

UMFA



above and below | Spencer Finch, American, born 1962, *Great Salt Lake and Vicinity* (detail), 2017, 1,132 ready-made Pantone chips and pencil, Commissioned by the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Purchased with funds from The Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment Fund, UMFA2018.4.1

Spencer Finch installing *Great Salt Lake and Vicinity* in the UMFA Great Hall.

AN INTERVIEW WITH

SPENCER FINCH

Whitney Tassie

Senior Curator
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art



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World-renowned artist **Spencer Finch** created *Great Salt Lake and Vicinity*, his largest-ever Pantone color chip installation, in response to the UMFA's G. W. Anderson Family Great Hall's architecture. His conceptual and labor-intensive process began with a long journey—the circumnavigation of Great Salt Lake. As he made his way around the lake, Finch logged precise measurements of color, and the resulting installation is a colorful sequence of ready-made Pantone chips affixed directly to the walls of the Great Hall. Each color chip is hand-labeled in pencil with the name of its original color source—the bark of a tree, the water in the distance, the wing of a bird. The line of color reads like field notes, a data-driven abstraction of close observation.

To share his private journey around Great Salt Lake with museum visitors, Finch leans heavily on documentation, a tool that Land artists enlisted in the 1960s and 70s to convey their work from distant locations. Like the non-site works of Land artist Robert Smithson that bring rocks or dirt from remote locations into the gallery in a sculptural form, Finch's Pantone installation brings a specific landscape into the museum by using color and language to engage memory and imagination in the recreation of a journey. By poetically transporting aspects of the outdoors into the Great Hall, Finch's installation redefines how we experience the museum and our surrounding landscape.

On the final evening of his three-day circumnavigation via foot, boat, and car, Spencer Finch met with UMFA curator Whitney Tassie to discuss his work, the site-specific project, and his experience in Utah. The following are excerpts from that conversation.



AN INTERVIEW WITH SPENCER FINCH

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Whitney Tassie (WT): *Spencer, how did you arrive at the idea for this installation?*

Spencer Finch (SF): The idea came from seeing the museum space and seeing the environment here, coming out to visit, and trying to think about something that works in the space, makes sense for this place, and has a relationship to this place.

The Great Hall is so enormous. There were two ways to go, and there was no in-between. The installation either had to be maximal or minimal, and so, I originally thought of it in a maximal way with things hanging in the space, but it always felt like it wasn't going to be big enough. Because it's such a cavernous, enormous space, the expectation is that it's going to be a spectacular, giant piece. So then I thought, in my contrary way, that maybe the way to approach it is to do something sort of smaller that fills the space in a different way.

WT: *Conceptually.*

SF: Yeah. And also visually in a tiny way. And that's when I thought about doing the Pantone piece so that something is visible from everywhere in the space, but it only gets meaning when you get up close to it and you realize what it is.

WT: *A large installation but intimate in that way.*

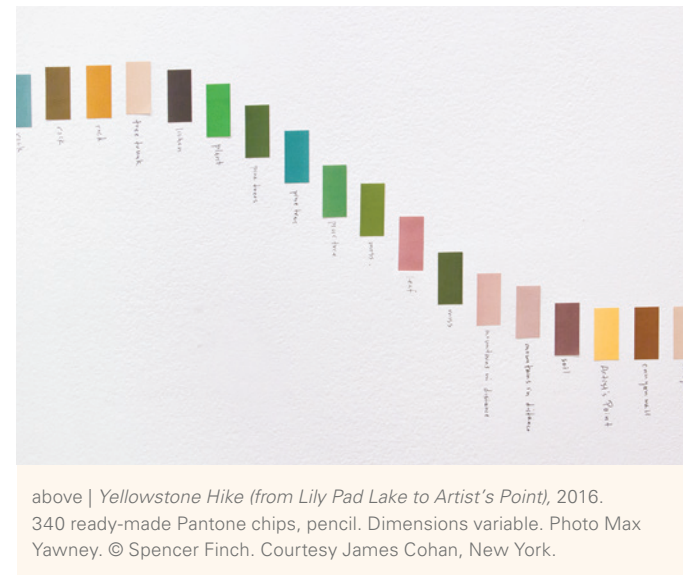
SF: Right. There is a kind of difference ... It's abstract from a distance but becomes representational when you get close.

WT: *The piece functions, and can be experienced, at multiple scales.*

SF: And it also has a narrative as you move around it. I like the idea of the shape of the artwork referring to circumnavigating the lake, but of course, it's not like you could walk around it and see it in that sort of complete way because the lake is not always accessible. It's a matter of going around it and seeing the nearby environment, and dipping in and dipping out, so it's more complex, and also more rich, and also a little more complicated than I imagined, but I went around the whole thing. And I saw it from many, many different vantage points.

WT: *So, this work is the fourth in this series?*

SF: Right. The first one, *A Walk through Berlin (with Claudia) (2013)*, was a very short one. Then I did *Ulysses (September 19) (2014)*, which was shown in Marfa. And then I did the Yellowstone hike last summer. But this is different because it involved being in vehicles and being in boats, and it's not just walking.



above | *Yellowstone Hike (from Lily Pad Lake to Artist's Point)*, 2016. 340 ready-made Pantone chips, pencil. Dimensions variable. Photo Max Yawney. © Spencer Finch. Courtesy James Cohan, New York.

WT: *The scale is just different. It's just huge.*

SF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But, the idea of creating this narrative of a landscape by reducing it to these chips of color is consistent. And people, especially, the more I learned about the lake, the more I realized that a lot of people who live right near the lake never go to the lake. No one's interested in it. They think it's polluted; they think it's smelly; they think there are lots of flies; they think it's ugly; it's not a natural wonder. But it's pretty spectacular, I mean, it's pretty amazing.

WT: *It's otherworldly.*

SF: It is otherworldly. It's like some sort of ocean from Venus. Very odd, you know, with all the salt, all the different colors ... And when you go out on the causeway, you can see that. You can see the division of the colors. The south side is blue, and the north side is reddish-purple. I've been interested in using Pantone as an art material for a while. About five years ago, I used it for a piece that was a spinning wheel for the Folkestone Triennial. I used different Pantone colors on this wheel that people spun. They looked at the ocean, matched the color of the water with a Pantone, and then a flag of that color was raised. I think that was the first time I use Pantone as a way to standardize.

WT: *It was a cyanometer, an instrument for measuring blueness.*

SF: Yes, a cyanometer is an amazing thing. The Pantone, because it is a standard, allows for repeatability, it allows for shifting



above | *The Western Mystery*, 2017. Site-specific installation of 339 pieces of colored glass suspended in air. Seattle Art Museum, Olympic Sculpture Park, PACCAR Pavilion. Photo: Mark Woods.

A moving abstraction of a sunset, based on actual sunsets photographed from Seattle over Puget Sound.

to different media. For example, a lot of colors will repeat throughout this piece, and I'm sure that they're always the same. But I also realize, I mean someone would look at the Pantone book and think, "Oh, there's so many colors in there," but when I'm matching, I realize there's not a perfect match in most cases. You realize how many colors our eyes can see, and all the subtle differences.

WT: *There is a limit to reproducibility.*

SF: Well, yeah, the limit of creating a certain system of color. And the thing is, I could get closer if I was out there mixing paint, but I couldn't do over a thousand colors. It takes a long time to mix colors, so this process has a sort of quickness, an immediacy, and a facility. I know the Pantone book well, even though it's not in any real particular order. There are oranges in the front, oranges in the back, so it's a little bit mixed up. Mostly it's organized by color, but not completely.

WT: *But you use it a lot, so you know it.*

SF: Yes, I know it more or less. I know there are these two purplish-gray pieces in the middle, sort of blue section. They are not in gray, they are not in purple. But, I know they're there in that section. It is limited, but there is still an incredible variety. And, there is a huge variety of color around the lake and its environment. Color is a fun way to think about a trip. There are plants; there are animals; there are insects; there are birds. There's a lot of color, and there's a lot of water. The more I saw the lake, the more I wanted to really have a lot of different views of the lake, and to see the variety of color. It's just a huge range. It depends on the angle that you're viewing it from; it depends on the part of the lake; it depends on where the sun is; it depends on the weather; it depends on the light; it depends on all sorts of things, so there's a lot of variety, which is great.

WT: *I think it'll be surprising. I think people will be surprised to see the variety of color. Because like you said, many don't go out there.*

SF: Yeah, Great Salt Lake is like another planet somehow. It is really a strange, strange place. I do think the installation will be a sort of shock for people, but I think once they enter into it, they'll be engaged and it will take people a long time to go through it.

WT: *I've been thinking about the translation that happens between your experience, the production of the artwork, and the visitors' experience.*

SF: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WT: *The installation very much represents your personal experience, but as soon as the visitor starts to look, read, and experience it, they draw from their own memory to create their own narrative of a journey.*

SF: I think people will see, say Antelope Island, and they'll think, "Oh, is this really that color?" Or just the lake, or *Spiral Jetty*, or Willard Bay, or the color of those evaporation ponds. To see all of these colors might be surprising for people. If the piece has a purpose, it might be to have people open their eyes to look around to see the natural world differently, to appreciate the huge range and splendor of it.

WT: *When people experience the documentation of your performance, or your process, they will have their own different experience. Even though you've painstakingly documented your experience, they cannot know your experience. From a*



above | *The Color of Water*, 2011. 100 flags and color wheel.

Over several weeks throughout 2010 Finch observed changing tone and color of the English Channel. He selected a Pantone swatch for each color observed resulting in a palette of 100 variants of sea color, which was used to dye 100 flags and to create a color wheel. Every day of the Folkestone Triennial exhibition in the UK, an observer used the color wheel to match the color of the water to a flag that was then hoisted up a flagpole.

color and a word, or a name, they have to imagine the journey. They have to-

SF: They project on to it.

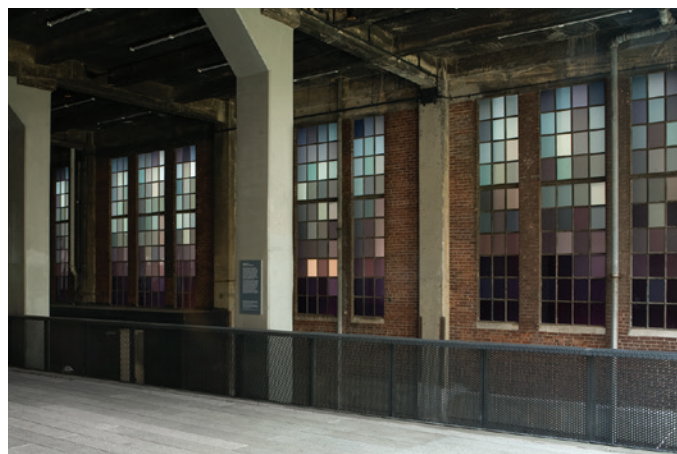
WT: *Right! I think that's fascinating. So, do you think we all see color differently?*

SF: Yeah.

WT: *So if someone else was with you, selecting Pantone colors, they probably would've selected different color chips?*

SF: Yeah, they would do it differently. Also, I don't think I have a super-great color sense, but it's developed now. I'm good at color-matching. That skill is something that I've developed, whether it's mixing paint to match, or using Pantone to match, it's something I've gotten good at because I've done it a lot. But I feel like I don't have super-great color acuity vision. Once I'm looking at something, then I can sort of get a sense of the subtle difference. Then I can remember colors and match them pretty well.

Although, there are certain times when I just can't get a match because I'm trying to work pretty quickly when I'm doing it. I just move on. I skip it. Pantone colors are flat color, so for something that is almost two colors combined, like vegetation on a hill in the distance, you basically have to choose between two Pantone colors. If you paint it, you could have an underlayer, and then over-painting, and you can get a complex color that way. But you can't do that with the simple colors that you get with Pantone. There's no layering, so sometimes really subtle or complex colors can't be matched easily.



above | *The River that Flows Both Ways*, 2009. 700 individual glass panes. Photo Iwan Baan

A site-specific installation at the Chelsea Market Passage on The High Line in New York City consisting of colored glass panes representing the water conditions on the Hudson River over a period of 700 minutes in a single day. Finch photographed the River's water's surface from a tugboat and, based on the pixels in his images, assigned a color to each of the window panes. Depending on the time of day, the amount of light on the windows changes, altering the appearance of the colors and translucence of the installation's panes.

WT: *You've been so extremely busy over the past year working on projects in Milan, Berlin, West Palm Beach, Seattle, North Adams, New York, London, Brooklyn, Louisville, and Chicago, to name a few. I know it's part of your rhythm, but I'm curious how you manage to balance your workload when so much of your production process requires deep focus for an extended period of time. Observation takes time.*

SF: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WT: *Do you find that making your work is meditative or therapeutic? For example, what was the effect of carving out these past three days to be looking and recording in the middle of nowhere, as opposed to traveling on an airplane, or managing your studio, or responding to emails?*

SF: Yeah, yeah. It's really useful. It reminds me that I need that kind of time. It's so much more useful than answering emails, or doing conference calls, or whatever. And actually, being out and doing this, I have ideas for other work. When you take a break, you see things. You see things that are different from what you see normally. It's nice to be out in the world and getting ideas. It's hard to find time to think and look, and to be exposed to different things. It's nice just being on my own, driving around and going to new places, like today at the Nature Conservancy in Layton, the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve. I was the only person there for a while. It's just a really beautiful place.



above | *Pacific Ocean, Noosa, Australia, April 1, 2008 (Afternoon Effect)*, 2009. Watercolor on paper, 22 x 30 inches.

This watercolor drawing is part of an ongoing series based on observations of various bodies of water at different times of day under changing light conditions. Similar works are based on Lake Michigan, the Mediterranean Sea, and the River Seine.

WT: *Kind of a rare experience.*

SF: Unfortunately, you can't see the lake from that point. As close as you can get to the lake, you can't see it. It's so marshy, and then I think it's probably salt flats, and then it's the lake. But then, I got in the middle of the lake, and it is a huge, enormous lake.

WT: *But it's a shallow puddle with average depth of something like 12 feet.*

SF: Yeah, no, it's not so deep. But when you're out there... I mean, we drove 45 minutes out, full speed with these double, 300 horsepower outboards, you feel like you're going forever. When you're there at the south marina, and you look north, you see the water, and it feels like an ocean. It really does go on.

WT: *It's quite vast. Did you see a bunch of birds?*

SF: I saw a lot of birds, mostly in Willard Bay. There were pelicans; there were lots of different kinds of gulls; there were various birds nesting. These birds make floating nests out of the grasses. They're just floating in the water, so the parents keep fixing the nest until the eggs hatch, and then when the eggs hatch, they don't need the nests anymore, so they just disintegrate. They're pretty amazing. There are all kinds of things. There are deer, there are foxes, there are badgers and so on. Dragonflies.

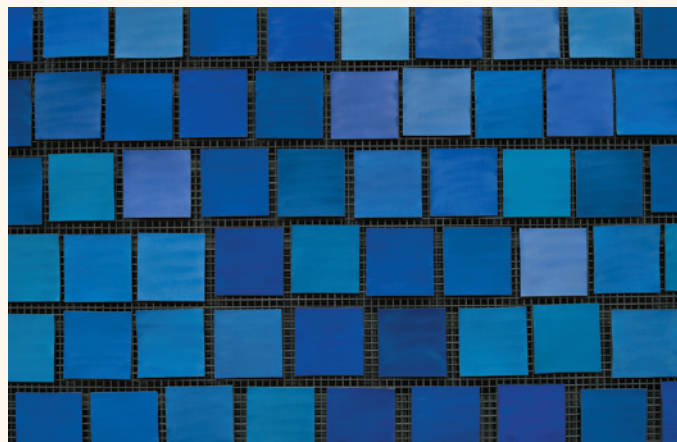
WT: *I know. People love to say there's no life in Great Salt Lake, because there are no fish. But, it's not really so. It supports a lot of life.*

Tell me about your experience at Spiral Jetty. Had you been there before?

SF: No, I'd never been there. At first, I was underwhelmed by it. I sort of felt smaller and lower than I thought. And then, walking out on it, I thought it was really great, and it felt more modest, and then I thought that was kind of great, you know? It was made almost 50 years ago, and it has this kind of modesty, like an artist just got a guy with a dump truck, more or less. Not at all like something with a Jeff Koon's production value. But just someone who's really determined to make something interesting.

Artist's Biography: Spencer Finch (American, born 1962) works with light, landscape, and history to consider the power and limits of memory and perception. He is perhaps best known for his work *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on that September Morning* (2014), the only artwork created for the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York. He has had extensive international solo exhibitions and projects including *Lost Man Creek*, his project with the Public Art Fund on view at MetroTech in Brooklyn through 2018; *A Certain Slant of Light*, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY (2014) and other

below | *Trying To Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* (detail), 2014. 2,983 individual watercolor drawings. Approx 40' by 150', site specific. Photo Ofer Wolberger. © Spencer Finch. Courtesy James Cohan, New York.



exhibitions at the Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK (2014); Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, Providence, RI (2012); the Art Institute of Chicago, IL (2011); Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, La Jolla, CA (2011); the Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst, MA (2011); Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2010); Frac des Pays de la Loire, Carquefou, France (2010); Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia (2009) and Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2007). Finch was included in the 2004 WT Biennial and the 53rd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale. His work can be found in many collections including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.; the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, GA; the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany; The Kemper Museum of Art, St Louis; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, NY; and the WT Museum of American Art, New York, NY. Finch earned his M.F.A. in Sculpture at Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI and his B.A. in Comparative Literature at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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