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Painting Air: Impressionism and Spencer Finch

Spencer Finch's *Painting Air* (2022) is a multifaceted installation that explores a modern take on a historic art movement. First seen at The Rhode Island School of Design Museum in 2012, the installation is currently at the Hill Art Foundation as a part of Finch's exhibition *Lux and Lumen: Spencer Finch*. It is a three-dimensional installation that is personalized by the viewer's perspective. In Finch's *Painting Air*, he uses impressionism to portray complexity in perceived simplicity.

Four walls are painted as collages of geometric shapes. The colors of the polygons take inspiration from Claude Monet's garden in Giverny, France. On the walls lay a massive collage of various shades of green, blue, purple, and pink. Therefore, the viewer is surrounded by a pixelated or blurred interpretation of an impressionist painting. In the space between the walls, multiple glass squares are hung at various heights. The reflectiveness of light creates an individualized experience for every art enthusiast. The colors of the walls represent the shrubbery, flora, and sky of the garden. The usage of glass represents the water of a pond.

Spencer Finch was born in 1962 in New Haven, Connecticut.¹ He presently resides in Brooklyn, New York. Finch is a sixty-one-year-old white American artist. He is largely influenced by the interactions between light and color. After studying Monet at Giverny, he became fascinated by the subjectivity behind impressionism.² Glass inspired Finch significantly as well. In an interview with the Corning Museum of Glass, Finch explained, "By considering

¹ "Spencer Finch Biography." www.spencerfinch.com. Accessed February 4, 2023. <https://www.spencerfinch.com/curriculum-vitae>.

² Jean-Marie Gallais. "Spencer Finch, Artisan-Observer." In *Lux and Lumen: Spencer Finch and Valentin Bousch at Hill Art Foundation*. Edited by Martin Fox, 38. New York, December 2022.

the transparency of glass, one of its most basic characteristics, and the ways transparency masks a complex interaction with the environment, I am trying to engage and celebrate the complexity of the material as well as the wonder of human perception.”³ He was inspired to utilize glass in *Painting Air* due to his yearning to explore perception.

Impressionism, beginning with artists like Monet, was based on interpreting the outside world in various ways. George Moore describes the art movement as a form that “penetrates all true painting... in its most modern sense signifies the rapid noting of elusive appearance.”⁴ Impressionism is about capturing the unachievable. It is seeing the world as an ever-changing whirl of colors and light. This is exactly the essence of *Painting Air*. When speaking about Impressionism Finch claimed, “I began to think about Impressionism as a way of looking at the world in a subjective, relative way.”⁵ *Painting Air* creates a subjective viewing experience. The Suprematism in the usage of shapes with the impressionism of the color scheme work in conjunction to do the impossible—paint air.

Finch was also largely influenced by the ideas of Suprematism. *Painting Air* incorporates the ideas of suprematism through the sole usage of squares. The creator of Finch’s favorite art piece, Kazimir Malevich, is the founder of Suprematism. Finch stated in regards to Malevich, “my favorite drawing in the world is the 1923 diptych pencil drawing by Malevich of two squares that’s called *Suprematist Elements: Squares*. It is such a beautiful drawing and has the essence of duality: it’s so basic and essential and continues to be interesting to me. So I did always love Malevich.”⁶ The idea to use squares in *Painting Air* likely stemmed from this

³ “‘The Secret Life of Glass’ Will Be Installed in 2020.” Press.cmog.org. Corning Museum of Glass, October 4, 2019. <https://press.cmog.org/2019/commissions-large-scale-site-specific-work-spencer-finch>.

⁴ Duncan C. Phillips. “What Is Impressionism?” *Art and Progress* 3, no. 11 (1912): 702–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20560737>.

⁵ Mark Godfrey. "A Celebration of Glass: Spencer Finch in Conversation with Mark Godfrey." In *Lux and Lumen: Spencer Finch and Valentin Bousch at Hill Art Foundation*. Edited by Martin Fox, 38. New York, December 2022.

⁶ Mark Godfrey. "A Celebration of Glass" In *Lux and Lumen*. Edited by Martin Fox, 49-61. New York, December 2022.

drawing. Impressionism is a geometry-based art movement. It's a more abstract style of creativity. Malevich explained, "By 'Suprematism' I mean the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art. To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling."⁷ Suprematism is using simplicity to evoke an emotional response from the viewer. By creating a more complex style of art, one diminishes the purity of it all. Finch's *Painting Air* utilizes Impressionism and Suprematism to give more power to the viewer in both their emotional connection and perspective.

I believe that Finch's *Painting Air* is extremely innovative. It redefines the concepts of light and color. I initially found the installation to be very simplistic. I didn't know what the colors represented or why everything was geometric. However, after extensive research, I have a newfound appreciation for *Painting Air*. Using the colors of Monet's *garden*, created a stripped, pixelated version of a wildly complicated painting. It was his impression of Impressionist work! The raw edition of Monet's garden with the Malevich-inspired squares completely transforms the past. The suspended squares of glass that are gently moved by air are the perfect addition to it all. How the light interacts with the glass makes this a powerful aspect of the *Lux and Lumen* exhibition.

Finch said about Giverny, "I wanted to create a laboratory like that: three-dimensional and constantly changing."⁸ *Painting Air* is the manifestation of that. In the piece, Finch uses impressionism as a way to portray the complexity of perception with a simplistic style. It is impossible to have the exact same perspective twice. It's artists like Spencer Finch that prove the

⁷ Malevich Kazimir Severinovich. 2003. *The Non-Objective World : The Manifesto of Suprematism*. Mineola New York: Dover Publications.

⁸ Mark Godfrey. "A Celebration of Glass: Spencer Finch in Conversation with Mark Godfrey." In *Lux and Lumen*. Edited by Martin Fox, 49-61. New York, December 2022.

endless evolution of art. *Painting Air* takes the past and alters it into his own idea. The laboratory is truly an ode to the subjectivity of art.

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