

Weekend

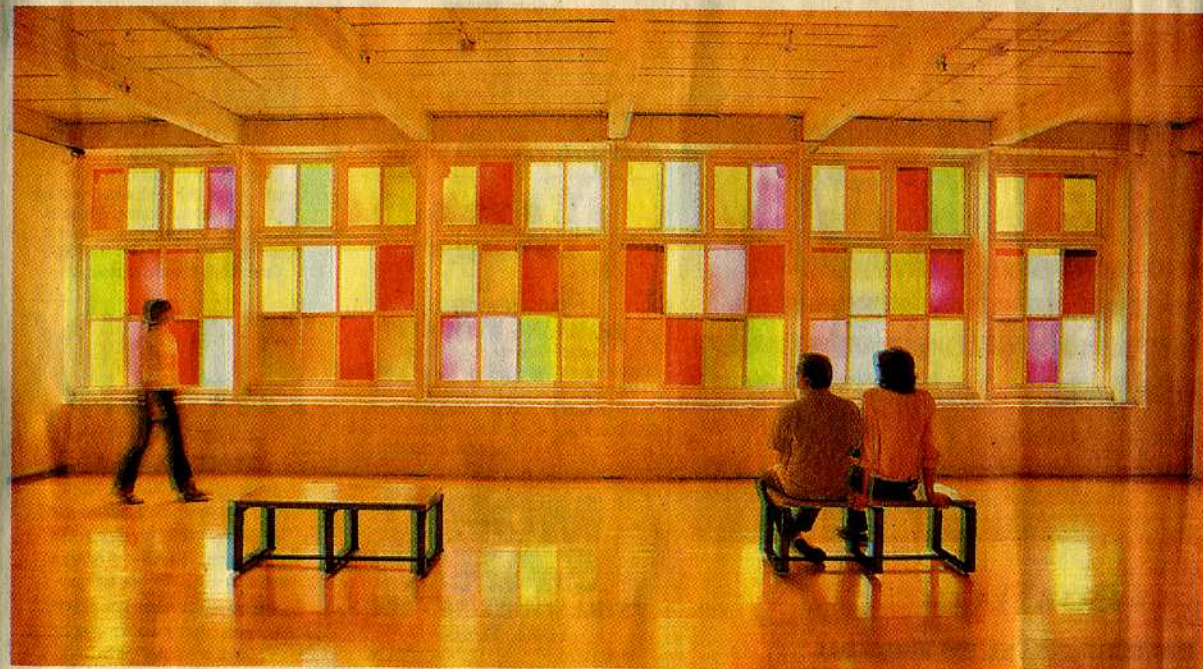
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POSTMASTERS

Art Review

Playing with the past while examining the fault lines of memory



At the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Spencer Finch's installation "CIE 529/418 (candlelight)" filters outdoor light through red, yellow, and green stained-glass panes, creating a warm ambient glow.

At Mass MoCA, Finch ponders limits of knowing

By Ken Johnson

GLOBE STAFF

NORTH ADAMS — Do you remember the color of the pillbox hat Jackie Kennedy wore on the day her husband was assassinated? It was pink, that's right, but do you know exactly what shade of pink? Could you reproduce the precisely matching color using, say, paint or crayons? That's what Spencer Finch set out to do in a series of 100 pastel drawings he made in 1994, each a simple, face-size oval of a different shade of pink.

Like many of the works in Finch's slyly illuminating exhibition "What Time Is It on the Sun?" at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, "Trying to Remember the Color of Jackie Kennedy's Pillbox Hat" raises a host of intriguing philosophical questions about perception, memory, knowledge, and truth. The drawings and most of the works in the

show are more interesting to think about than to look at, but with Finch's art, it's the thought that counts.

A New York-based artist with a considerable resume of international exhibiting over the past 10 years, Finch re-creates sensory experiences of light, darkness, color, and wind using a variety of unconventional means including electric lights, video monitors, and electric fans. He is, you might say, Postmodernist Impressionist. As Mass MoCA's survey of works dating from 1993 to the present shows, his larger mission is to prompt us to ponder age-old epistemological questions: How do we know what we think we know? What can we know, if anything, for certain?

Getting back to Jackie's hat, how would we know which of the 100 drawings matches — or comes close to matching — Finch's memory? He doesn't tell us which, if any, does. But then, given the mercurial nature of memory, how would the artist himself know for sure which is the right pink?

Born as he was in 1962, it's unlikely he

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saw it firsthand, so whatever he does remember would have to be based on old photographs or films, which themselves may be unreliable. Assuming the hat still exists somewhere (and hasn't faded), it might be possible to discover whether any of the drawings does match its color. But only Finch would know whether his idea of the color is close to the hat's actual color or to that of one of his drawings.

A similar question arises in a set of 102 ink drawings from 2002, each a Rorschach-type blot made from a color that Finch says appeared in a dream. Who could verify that any one of these colors is true to a color that only ever existed in the mind of the artist? No one could — maybe not even the artist — and that's the point. The harder you study how we know things, the more mysterious knowing becomes.

In later works, Finch would go to great lengths to ensure that his re-creation of an experience would match its original. For a piece called "Eos (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02)," he traveled to the site of the ancient city of Troy and used a device called a colorimeter to measure the early morning light — what Homer famously called "the rosy-fingered dawn." Then he constructed a rectangular configuration of 69 fluorescent tubes covered with translucent red, yellow, and blue plastic filters. It is supposed to fill a room with light the exact color and luminosity of the dawn light of Troy — presumably the same light that Homer himself beheld.

Since we're talking about art and not science, it's unlikely that anyone will ever attempt to verify that the light of Finch's sculpture matches the actual morning light in Greece. But "Eos" still works as a thought experiment leading to some absorbing cogitations about the relationship between reality and the representation of reality.

We might think, for example, about how Finch's work differs from an Impressionist painter's attempt to capture the exact quality of light in a certain place at a particular time of day. One difference is that you don't immediately experience Finch's work as an illusion of something else. It's just electric light, and it's the verbal in-

Spencer Finch: What Time Is It on the Sun?

At: Mass MoCA through spring 2008
413-662-2111, massmoca.org.

formation that directs us to think about it as representing something else. Unlike the light and space works of James Turrell, which do create magically illusory experiences, Finch's works don't appear to be anything other than what they are.

It takes a certain effort of imagination to experience what Finch's works are supposed to re-create. A construction consisting of ordinary box fans stacked four-high and arranged in a semicircle is supposed to replicate the breezes blowing off Walden Pond, which Finch measured over a two-hour period one day last March. As a computer-controlled system turns certain fans on and off, you might close your eyes and feel like you are outdoors communing with nature and the spirit of Henry David Thoreau. But it's a stretch.

It's hard to see, too, how a mass of crumpled translucent blue plastic sheets suspended in front of a bank of white and off-white fluorescent lights reproduces the light outside Emily Dickinson's home as a cloud passes across the sun. See "Sunlight in an Empty Room (Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004)."

That Finch's works do not produce a fully transformative experience is disappointing. Still there is something curiously touching about using such modern devices to capture such evanescent experiences. Beholden as they mostly are to a Minimalist aesthetic, Finch's constructions aren't funny or wacky — they'd be more interesting to me, at least, if they were — but they are quixotic. It helps to imagine Finch as a kind of nutty scientist played by Christopher Lloyd trying to distill and exactly measure the essence of poetry.

A problem with showing Finch's works is that their perceptual subtleties are easily disrupted if the environment is not perfectly controlled. If the Dickinson work were presented by itself in an empty white room it might cast a transporting spell. But there are other works and other light sources in the spacious Mass MoCA gal-



ART EVANS/MASS MOCA

“Sunlight in an Empty Room (Passing Cloud for Emily Dickinson, Amherst, MA, August 28, 2004)” aims to reproduce the light outside Dickinson’s home as a cloud passes across the sun.

lery where it presently resides, and those distracting influences undermine the intended effect.

Where Finch’s works are isolated from other spaces, they are more sensually and emotionally compelling. In a single, whole-room installation titled “CIE 529/

418 (candlelight),” windows outfitted with red, yellow, and green stained glass panes filter the light from outdoors and cast a warm yellow glow onto the interior wall opposite the windows. The whole creates a lovely, church-like ambience in which the play between

the luxuriously material windows and the ethereal light generates a mood of quiet spiritual elation.

Also effective is a piece consisting of nine video monitors stacked in a three-by-three grid in a dark room. It casts a slowly diminishing light onto the wall it faces. It is

supposed to replicate the fading afternoon light in a motel room in Monument Valley, Utah, where Finch recently stayed. The punchline is that the light is created not by illuminated blank screens but by stills from the Western movie “The Searchers” that change as time passes. The movie was filmed in Monument Valley, so in a roundabout sort of way, the light of Finch’s sculpture really is the light of Monument Valley. That the movie he used is called “The Searchers” is also a kind of pun, for Finch’s project itself is a kind of unending search for truth. It’s a witty piece, but the declining light in the empty room also produces an elegiac feeling.

Finch’s works are almost always related by their titles to famous people, places, and things, which could seem a gimmick by which to make his esoteric pursuits more interesting to a general audience. But there is a larger point in that the titles usually relate to elements of our collective memory that have to do with the unknown or the unknowable.

Culture is shaped as much by what is not known as by what is, and Finch’s works track the blurry border between. Many people still wonder what really happened in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963. Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau pushed language to the limits of its ability to describe the ineffable. One of Finch’s sculptures, an oval panel covered by rhinestones representing the color of the sky over Roswell, N.M., alludes to a place where some people believe beings from other, unknown worlds have visited.

Finch’s lesson is that to be human is to be forever at the mercy of our merely human perceptions and beliefs. We may do our best to discover what truths are out there using the methods and tools of science, but we can never achieve a vantage point outside human consciousness from which we can objectively know the absolute truth about anything. To answer the question that gives Finch’s exhibition its title, a question originally posed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, we cannot know what time it is on the sun. The only time we can hope to know is human time.

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