

# SPENCER FINCH

## THE BRAIN IS WIDER THAN THE SKY

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CONTENTS

6

**AN INTRODUCTION TO  
THE WORK OF SPENCER FINCH**

SUSAN CROSS

14

**ARTWORKS**

223

JAMES RONDEAU ON

**366 (EMILY DICKINSON'S MIRACULOUS YEAR), 2009**

227

MARK GODFREY ON

**WEST (SUNSET IN MY MOTEL ROOM, MONUMENT VALLEY,  
JANUARY 26, 2007, 5:36–6:60 PM), 2007**

230

Index of Works Illustrated

232

Selected Exhibition and Publication History

238

Acknowledgments

240

Photo Credits

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF SPENCER FINCH

SUSAN CROSS

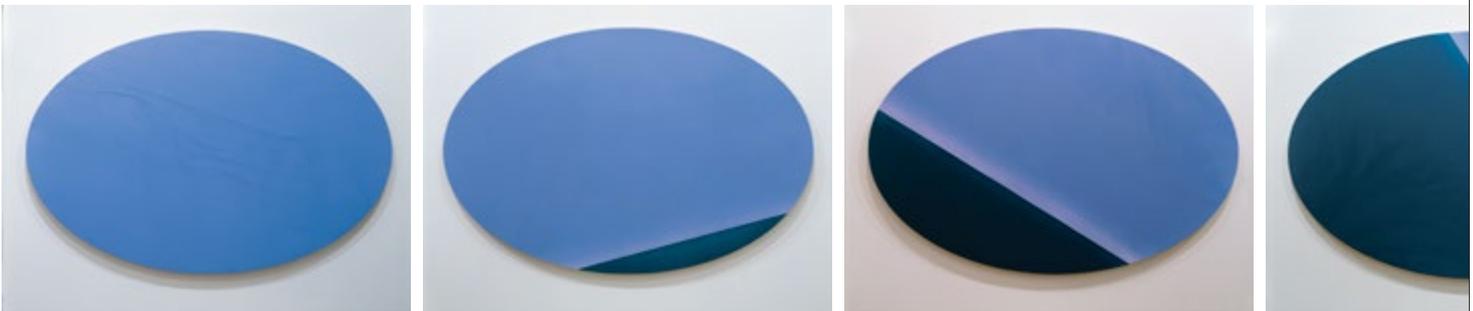
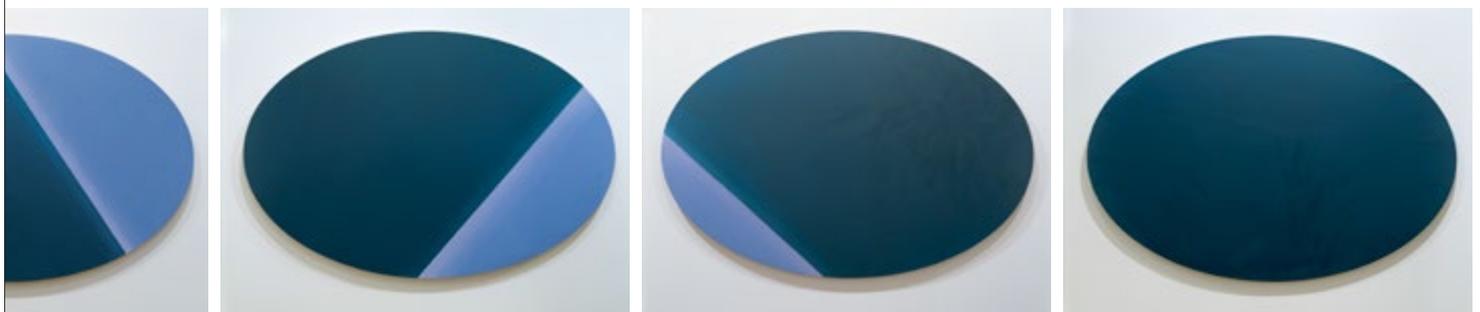


Fig. 1. *Sky Over the Ikarian Sea I–VII*, 1997. Beeswax, pigment, and oil on panel, 7 panels, each 47 x 70 in. (119.4 x 177.8 cm). All but one panel destroyed

In my mind, I can still see the jewel-like colors of the first work by Spencer Finch that I encountered—a suite of seven oval paintings (now destroyed) painted in two brilliant shades of blue, with a line of glowing white separating the fields of colors where they met. At first the works read as pure abstraction—sumptuous studies of color and their effect on one another. Yet like much of Finch’s production, the images are resolutely representational. They are carefully observed and precisely rendered images of his subject. It became apparent to me on closer study of the seven blue panels—and with the help of the series’ title, *Sky Over the Ikarian Sea* (1997) (fig. 1)—that the waxing and waning fields of light and dark blue illustrate the shifting views of sea, sky, and horizon that the mythical hero Icarus would have seen as he plummeted from his ill-fated flight toward the sun. The preponderance of cobalt blue in the first panel gradually gave way to a deep, dark indigo in the final monochrome: Icarus’ last watery view before drowning.

Drawn to the dramatic story of creation and failure (themes investigated frequently in Finch’s work) and to Icarus’ seduction by the sun (also familiar to the artist), Finch traveled to the island and sea named for the tragic-heroic figure. The artist flew from Athens to the island of Leros, a path that took him directly over the spot in the Aegean Sea where Icarus died. The great effort that went into the making of the work—including Finch’s determined attempts at precision and accuracy despite the elusive nature of his subject—are characteristic of his working method. His firsthand observations and rigorous collection of data—often more associated with a scientific approach—result in surprisingly poetic ends. Both from the airplane and from the highest point on Leros, Finch made studies of the colors of the sky and water and then translated those color notes into paintings made from beeswax encaustic. While his choice of medium references the wax that Daedalus used to create Icarus’ wings (the same wax that melted under the heat of the sun and



caused Icarus' demise), the shape of the works references the nineteenth-century critic John Ruskin's notion that the oval most closely matches the human field of vision. Through these works, then, Finch offers viewers the opportunity to imagine themselves looking through Icarus' eyes, seeing what he saw.

At the heart of Finch's practice is this romantic impulse to see what others have seen, and to share that impression—to accurately convey it—to a multitude. Often Finch is drawn to the idea of experiencing what certain historic figures have envisaged, and he imagines that the light of the sun is perhaps the singular phenomenon that may not have changed over the years.<sup>1</sup> With that in mind, he has traveled to Troy to record the dawn that the Greek hero Achilles saw, ventured to Lascaux to document the sunset that the earliest artists would have witnessed outside the now-famous caves (fig. 2), and made numerous pilgrimages to Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst, Massachusetts, to experience and transcribe visually the light

she so eloquently described in her poems. Light and its color are ultimately the subjects that fascinate Finch and those that he returns to again and again—along with the perceptual, physiological, psychological, and linguistic workings that influence how we experience them. Like many artists and thinkers who have inspired him and who turn up in his work—scientists, artists, poets, and philosophers, including Monet, Turner, Newton, Dickinson, Goethe, and Wittgenstein—Finch is continuously celebrating, and grappling with, the beauty and enigmas of light and color. His mix of science and poetry is fitting for a subject that is equally tied to science and art.

Finch's recent commission for the National September 11 Memorial & Museum adeptly articulates both the power of light and color and their elusive nature. To create *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* (2014) (p. 00), he painted by hand 2,983 watercolors, each an attempt to represent the crisp, blue sky of that historic morning, each a



Fig. 2. *The Light at Lascaux (Cave Entrance) 9/29/2005 5:27 pm*, 2005. 38 fluorescent light fixtures and lamps with filters and gel filters on clear acrylic tubes, Dimensions. Henry Art Gallery, Seattle. Promised gift of William and Ruth True

different shade of blue (and each made in memory of one of the victims of the World Trade Center bombings). The quality of the light on September 11 is burned into so many of our minds, and Finch captures that shared sense memory in stunning hues. At the same time, he deftly suggests both the imperfection of memory and the varied perspectives of each individual who witnessed or was touched by the event. For Finch, the light of the sun is a universal experience, one that is an apt metaphor of our yearning for communion and communication. And the difficulty in representing it is equally apt at describing the obstacles posed by all representation—and perhaps even the impossibility of it. As the painter Josef Albers wrote in his influential book *Interaction of Color*, "If one says 'Red' (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different. Even when a certain color is specified which all listeners have seen innumerable times . . . they will still think of different reds." As Albers noted: ". . . no one can be sure whether each has the same perception."<sup>2</sup> This is the conundrum that Finch wrestles with.

He has often turned his attention to the incidents and landscapes that make up our collective memories—our shared experiences and history. In many cases, he taps into a particularly American consciousness, evoking iconic sites such as the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas, as well as defining moments such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*. With his seminal work *Trying to Remember the Color of Jackie Kennedy's Pillbox Hat* (1994) (p. 00), Finch created 100 pastel drawings in different shades of pink in response to the conflicting accounts of the day recorded in the Warren Report. That same year, with his work *Blue (Sky Over Cape Canaveral, August 31, 1994, 10:25 am)* (1994) (fig. 3), Finch

tried to picture a national tragedy that had been witnessed and widely televised, much like 9/11. With both, he avoided the reductive image of the explosive moment. Visiting the site where the *Challenger* had broken up eight years earlier, he painted the color of a one-square-kilometer area of the sky at that exact location (determined with NASA's help). Made with the aid of a homemade siting device and numerous complicated triangulations and calculations, the work is a single three-centimeter square of blue. The simple work powerfully conveys the absence felt in the wake of the disaster and also hints at the absurdity in trying to represent the momentous event in a single image. Instead, Finch lets our imaginations fill in what is missing; distilled in the tiny patch of color is the endlessness of the sky, the enormity of the tragedy. With this blue—blue, like the sky from which Icarus fell; blue, from the sun's shortest wavelengths scattering off the molecules in the earth's atmosphere; blue, like the heavens—Finch evokes the omnipresent witness of all human endeavors: the sun.



Fig. 3. *Blue (Sky Over Cape Canaveral, August 31, 1994, 10:25 am)*, 1994. Mixed media and acrylic on paper, Siting device: 22 x 9 x 12½ in. (55.9 x 22.8 x 31.7 cm), painting: 9½ x 9½ in. (24.1 x 24.1 cm). Collection of Roger Björkholm, Stockholm

Finch often repeats the apocryphal last words of the painter J. M. W. Turner, who is said to have declared on his deathbed that “the sun is God.” Certainly, the sun is just as mysterious and elusive. Finch himself is always trying to get closer to it. “The sun is the ultimate goal of my work,” he has said of his practice, “—always the goal, always absent.”<sup>73</sup> While the blazing star is everywhere, lighting up each day (and most nights as its light reflects off the moon), it remains billions of light years away, out of reach and resistant to direct observation. (Many intrepid scientists of the nineteenth century blinded themselves in attempts to study it.) Yet, while the sun is a constant in our lives—the source of the energy that sustains life, the star around which our planet revolves, as well as the calendars and clocks that order it—it is mostly, paradoxically, invisible. And its light is constantly in flux—depending on its position and the objects that absorb or reflect its light. These conditions/vicissitudes are central to Finch’s work. Thinking back to *Sky Over the Ikarian Sea*, it is fitting that Finch would illustrate the location of Icarus’ fall over seven panels, though more famous paintings of the subject, such as Bruegel’s, are limited to a single canvas. Finch’s series not only introduces the passing of time but also the changes that occur in his subject over time. A large number of his works are serial studies of the same subject, photographed, painted, or drawn minutes, hours, or days apart, emphasizing that nothing—not even the sun—can be represented in a single image. Like Monet’s famous paintings of Rouen Cathedral, which changed in appearance over the many times that the artist painted it, Finch’s works make clear that his subjects are continuously morphing, changing under the sun’s light. Like Monet, Finch includes in his titles the date and the time of day his subject was observed, marking time with his work. Time itself often becomes the subject of his practice.

Just as Finch reminds us that the light of the sun is constantly changing, he also understands that we experience—or notice—the sun only in glimpses or at a remove. We see light as it is reflected off an object, as it illuminates an intermediary substance, or as it appears filtered through the atmosphere. We see its colors in the everyday objects that reflect or absorb its light, or in the spectacular reds and oranges of the sunset produced by the scattering of those wavelengths by the earth’s atmosphere. Fittingly, Finch brings us the sun in oblique approximations, meticulous, but nonetheless translations: sunlight imitated by fluorescent lamps filtered with theater gels or in combinations of colored glass or in the flickering light and changing hues of glowing TV screens. Even in his traditional paint, pastel, and watercolor, it is rarely the sun’s gaseous orb that Finch reproduces but its radiation, in particular, the colors of its light.



Fig. 4. *Study for Dawn (Troy)*, 2002. Watercolor on paper, 11¼ x 10 in. (28.6 x 25.4 cm)

It was Isaac Newton—in the 1670s—who first correctly theorized that the sun’s white light is comprised of all the colors. He used a prism to refract a beam of light in a dark room, dispersing and revealing the red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet within it—the visible spectrum of light whose wavelengths fall within a certain range between infrared and ultraviolet. With this simple experiment, Newton had unlocked a mystery that had perplexed thinkers since antiquity. Finch repeated a similar prismatic study in Troy in 2002, unraveling the colors of the dawn light that Homer had described so famously as “rosy” in the *Iliad*. The refracted bands of color landed onto a paper that Finch held in his hand and onto which he copied the same hues in watercolor (fig. 4). In a sense, many of Finch’s works reveal the palette of colors that mix to create the sun’s white light. He has reproduced a Texas sunset in fluorescent lamps fitted with ecstatic, candy-colored filters in green, pink, blue, yellow, and orange, and the dawn light of Troy in a starburst of deep blues, greens, oranges, reds, and violets. While Finch carefully combines the colors to achieve the quality of the original that he measures with a colorimeter, the formula can change, different colors mixed together in various combinations to achieve the same result.

While Finch uses a colorimeter to measure the exact hue, saturation, and level of brilliance of a given light, his skills of observation are an equally important tool. Despite the sun's constant presence, most of us fail to notice its effects, perhaps because of its very pervasiveness. Finch's work *Berlin Light Study (Afternoon Becomes Morning, Morning Becomes Afternoon)* (2013) (p. 00) conveys this paradox. Isolating two sections of a gallery window with identical Foamcore boxes, he framed two distinct views. He then attached colored filters to the glass in order to convert the yellowish color of the afternoon light to the bluish cast of the morning light he had measured, and vice versa. The work draws attention to the ubiquitous bath of light that permeates—and literally colors—our environment, emphasizing the changes in hue that occur, variations that are rather dramatic yet most often not consciously noted.



Fig. 5. *Shadow (Inside Goethe's Window, November 27, 2007, Noon)*, 2007. Acrylic on wall, Dimensions variable. Site-specific installation at Nordenhake Gallery, Berlin

Finch's practice embraces color in all its incarnations and variations—in its brilliance and intensity and in its extreme subtleties. He has captured the otherworldly azure blue of New Zealand's Fox Glacier with dyes frozen into ice and then melted on paper. He has photographed the deep red, yellow, and purple of wilted tulip petals, and matched in acrylic the Technicolor hues of *The Wizard of Oz*. With equal passion, he has documented in watercolor the barely gray, ochre, and blue tints of his white studio wall in the sun, and captured in pastels the surprising colors of his studio at night. In these *Darkness* drawings, Finch studied the "blackness" of the studio wall every night over a period of a month, matching in sumptuous pastel what he observed with the lights off. With the variations in color—some of the drawings verging toward brown, many toward gray, others looking positively blue—the work suggests Finch's sensitive eye, locating color with even the lowest of light to produce it. Or perhaps it suggests the power of the mind to influence what we see. Darkness is the absence of light, and thus the absence of color. Or is it?

In *Shadow (Inside Goethe's Window, November 27, 2007, Noon)* (2007) (fig. 5), Finch makes a nod to the German poet and his struggles to understand color. Goethe questioned Newton's ideas about light and proposed that color is the result of the interplay of light *and* darkness. Conducting many experiments on colored shadows, Goethe construed that color could not be solely the product of light. In his own work, Finch re-created the exact hue of a shadow he noticed in Goethe's house in Weimar—the house where he wrote his *Theory of Colors* in 1810. Finch painted a small wall by a window in the Galerie Nordenhake the same monochrome bluish gray. The restrained gesture invites us all to look more closely, while paying homage to Goethe's contributions to our understanding of color. Despite his many incorrect theories, he laid the groundwork for a psychological understanding of the phenomenon, assigning particular emotions to particular shades—blue, for example, inciting both "excitement and repose."<sup>4</sup>

Finch connects Goethe's interest in the relationship between color and emotion to the role that the shadow often plays in literature (even Goethe's own)<sup>5</sup> as a symbol of repressed emotion, or alter ego, or an "other" self. Color, too, is a complicated character, with many mysterious facets and origin stories. There is often confusion between how light produces color and how pigments, dyes, and other colorants function—as well as color produced by electronic light. There are in fact a number of materials and processes that result in color sensations. There are at least fifteen known causes of color in various materials, many of these involving electrons and the absorption or emission of light.<sup>6</sup> With *Two Examples of Molecular Orbital Theory (Prussian*

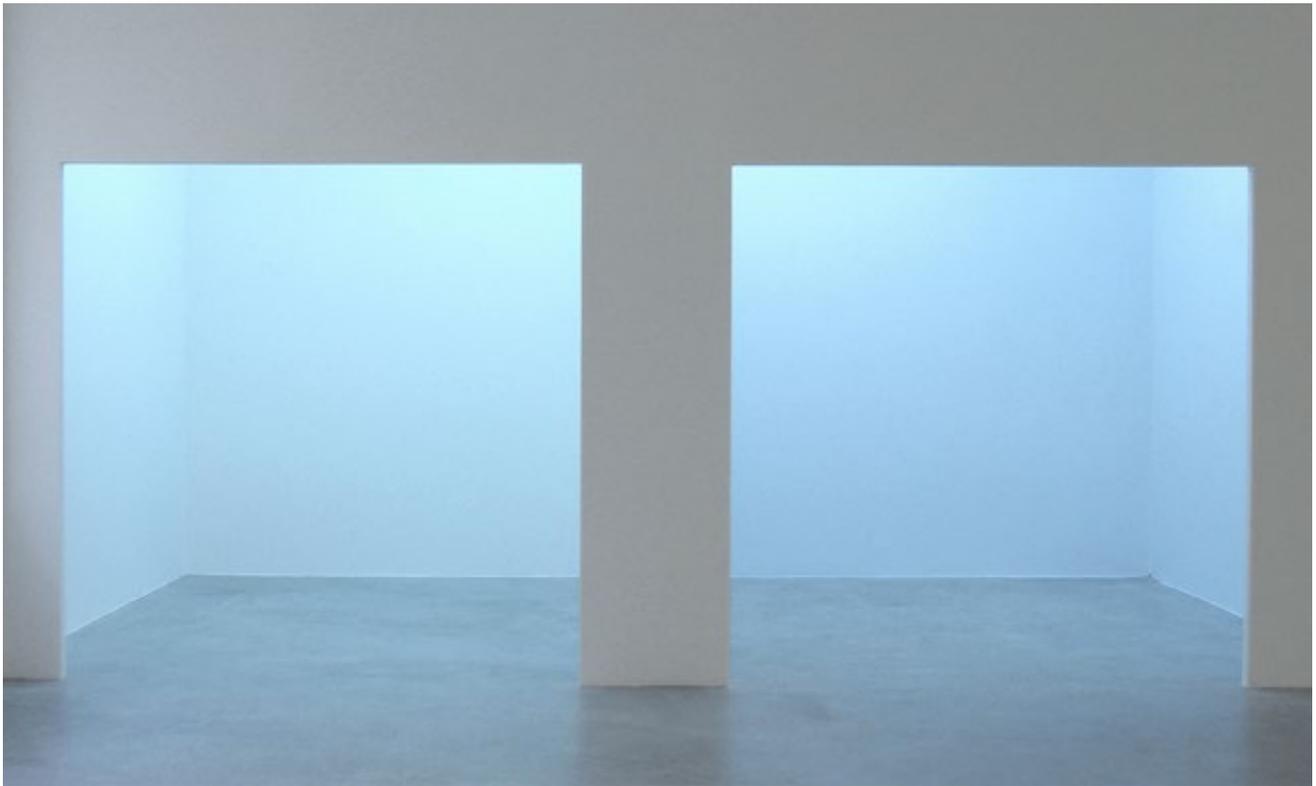


Fig. 6. *Two Examples of Molecular Orbital Theory (Prussian Blue)*, 2005. 2 identical rooms, fluorescent fixtures, and lamps with filters and acrylic paint, Dimensions variable. Collection?

*Blue* (2005) (fig. 6), Finch explored two of the varied means to create color. In two identical, adjacent rooms, he produced the same blue hue by different methods. In the room on the left, the walls were painted white and lit with fluorescent lamps masked with blue filters. The walls of the room to the right were painted with white paint mixed with Prussian blue pigment and lit with unfiltered white light. The title of the work refers to the electron transfers that produce certain colors, including Prussian blue, as well as the blue of sapphires, and the brown in glass bottles. With this work, Finch draws our attention to the workings of color that most of us don't even think about, that we take for granted.

Although the common factor in the various color phenomena is light (the simplest ingredients for color being light, material, and an observer), Finch has investigated many of the perplexing exceptions. With his *Poke in the Eye* series (1997) (p. 00), he has produced color sensations—disks and rings of assorted hues—by applying pressure to various parts of his eyes. With *102 Colors from My Dreams* (2002) (p. 00), he kept a diary of the colors he saw in his dreams, ostensibly a product of his brain, not his eyes or outside stimulus. He matched the col-

ors from his memory and his notes as best he could in ink, which he applied to sheets of paper in the form of a Rorschach blot to emphasize the possible psychological origin of the colors. In his large ink drawing *Abecedary (Nabokov's Theory of a Colored Alphabet Applied to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle)* (2004) (p. 00), he ponders the mysteries of synaesthesia—a condition that connects or confuses multiple senses within the brain. With an explosion of colorful ink dots, Finch imagines what Heisenberg's theory about scientific observation would have looked like to the Russian novelist, who associated specific colors with letters of the alphabet.

Further complicating the nature of color, in many works Finch investigates the confounding relationship between color and language. Influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, Finch poses his own questions about the limits that language imposes on our perception. While the human eye can distinguish an enormous number of hues, universally, we have only a very limited number of recognized color names, no standardized system beyond the ROY G. BIV most of us learned as children and the CMYK associated with color printing. With works such as *Study for a Groovy Unnameable Color (Greenish Yellow)*



Fig. 7. *Rainbow (Brooklyn)*, 2001. Black-and-white photographs and pencil on paper, 2 photographs, each 14¼ x 12¾ in. (36.1 x 31.4 cm). One of two versions. Private collection

(1997) (p. 00), Finch presents the numerous shades that fall somewhere in the continuum between green and yellow, all of which, though recognizably different, are most likely to be described as the same “greenish yellow,” unless perhaps you are reading Maerz and Paul’s *Dictionary of Color*, a J Crew catalogue, or a Pantone swatch book. Finch has utilized both the Maerz/Paul dictionary and Pantone chips in his work, tools that seem to simultaneously expand and contract the color palette, acknowledging the multitude while pinning them down with a name.

While Finch is methodically investigating the mysteries of color, it is clear that he is also reveling in its magic. Yet, interestingly, it is in fact a black-and-white work that for me perhaps best articulates the allure of color—both its sensory appeal and its puzzles. In the diptych *Rainbow (Brooklyn)*, made in 2001 (fig. 7), Finch photographed the two sites where he determined the arc of a rainbow had begun and ended. Two years earlier, he had spotted the rainbow from the elevated F train in Brooklyn, and calculated where the legs of the arc would have fallen. Of course, two years later, the rainbow was gone. Shot in black-and-white to imply a documentary-like approach, the work articulates both the lingering awe of the natural phenomenon and its transitory nature. Finch captures how fleeting the optical event is, like color, time, memory, life itself. And perhaps because of this, the image of the color spectrum arcing across

the sky is wondrous each time we see it. When he exhibits the work, Finch hangs the two photographs at a distance from each other, leaving the viewer to fill in the missing colors. It is perhaps fitting that each viewer will imagine a different rainbow (just as Albers noted that we will all think of a different red on hearing the word) as in fact no two people see the exact rainbow on those sunny rainy days that produce them; rainbows appear differently, based on the position of the observer. This work, like many others, approximates the sensory experience for viewers while acknowledging both the limits of what we can share and what we know and what we see. At the same time, it strangely suggests the possibilities. While we may each see a different rainbow, we can find space for it in our mind. As the title of this book reminds us, in the words of Emily Dickinson, “the brain is wider than the sky.”

#### Notes

1. Spencer Finch in conversation with Susan Cross, August 3, 2015.
2. Joseph Albers, *Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 13.
3. Daniel Birnbaum, “1000 Words: Spencer Finch Talks about Collaborating with William Forsythe,” *Artforum* 43 (Apr. 2005), p. 163.
4. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colors* (1810) (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), p. 311.
5. Spencer Finch in conversation with Susan Cross, October 2, 2015.
6. Rolf G. Kuehni, *Color: An Introduction to Practice and Principles* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), pp. 1–3.