achilles* is a nifty little shortcut to the sublime; *Paper Moon* has an economic melancholy—as well as in the kind of mental exercise it entails. In trying to capture fleeting things, he runs the risk of or even courts failure, but this itself leads us to think about how precise any depiction of anything at all can be, and thus his efforts bloom into something new, something just to the side of what one might be expected to remember—not the poetry but the colors, not the window but the anxiety—something that arises from the combination of a memory and the desire for it.

—Emily Hall



Spencer Finch,  
*Paper Moon (Studio  
Wall at Night)*,  
2009, mixed media,  
dimensions variable.