

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Gopnick, Blake, "Exhibit Review of Spencer Finch's 'My Business, With the Cloud' at the Corcoran," *The Washington Post* 9 September 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/08/AR2010090807041.html>

The Washington Post

Exhibit review of Spencer Finch's 'My Business, With the Cloud' at the Corcoran

By Blake Gopnik

Spencer Finch is a big baby. I mean that as a compliment.

Finch is 47 and lives in a loft in Brooklyn, N.Y., but it's the baby in him that makes him one of the smartest, most original artists working today. No other adult would think of making work quite like what's on view in "My Business, With the Cloud," Finch's new solo show at the Corcoran. It opens Saturday as the first in the museum's "NOW" series on contemporary art.

New theories in psychology bill babies as in some ways smarter and more aware than the adults they become. Adults have learned to focus, laserlike, on just the things that matter -- which means that they stay unaware of most of what's around them. The very young, on the other hand, are open to everything that's in their world, because they need to learn so much about it. They refuse to preconceive what matters and what doesn't. That's where Finch sits.

His art, like so much art that's come before, is about depicting the world -- landscape art you could call it, almost. But it takes a whole new tack on which parts of the landscape are worth depicting and what it might mean to depict them. It's as though Finch stays conscious of aspects of reality that the rest of us have grown up to ignore, then finds new ways to let us in on his expanded vision.

"Passing Cloud," the single, giant piece that he's installed in the Corcoran's grand rotunda, gives a picture of the cloud in its title and of the light that passes through it. It does that by giving us the light itself along with the cloud. High under the room's dome Finch has suspended a huge "cloud" assembled from 110 crumpled theatrical gels in an assortment of pale blues and grays. Light piercing the rotunda's skylight passes through the tangle of filters on its way to us below, so that it winds up matching the blueness and brightness of the light we'd see on a bright day under a passing cloud.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Gopnick, Blake, "Exhibit Review of Spencer Finch's 'My Business, With the Cloud' at the Corcoran," *The Washington Post* 9 September 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/08/AR2010090807041.html>

Finch could have given us that cloud by painting or photographing it, like his great cloud-art predecessors John Constable and Alfred Stieglitz. But he prefers to make cloud art that actually works on us the way a cloud-filled reality would. Cross from one side of the rotunda to the other, while keeping your eyes focused on your hands or clothes, and you see the light on them pass from blue to a sunny yellow-white.

One way to understand Finch's piece, then, is to keep your eyes turned away from it. There aren't many other art works you can say that about. Is a cloud mostly about what it happens to look like or what it *does*? For Finch, it's the doing that matters. One thing atmospheric do is evoke particular places, and the times we've stood in them. "Passing Cloud" registers the cloud light at the corner of Vermont Avenue and L Street NW one day this July. Finch stood there with an electronic light- and color-meter, then later matched those readings with his filters in the Corcoran's rotunda. He chose that particular corner because it resonates in our cultural history. It was where Walt Whitman used to stand, in July of 1863, to bow to Lincoln as the president made his daily trips to the White House from his summer retreat in Washington's north end. *That* is the moment and the light that Finch's piece evokes, or at least tries to.

The history itself -- the physical and material reality of being *there, then* -- is forever lost to us. Finch knows that. His piece in some sense proclaims it. It tries, and fails, to put us there, then. And the poignancy of that failure, of the irrevocable lost-ness of the past despite our best efforts to revive it, is part of what this work is about.

All of Finch's art tries to get closer to what matters in the world, by leaving behind the surface appearances that most art has always been about and that most adults dwell on. And then it acknowledges the near impossibility of getting very far, no matter how wide-eyed innocent you remain. Upstairs at the Corcoran, Finch presents a number of other pieces that make the same effort at baby-like vision.

One major new work is wildly peculiar, even by Finchian standards of eccentricity. It's a room-filling assemblage of 64 fluorescent fixtures, two and three and four feet long, joined at their ends to become something like a geodesic dome gone wrong. Imagine trying to depict a storm cloud using 64 Tinkertoy rods, and you'll get some idea of the shape and strangeness of Finch's sculpture, called "Open Cloud." Clouds again, yes, but this time taken from art rather than history.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Gopnick, Blake, "Exhibit Review of Spencer Finch's 'My Business, With the Cloud' at the Corcoran," *The Washington Post* 9 September 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/08/AR2010090807041.html>

Each of the fluorescent tubes represents -- as always with Finch, you have to use that verb loosely -- one of the famous cloud studies that Constable painted in the 1820s. Finch began his piece by observing a stripe across the surface of each Constable, narrow enough so that the variations in color and brightness across its painted sky were reduced to a series of abstract colored bands. He then reproduced those bands on the surface of his fluorescent tubes by sliding short lengths of sleeving, in blues and grays and even sunset-pinks and golds, along their lengths. His 64 striped tubes mimic 64 stripes across Constable's paintings -- without ever looking a bit like a Constable.

"Open Cloud" certainly captures something important about Constable's pictures, with an attempt at almost scientific precision. But it refuses to give us the vision of Constable our eyes expect, with their very adult goal of confirming things we already know. Instead, it gives us Constable's own light.

Look around at the other Finches in the gallery, or rather look around at the air and space around

them, and you'll realize that the filtered bulbs in "Open Cloud" are casting a outdoorsy, even British illumination on everything else. It's as though the light captured in Kent in the 1820s by Constable's paint were infiltrating this gallery, now. (It's important to visit the show during daylight hours, when the incandescent lighting is off.)

Another piece, called "Taxonomy of Clouds," consists of 17 framed color photos that depict some of the different kinds of clouds that scientists have named. Except that, instead of taking the obvious step of looking up, Stieglitz-like, to shoot his cumuli and stratuses, Finch has found them reflected in puddles in dirty Brooklyn streets. Where the rest of us adults would only see the things, the puddles, in front of us, Finch looks at them and sees everything they show. If we then take our lead from him, ignoring things and paying attention to the full range of our sensations, we realize that the glass protecting Finch's photos is also reflecting clouds -- this time, in the shape of the glowing fluorescent tubes of Finch's nearby "Open Cloud."

If this art sounds a touch confusing, it should. There's no quick take on Finch's work, no instant read, no 20-minute visit to his show. Its complexities deserve to be unpacked, the way you'd work at one of the more metaphysical poems of John Donne or Emily Dickinson. (The show's title is a line from Dickinson.)

It takes the brains of a baby to do it.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Gopnick, Blake, "Exhibit Review of Spencer Finch's 'My Business, With the Cloud' at the Corcoran," *The Washington Post* 9 September 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/08/AR2010090807041.html>

Spencer Finch: My Business, With the Cloud

opens Saturday at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW, and runs through Jan. 23. Call

202-639-1700 or visit <http://www.corcoran.org>.