

Susan Cross Talks To Spencer Finch

*Spencer Finch is a New York-based artist and Susan Cross is a curator at Mass MoCA. Finch's solo show *What Time is it on the Sun?*, which Cross curated, will be on view at Mass MoCA until March 31, 2008.*

Susan Cross: In one of the new pieces made for MASS MoCA, *A Few Days Are All We Have* (*Sky, January 1 – June 17, 2007*), you matched layers of filters to the varied colors of sky over a period of several months. I find myself looking up a lot more now. Many of your works refer to a particular sky: *Sky (Over Roswell, NM, 5/5/00, dusk)*, *Night Sky (Over the Painted Desert, Arizona, January 11, 2004)*. I'm wondering how you first came to the sky as a subject.

Spencer Finch: There's a line from Freud where he talks about Kant, who said that there were two things—a moral thing and a natural thing—that continued to amaze him: the night sky and the goodness in the hearts of men. Freud was very dismissive, and said, "Oh yes, the night sky is quite beautiful." I think it's those two things, the idea of images that can straddle the space between abstraction and representation, and then also subject matter, that produces a sense of wonder and approaches this idea of the sublime.

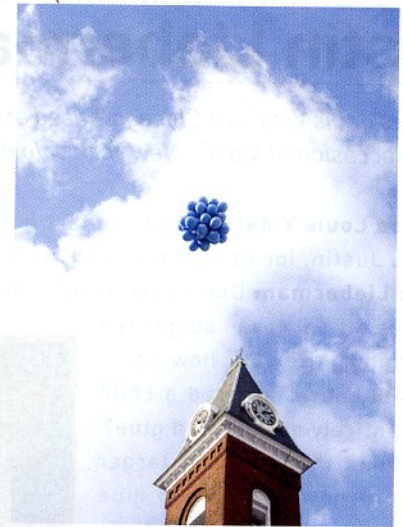
I became gradually interested in the sky, choosing each location for a specific conceptual reason, whether it was *Blue (Sky over Cape Canaveral, August 31, 1994)*—which was an attempt to match a very specific point in the sky where the Challenger disaster occurred eight years before I started the project. I think it also had to do with the idea of wanting to be a landscape painter, and then

trying to think about landscape in a way that was nontraditional but had traditional 19th-century ideas.

SC: You've referenced 19th-century landscape painters in your work, specifically Monet and Turner, both of whom are, in part, known for their treatment of the sky, and of course its light. Is there a specific connection to these painters?

SF: I think part of my interest in 19th-century painters, Turner, Monet, and also the Hudson River School, is, in part, their reaction to photography. And I feel that this continues to be a foil for many people, this idea of representing change. Whereas photography has always been about a single moment frozen in time, there is a sense that those painters are referencing a period of time. That is certainly the case in the serial paintings of Monet. And in Turner, as your eyes move across them, there's a diachronic way of experiencing them that is very different from the experience of looking at a photograph. I always think of Civil War battlefield photographs as the archetypal landscape photos of the 19th-century because they're one single moment. There's no moment before or after, it's just one moment. My work doesn't capture a moment; it captures the fleetingness of a moment. It seemed like a very painterly idea.

SC: And how did you begin working with light, a phenomenon that seems particularly illustrative of the fleeting nature of things?



SF: The first fluorescent piece I did was *Eos* (*Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02*). I really was thinking about the 19th-century painters, specifically: what if, instead of painting a picture of a place you could recreate the light of a place. If we were as sensitively attuned to the color of light as we are to a convention like perspective, for example, maybe we could have the experience of saying, "Oh yeah, that's Paris at dusk...There's the Hudson River Valley on a winter afternoon." It's a way of thinking about how to represent landscape in an unconventional but totally accurate way.

SC: By offering alternative modes of representation, as well as referencing outdated conventions like mosaics and frescos, your work helps people see how they are trained to see while inspiring them to see differently. After spending so much time with your light work, I notice incredible, yet subtle, shifts in color.

SF: That's the great thing about it. I now have much more sensitivity after spending so much time observing and being aware of light conditions. It's about being able to see the world in a richer and more complex way.

SC: Many of your works look at events and sites that we all have a relationship to: the assassination of President Kennedy in *Trying to Remember the Color of Jackie Kennedy's Pillbox Hat*, the Grand Canyon, Roswell. Can you talk a bit about how you choose those sites?

SF: There's the famous De Kooning line about content being very tiny, and I kind of agree with that. I feel like content has to be there because I'm not interested in abstraction. And often the art experience is greatest when the audience has some way of entering the work: a familiarity or previous relation to a thing. But I don't have some big message to convey; the focus is on the actual conventions of representation as a subject itself. The collective understanding of perception—the gaps, skips, and friction—is more interesting and sustainable to me than work that has subject matter per se. The viewing experience becomes more about asking questions than receiving some sort of answer. There's a fine line between being somewhat matter-of-fact but also visually interesting.

SC: When you describe your work as matter-of-fact, I think in particular of some of your most recent pieces—which use these very straightforward, surprisingly commonplace materials for poetic ends. They're formally engaging, while ultimately capturing the most ephemeral, even romantic, of sensory phenomena. I'm thinking about the box fans you used for *Two hours, Two minutes, Two seconds* (*Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007*) and the televisions used for the light in *West* (*Sunset in my motel room, Monument Valley, January 26, 2007, 5:36-6:06 pm*). Both use these machines to reference the natural.

SF: I did want those pieces to be very matter-of-fact—with *West* I wanted to reference the TVs that you see in motel rooms and the melancholy feel of the TVs light in a room at night. And there's also a bit of a joke in the piece—when I first installed it facing the wall, the guys synching the DVDs said, "Wait! Shouldn't it be facing out?" It challenges expectations—it's counterintuitive.

SC: Your work has often been described as both scientific and poetic. You have referenced Newton in your works, and also Heisenberg, as well as the poems of Auden, Dickinson, Moritake. You share their keen sense of observation.

SF: Poetry is a model of what art can do. Auden understood this in a profound way when he said, "Poetry makes nothing happen. It exists in the valley of its making, where executives would never want to tamper." And Beckett also talked about the impotency of art, and at the same time the obligation to make it in spite of its incredible limitations. And then there is Emily Dickinson, who could see more from her own backyard than most people who travel the world.

And there was a time, certainly in Newtown's day, where there wasn't such a difference between artists and scientists. It was all drawn together in fields like alchemy. My interest in the scientific method has something to do with my wanting to quantify things and yet realizing that an impossible goal. So actually just dancing around quantifying something is to keep it alive. It's almost as soon as you capture something—whatever it is, this moment—you kill it. ◊