

## San Francisco Chronicle

### Spencer Finch makes art of light at Berggruen

By Charles Desmarais | April 6, 2018



Spencer Finch, "Falling Leaves (maple)" (2017), watercolor and pencil on paper. The artist writes, "A drawing tracing the paths of falling leaves, mapped using video and then traced from the video monitor. All colors are matched with those of the original leaves."

There are words a critic should use advisedly. "Entrancing" might be one. But how else to describe art that, like the most delicate Japanese haiku, creates a mood or sensation with barely a few light gestures?

The art of Spencer Finch is like that. The subject of a substantial exhibition at Berggruen Gallery through May 5, it occupies two floors of the gallery. It is neither a survey of new work nor a considered retrospective; it appears to be simply an incidental accumulation of recent, and some older, work. Yet I left the gallery in a pleasant haze.

Finch is an artist whose work I have adored for nearly two decades. In 2004 I had the opportunity to include a piece—a large but elegantly simple installation—in an exhibition I organized in Cincinnati. That information is shared by way of full disclosure. Yet it also indicates how long the artist has pursued his method, which is the construction of experience, burdened by only minimal regard for the making of objects.

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Spencer Finch, "Studio Window (infrared, morning effect, 3/10/18)" (2018) oil pastel on paper. The artist notes, "Documentation of the temperatures recorded with fifteen thermometers on a section of Finch's studio window in the morning, drawn in false-color."

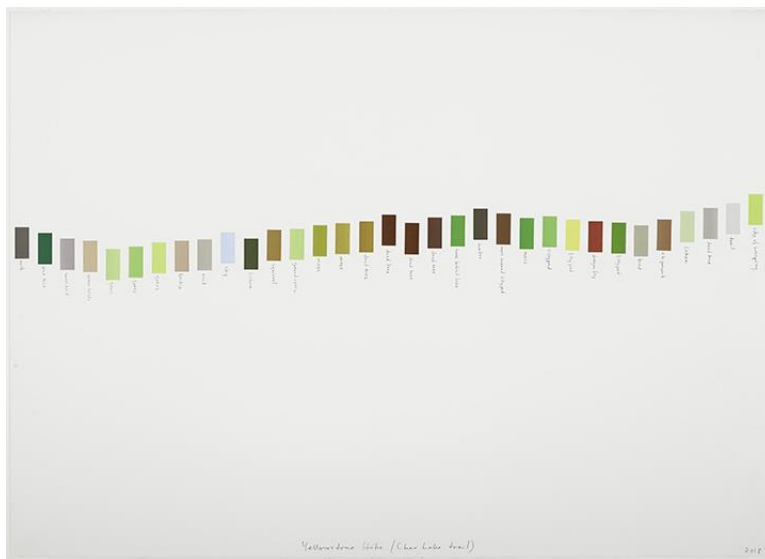
Memory is a function of time, a story related in an ordered sequence. Or so we tell ourselves, until that fragmentary sound, that fleeting scent or taste wallops us once again with the realization that narrative is something we must construct. Memories are not reeled up on spools, to be played as needed; they exist apart from language and logic.

I think of Finch as more alchemist than artist, harnessing the physics of light and color to forge rare perceptual elements.

That work I found so transporting 14 years ago is a fine example. Its title is "Winter Light (shadow, Monet's House, Giverny, 1/8/03)." Two fluorescent bulbs, sheathed in a translucent material, form an oblique angle on the floor, but they do not constitute the work. The work is the filtered light they cast on the room around the viewer, carefully metered and calibrated by the artist to match the intensity and color temperature, outdoors in France, at a given moment on a specific day, in the shadow of a home that once belonged to art history's most famous Impressionist.



The exhibition at Berggruen includes only one such immersive piece, and it is somewhat more complex. Created especially for the occasion, "Light in an Empty Room (my childhood bedroom)" from the outside looks tacked together with, for example, a flashlight taped to a toy locomotive. Within the room, though, the work extracts nostalgia from a square of white light slowly traveling across one wall, suggesting a passing car, and a flickering blue luminescence seen through a cutout window, a stand-in for that TV at the next-door neighbor's.



Beyond that poetic environment, the exhibition consists mainly of works on paper and other objects. They are often documents of the artist's ruminations or, perhaps, notes that could lead one day to bigger things.

Part of the fun is puzzling through the references, based upon only the work and its title. If you get stuck, though, there's a cheat sheet. It may not be offered, so be

Spencer Finch, "Yellowstone Hike (Clear Lake trail)" (2018), Pantone swatches and pencil on paper. According to the artist, the work is "a record of the colors seen on the Clear Lake trail in Yellowstone National Park."

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Spencer Finch, "Binary Star (Antares)" (2018), fluorescent fixtures and filters. According to the artist, "Each lamp emits the color and light of the individual stars making up the binary star Antares. The filter configuration refers to the spectral fingerprint of each star."

sure to ask at the front desk for the exhibition checklist, which includes one- or two-sentence thoughts from the artist on each piece.

A pair of lighted asterisks, fashioned from fluorescent tubes striped in multicolored plastic sleeves, hangs on a gallery wall. "Binary Star (Antares)" (2018) might be a visual pun on works by Dan Flavin, an evident influence. The artist's helpful commentary adds something more. "Each lamp," he tells us, "emits the color and light of the individual stars making up the binary star Antares. The filter configuration refers to the spectral fingerprint of each star."

One drawing, "Following a Bee (Zinnias)" (2018), traces an insect's garden meanderings in pencil among pastel bursts of color. It verges on the too-cute, though the ever-inventive Finch points out that "the use of pastel is a reference to the pollen."

In this context, singular, bright brushstrokes of watercolor on white paper take on added resonance when read as "Falling Leaves (maple)" (2017). Or when blotches of color are revealed to be a "Poke in the Eye (Left Eye, Outside Edge, Strong Pressure)" (2010).

A series of pictures, "Waking Dream (studio window)" (2018), is not as sweet as many works in the show, but in its analytical approach it is telling. Seven photographs, shot through a window, each depict the same scene: a bland cityscape outside the artist's studio. Nothing changes but the light outside, according to the time of day. Recording a phenomenon we have all perceived, the sheet of window glass before the lens shifts from transparent to reflective, as the shifting external light loses its battle of delineation with steady interior illumination.

Among his interests as an artist, Finch deals with perception and depiction, but these are not his central concern. He does

Spencer Finch, "Cumulus Humilis (Kyoto)" (2018), Scotch Tape on matboard. Described by the artist as "A study using scotch-tape to depict cumulus cloud formations as observed in Kyoto, Japan."



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not describe a place, as an illustrator might do. His effort is more romantic, more generous even than the poet's, endeavoring to share an experience. Finch's futile offer is not for us to hear what he has to say, but to take his place. To perceive what he perceives and, in a sense, to become him.

Spencer Finch, "Lump (of concrete) Mistaken for a Pile (of dirty snow) #1" (2010), concrete, marble dust, street dirt. According to the artist, the work is "A sculpture of a concrete lump that the artist initially mistook for a pile of dirty snow near his studio in Brooklyn."

**Spencer Finch: "Me, Myself, and I (A Group Show)"**: 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Mondays-Fridays; 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays. Through May 5. Free. Berggruen Gallery, 10 Hawthorne St., S.F. (415) 781-4629. [www.berggruen.com](http://www.berggruen.com)

*Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. This article appeared in print in the Saturday, April 7, 2018 issue of the Chronicle.*

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