

Story Gillian Serisier

SPENCER FINCH

American artist Spencer Finch looks at how we perceive light, colour and memory, bridging the gap between art and science.

The first thing I want to talk about is *The Light of Lascaux (Cave Entrance)*, September 29, 2005. Much of your work is founded in philosophy, literature, poetry or the personal space, yet the Lascaux caves have a much more public aspect. Why did you choose that site?

I was interested in seeing what the people who made those cave paintings saw. A lot of what my work is about trying to see what other people saw in a different place at a different time and to be some sort of conduit for that—this idea of the beginning of creativity. In going to Lascaux I did two things. I did drawings of darkness inside the cave—there is a series of 12 drawings based on studies I did inside the first entrance, the antechamber. The archeologist looking after me left the door open about a centimetre so there was some ambient light coming in. There is a series of four views within different walls of the caves at three different levels. As I left the cave, I was thinking about what the people who were there saw when they came back out into the world, because they went into this dark space where they represented the world and then went back out into the world. And the thing that is the same as thousand years ago is the light.

Often with your work I don't know where to place myself physically. With *Lascaux*, if I looked away from the fluorescent lamps at someone or something there was a difference, but I find it hard to locate the light in space.

The work is really not about the fluorescent lamps that you have a view of from the facing wall, purposefully left blank. As you look at the wall, that is the light, so the wall becomes almost the work alone—the fluorescent part becomes a diversion, necessary to create the work on the facing wall. It is similar to the *West* video piece, [*West (Sunset in My Motel Room,*

Monument Valley, January 26, 2007 5:36 – 6:06 pm) a work that simulates a sunset using changing TV light bouncing off a wall], which really was back-projected onto the wall. That is the light; you are standing within the same light, but that re-creation allows you to see how it shifts because there are all those colours. It is kind of a baroque distraction from the real matter at hand.

It is a beautiful distraction though. All those colours—I am presuming they're taken from a light reading.

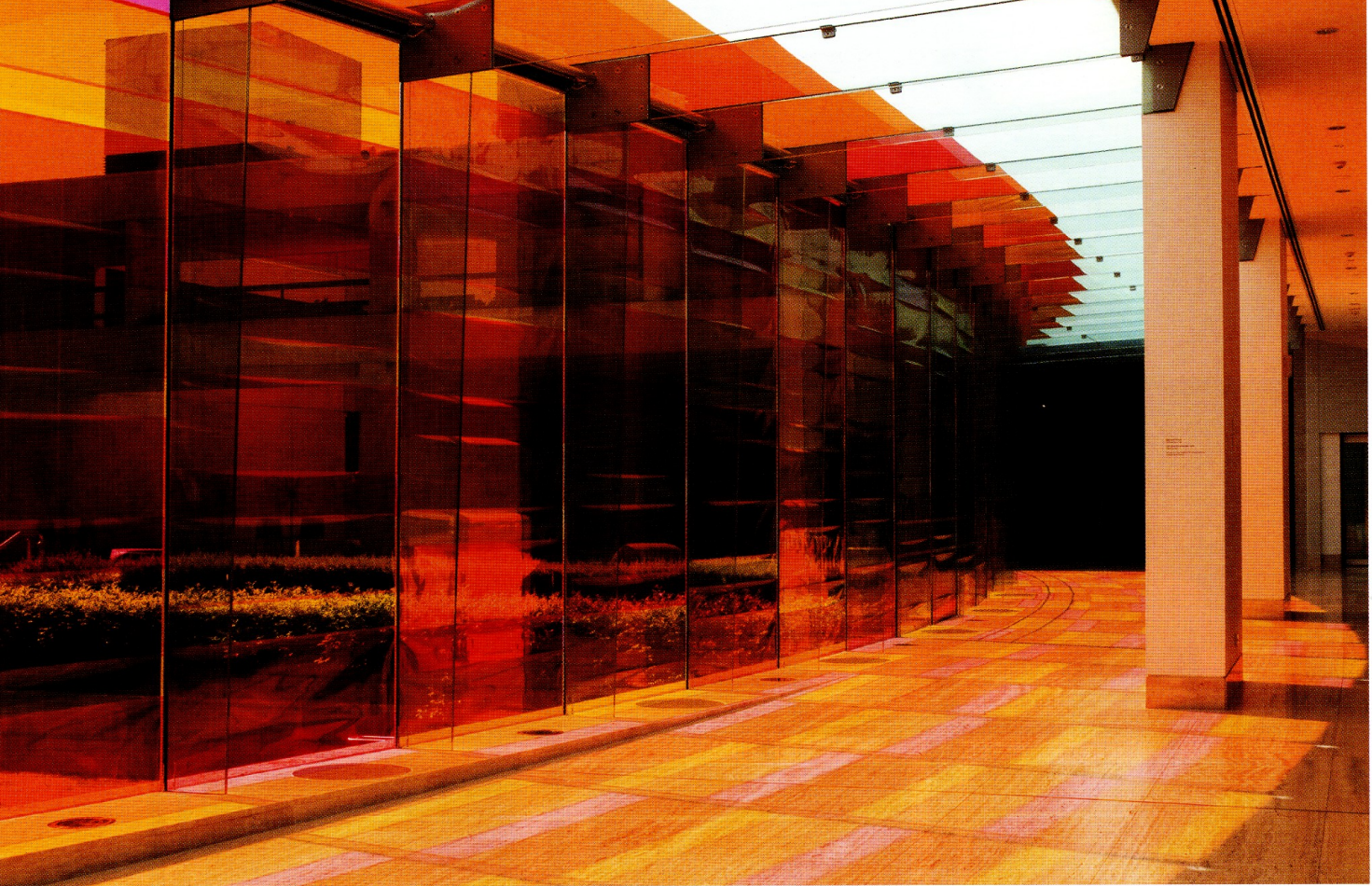
I'm re-creating average colour based on CIE coordinates. I used filters that were close to the colours of the pigments—oranges and browns—close to the iron oxides; then the pink, which was the titanium dioxide, and which you only see two or three times in the cave. Pink was used a little bit and that was causing the whole thing to shift to red, so then I needed to shift it back with blue and green. So I chose a blue that came close to the colour of the sky and a green that came close to the colour of the foliage. So the threshold is made up of the pigment and colour of the cave inside, and the landscape outside. I worked with that material to give it a representational reference to the place.

There is a semi-scientific component to the work but these choices are much more subjective.

Yes, the choice is subjective—it could have been done by mixing white light. Using Newtonian rules you can achieve basically any colour by mixing RGB. I could have just used RGB and ended up with the same colour. I was interested in having there be a somewhat obscure reference to the landscape.

***West* is taken from the John Ford's 1956 Western *The Searchers* and those choices also seem quite subjective.**

That was such a huge job. I cut thousands of stills from the film and indexed them. I wanted interesting images and I had to measure each one and get the colour and the intensity of each one, so I created this catalogue of stills determined by colour and intensity. I knew what was going to project individually on



02

52

the wall but about two-thirds I had to throw out because they were just way too blue. TV in general is very blue and so much of that [was] exterior landscapes that show sky—even interior shots are really blue. I really needed green in there, so every image from *The Seachers* with green in it, I have in that piece. Then of course, that shifts from starting out with these exterior shots, because they were the brightest, and as it proceeds it moves to interior, and then night, and then just very dark images, so there is a progression in terms of the amount of light in the frames that I have selected.

A lot of your work does focus on the light of Texas. What is that interest?

I spent time in Texas and I did a few pieces when I went down there in 2003. I am interested in Texas—not in Texas per se but in the American Midwest. The American idea has a real appeal for me. I think it is really spectacular in that tradition of representedness with landscape and I'm trying to do it in a somewhat less conventional way. I also feel like it is my country. I'm not possessive at all, but I am amazed by it and I love to go out there. I feel it is sort of weird in its tradition of American landscape artists starting with the Hudson River School and on to the light and space artists who did a lot of work out there.

You are not hiding paraphernalia of the technology at all—how are you bringing people to focus on that space within the work and to ignore or not be confused by the technology?

I think this comes from being trained in conceptual analysis that uses [the] methodology: 'what you see is what you get'. I am not interested in illusionism. I think it should really be matter of fact, I am not interested in tricking or using tricks and I try to avoid using complex technology. Whenever I can, I try to keep it as simple as possible, partially out of a sort of philosophical position about keeping it simple, but also in terms of the way I work. I don't like being dependent on software engineers or computer programmers. I feel that when it is possible to make a

low-tech solution it is better for me. I enjoy it more and I think the viewers are then dealing with what I think the work is about rather than saying: "well how did he do that, what is the trick?" If people are taking the time to think about what the trick is, they are not thinking about what the work is. I think that work that is too sophisticated in terms of its technology can trick you like smoke and mirrors and it distracts from the work.

Walden Pond [Two Hours, Two Minutes, Two Seconds (Wind At Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)] is incredibly simple in terms of technology yet complex in its conceptual presence. Tell me a bit about the ideas behind this work.

I wanted to make a work that was invisible and so I thought I'd make something about the wind and about oration. Also, it couldn't just be any wind, I wanted it to be grounded in a place and the idea of observation. I hit upon doing something at Walden Pond where [Henry David] Thoreau was for two years, two months and two days and was very observant about the weather and the conditions around him. So using an anemometer, I measured the wind over two hours, two minutes and two seconds, right at the point where his house was along the shore of the pond. It was actually quite simple. Then I created this bank of fans that goes in an almost 360 degree circle and figured out what the setting needed to be—it changes every 15 seconds—and from which group of fans and at what speed. Then all of this was put into a small computer. It was very simple to recreate this feeling of wind, [of] something from a particular place and particular moment. It is incredibly boring, ... I mean I haven't stayed in it for the whole two hours, two minutes, two seconds. Maybe I should have made it two minutes, two seconds and two hundredths of a second. But it is very close to the breeze—as close as I could get.

The work has an intimate and personal relationship with history. How do you arrive at those ideas? Is it through the comparative literature you have studied or how their philosophies effect you?

There needs to be a necessary relationship between the subject matter and the form. When I was thinking about the wind, that idea for doing something about wind came first, and then I needed to find a particular wind, and to my mind it seemed necessary that it would be that particular wind and it would make that connection. Sometimes I'll have a sort of form in place that I wouldn't know what to do with. There is this piece I did on [Mladimir] Nabokov's system of colour hearing—he had a colour for each letter. I wanted to transliterate a certain text using that and I didn't know what to do. I played around with things for a couple of months and then put it down for two years. What do you do with the system? What text do you use? Do you repeat your name a hundred times or take a Nabokov text? And then it occurred to me that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle was the perfect text for it. These things come to me. This rain on the window [*Untitled (After Emily Dickinson) 2009*] is something I've been thinking about for a long time. I wasn't sure what window it would be and then it made sense for it to be Emily Dickinson's window just because of her incredible...well, first of all because she was a little bit of a 'shut-in' and rarely left her house, but also because of her incredible powers of observation. Something so minor and easily overlooked as raindrops on a window is something she would have observed really carefully and with an intensity that the rest of us can only aspire to.

Are the raindrops a photographic image or is it a painting of a photographic image?

It is a photographic image with only the raindrops. Each one was taken out of the photograph, out of the background image. A layer was created by selecting each of the raindrops very carefully. Each raindrop was magnified enormously, I went around it with a selecting tool, then the layer with the landscape behind it was erased so that all that remained was the drops.

So each drop still has the garden showing through it.

It has. It was a wet sort of snowy, rainy day that was all grey. It is certainly not spectacular, but I am excited about that work because it is the newest work and something I hadn't seen until I got here. It is so subtle; I feel it is really hard core and I like that.

It is very interesting particularly with the brashness of Brisbane (with apologies to Brisbane) showing through it. You have these beautiful little blobs of grey that are from this beautiful reclusive garden that is so subtle.

And the shapes are so beautiful. I spent a lot of time with them so they are very special. Each little dot is special.

They truly are lovely and it is amazing how many children are drawn to it and sit in that little window tracing them. Oh really, that is good.

On the thought of 'spectacular', I know you have work to show in the Venice Biennale later in the year and you said you would have to do something spectacular for it.

I have to be careful about being too subtle. I know what the work is going to be—they have been quite specific about what they want, so it will be a window piece, which I don't think will be spectacular. It will be more subtle, but it is a beautiful window, and then one of the molecule works. These two works will work together, whereas normally they are totally independent works. So I can guarantee this won't be the most spectacular work there, but I am also hoping that people don't totally walk by it just because of the architecture of the art biennale. Also there is another artist in my space and that work is the big, more traditional sculpture and I have to deal with the realities of the space. I had proposals for things that were more subtle and new and more experimental and they were not eager for me to do that so I will do that elsewhere. I think it is better—I know how to do these kinds of work so there won't be many technical difficulties or surprises.

This must be a constant consideration for an artist working with installation.

Whenever you do anything new. The Dickinson window was a new thing—the whole process of finding how to get something clear and so subtle onto this size and onto the window. It is a whole new process fraught with questions. With this Biennale work, I can say I need this many watts going in and I need this for the window. It is these specific practical matters [that] unfortunately have to be considered.

Is there anything you would like people to consider when perceiving your work?

I know my work isn't for everyone and that's one of the great things about being a visual artist. We don't really have to appeal to the lowest common denominator and a super wide audience.

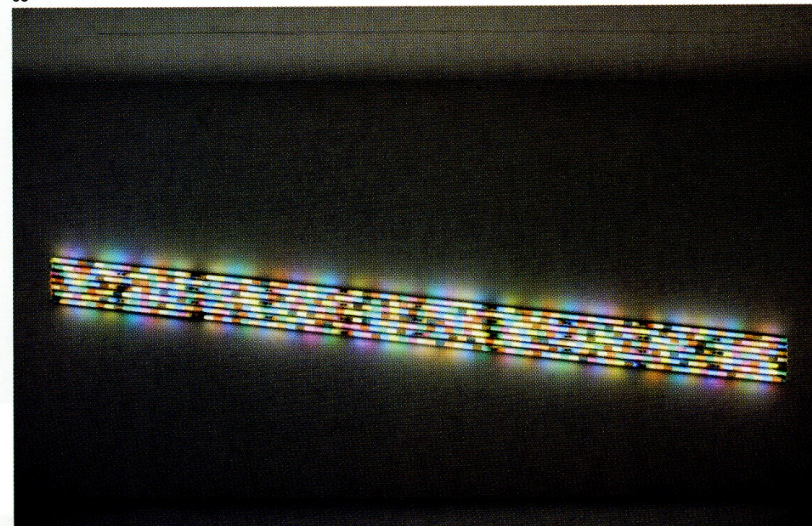
It's a bit like being a poet.

It is. It's very similar in terms of the audience. Poetry has to be accepted on its own terms, or just not be read. I think visual art is the same. I feel like the work is a leap in some ways, but not such a leap that only art world insiders can get it. I hope that people who share my interests and visual sensibilities can, and I think people can come from different fields. Actually my favorite viewers are people who are not real serious art viewers, who just happen to get something and see that maybe this is something that can interest them. And I hope it has a cumulative effect in this exhibition in particular [Spencer Finch: As if the sea should part and show a further sea. Queensland Art Gallery, 2009]. I'm hoping that people have an accumulation of seeing what I am interested in and what I am thinking about, so by the time they get around to the Emily Dickinson window, which is the subtlest most hard-core one, that they might spend time with it and try to let it speak to them in some way rather than walking by it. All you can hope for is to have generous viewers who approach the work with an open heart and draw something from the experience of it.

Born 1962 in New Haven, United States, Spencer Finch currently lives and works in New York. In June, he will exhibit at the 2009 Venice Biennale. www.spencerfinch.com

- 01 **West (Sunset in my motel room, Monument Valley, January 26, 2007, 5:36-6:06 PM)**, 2007, 9 channel video installation, Installation view
Image courtesy the artist
- 02 **CIE 529/418 (Candlelight)**, 2009, Installation view of the Gibson entrance, Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy David Sandison
- 03 **The light at Lascaux (cave entrance), September 29, 2005, 5:27 PM**, 2005, Fluorescent fixtures and lamps with filters, Installation view
Image courtesy the artist

03

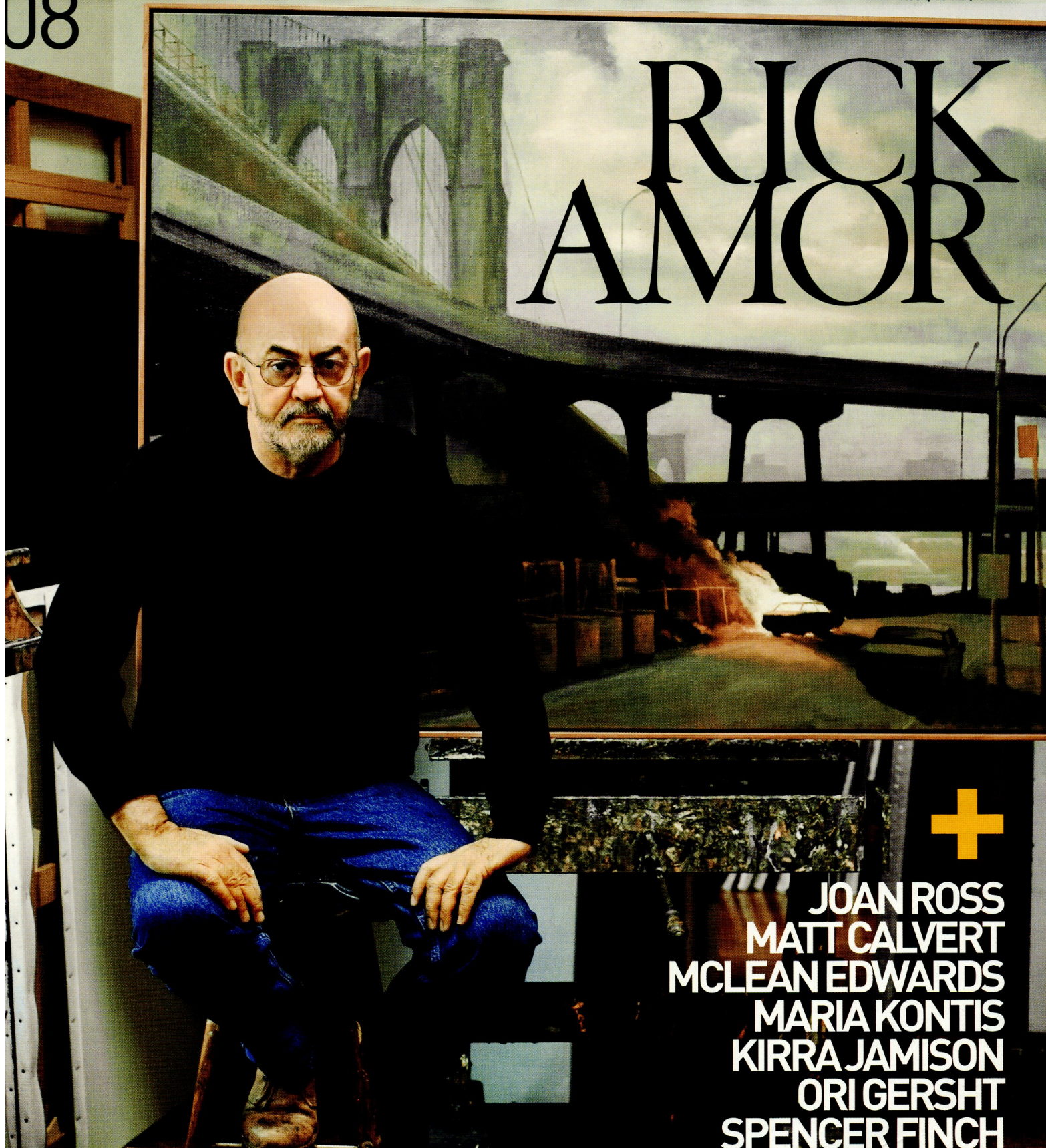


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08

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