

sculpture

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Painting Air, 2022. Glass, hardware, and wall painting, dimensions variable. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

Spencer Finch: Seeing and Knowing

February 10, 2023 by [Stephen Petersen](#)

Spencer Finch is interested in shifting light, both as a subject and as an artistic method. He is fascinated with changes in light at different times of the day and year, from one location to another, and with how light shifts as it is refracted through atmosphere, clouds, and windows, or reflected in different surfaces. To explore these changes in his work, he employs a variety of transparent, tinted, translucent, reflective, and diaphanous materials that alter or shift the quality of light. Ultimately, he wants to create what he calls “constantly changing optical events,” where light is continually shifting.



The River That Flows Both Ways, 2009. 700 colored panes of glass, 120 x 12 ft. View of installation at the High Line, New York. Photo: Iwan Baan

Over the course of a three-decade career, Finch has worked in and across a range of media, consistently probing the complexities of vision—how we see and how we know what we see. His work is both extremely methodical and highly whimsical, and it draws almost equally on science and poetry. “Lux and Lumen: Spencer Finch,” a solo exhibition currently [on view](#) at the Hill Art Foundation, offers an opportunity not only to reflect on the persistent themes in his work, but also to glimpse some fresh investigations.

As a point of departure for the show, Finch turned to *The Creation and the Expulsion from Paradise*, a large 16th-century stained-glass window by the French master glazier Valentin Bousch recently acquired by the foundation. Finch’s works have long featured colored glass windows—most notably *The River That Flows Both Ways* (2009), the inaugural commission for the High Line, and a 12-story glass façade for the Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore begun the same year. “Lux and Lumen” underscores this connection through its title, which references the distinction made by Abbot Suger in the 12th century between ordinary sunlight and the sanctified light that passes through stained glass. The ability of stained glass to transform one sort of light into another has been a central theme of Finch’s work for two decades.

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Valentin Bousch, *The Creation and the Expulsion from Paradise*, 1533. Stained glass and vitreous enamel, 114 x 90 in. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

A new version of *Painting Air*, an ambitious installation first created for the RISD Museum in 2012, fills a two-story gallery at the Hill. The title comes from Claude Monet's characterization of his attempts to capture the play of light in the atmosphere. *Painting Air* reimagines Monet's gardens at Giverny, which Finch understands as being less about horticulture or landscape design than about "creating a kind of laboratory for light and reflections," where the visual depths of the pond and the reflections on its surface create a "complex optical space." Finch notes that glass, like water, is both transparent and reflective. For *Painting Air*, he painted overlapping squares of color, drawn from specific hues found at Giverny, on the walls, and then suspended dozens of transparent glass squares, with varying degrees of reflectivity, from slender cables, so they are free to turn in the ambient breeze and reflect their surroundings at ever-changing angles of incidence. The resulting dynamic play of refraction and reflection creates an intricate, kinetic space of light and color.

Since the first iteration of *Painting Air*, Finch has used the device of multiple hanging panes of glass in an array of installations, some in galleries and some in public spaces. Sometimes he filters the light entering the space with colored gels, as in *Following Nature* (2013, Indianapolis Museum of Art) or *A Certain Slant of Light* (2014, Morgan Library in New York). Sometimes he fogs or color-tints the hanging panes themselves, as in *Thank You, Fog* (2016), made of whitish panes of varying translucence, or *The Western Mystery*

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Painting Air, 2022. Glass, hardware, and wall painting, dimensions variable. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

At the Hill, *Painting Air* takes on a kaleidoscopic quality. The second and third floors of the building feature oversize expanses of glass curtain wall, which, Finch notes, “brings everything in,” including 10th Avenue below and the adjacent High Line. Unlike the RISD Museum version, which occupied a mostly enclosed gallery, sections of wall remain visually open here, letting light stream in and allowing multiple “unexpected things” to happen. Other works in the exhibition, along with cars and taxis speeding by, and surrounding buildings with their own rows of reflective windows, all become part of the visual field seen in and through the rotating panes.

Finch likens the overall effect of *Painting Air* to Robert Smithson’s sites/nonsites: Giverny abstracted and re-presented in New York, so that one can entertain the experience of both places simultaneously. Setting disparate locations into a sort of dialectic has been a theme in his work at least since *Paris/Texas* (2003), in which he used stained glass to convert the summer sun in San Antonio into the cool tones of a Paris winter. Finch has recently taken to enacting more ambitious acts of displacement. In 2016, he re-created an entire California redwood forest out of living saplings at 1:100 scale for *Lost Man Creek* in Brooklyn. And in 2018, he simulated—at full scale—the 15-stone Zen rock garden at Kyoto’s Ryōan-ji temple within the reflecting pool of the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona, which he playfully termed “dropping a version of Ryōan-ji into the reflecting pool of the Pavilion.”



Another “nonsite” is featured in “Lux and Lumen.” *Rose Window at Saint-Denis (morning effect)*, made specially for the show, consists of a nine-foot-wide circle of radiating tubes of LED lights with a variety of colored filters designed to reproduce the morning light that emanates from the north rose window of the Basilica of Saint-Denis in Paris (Abbott Suger’s home church). Finch used a colorimeter to measure the particular color of the light on site, then artificially matched it with precision using a combination of gels, a technique that he has worked with for many years to re-create the specific light effects of one place in another. The rays of the tubes visually echo the Rayonnant style of the Gothic rose window at Saint-Denis while alluding symbolically to the sun as the source of light. Typical for Finch, the materials are laid bare in Minimalist fashion. As in a Dan Flavin work, the tubes act as visual components in themselves and cast glowing colored light on the wall, here to dazzling effect.



Rose Window at Saint-Denis (morning effect), 2022. LED fixtures, LED lamps, and filters, 76.5 in. diameter. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

For Finch, the use of gels with artificial lighting is analogous to his use of stained-glass windows to re-create a color atmosphere, not only in the workings of color filtration to create specific lighting situations, but also in the opportunity for aesthetic play as a kind of supplement. Within the demands of having to reproduce an overall color measurement, he is free to combine and arrange units of individual color in almost limitless ways. *Rose Window* features five different blues, three sorts of yellows, two reds, and a pink, creating a lush mandala and evoking the fluorescent equivalent of a Kenneth Noland target painting.

On the second level, a window bay is filled with a new version of *CIE 529/418 (candlelight)*, a stained-glass work from 2007. Taking its name from the Commission Internationale de l’Eclairage (International Commission on Illumination), which standardizes the measurement of light in architectural spaces in accordance with a codified system of coordinates, the work uses multiple panes of glass in a variety of colors to filter the full spectrum of daylight down to the wavelength of a single candle flame, altering the light environment of the interior.



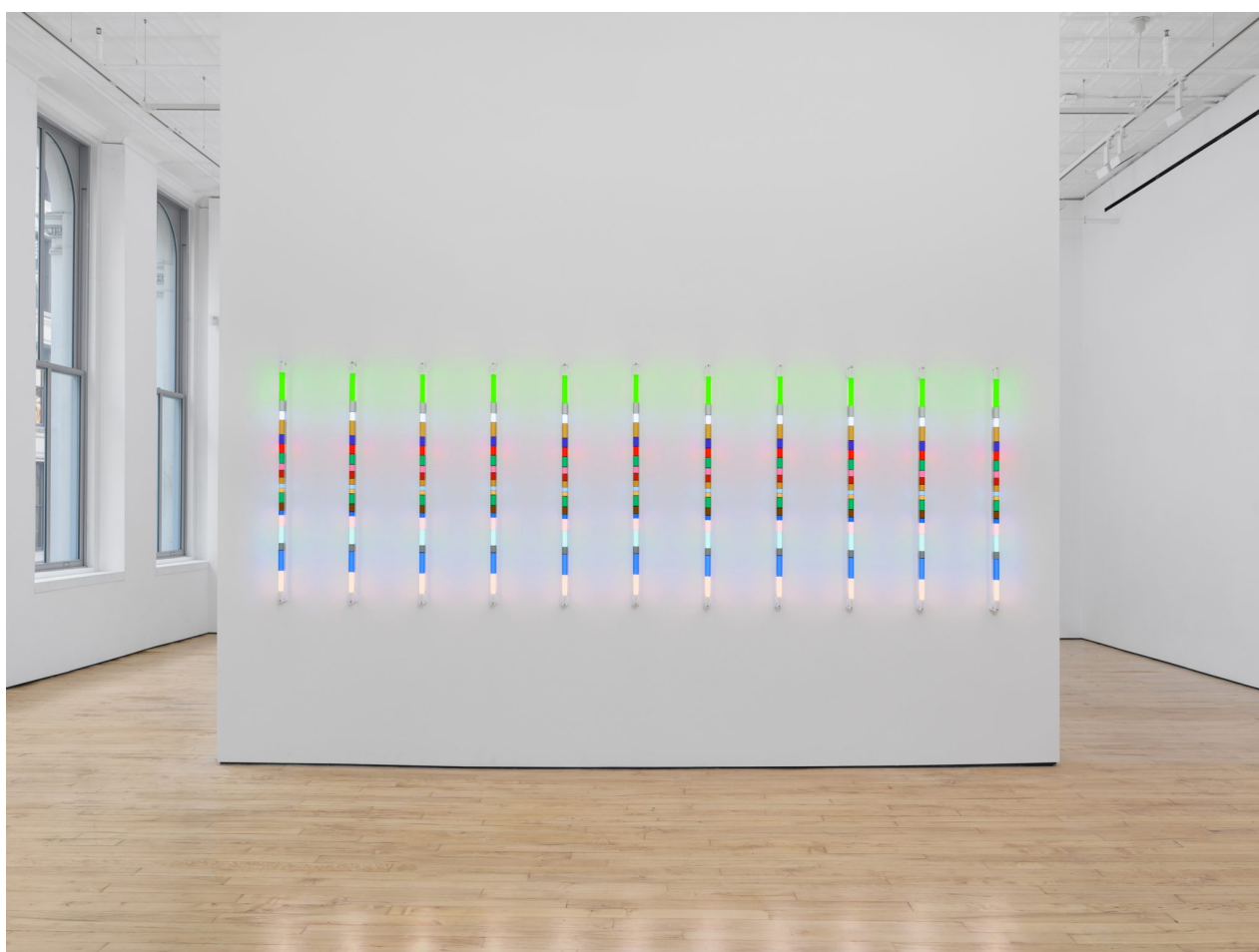
Candlelight (CIE 529/418), 2022. Stained glass and steel frame, dimensions variable. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

As in the case of *Painting Air*, this is not just a re-installation but a re-conception of the earlier work. As originally installed at MASS MoCA, *CIE 529/418 (candlelight)* consisted of a regular grid of 69 panes of sandblasted colored glass, installed in the old factory windows. In New York, Finch opted for hand-blown stained glass of a type used in European cathedrals, with a rich texture and sumptuous color. The pieces of glass are not regular panes, but large, hand-cut slabs with uneven edges. Arranged in a steel frame in three registers, they form what Finch calls a “casual installation,” with the glass laid in overlapping fashion to create a whole variety of intermediary colors. And unlike the first, sandblasted version, this glass allows the view through to become part of the piece: one can make out buildings, clouds, and people passing by on the High Line.

Photographs, drawings, and other works likewise investigate the idea of the window as a visual threshold, underscoring the central place of glass in Finch’s work. A group of oil pastel drawings based on infrared measurements recording the temperature of Finch’s studio window over the course of a summer day allude to *The Secret Life of Glass*, a major “window” work recently produced for the Corning Museum of Glass. There, Finch measured heat distinctions, invisible to the eye, in the museum’s glass curtain wall and translated the numerical readings into wave forms, assigning particular colors that he found in the palette of Henri Matisse. Glassmakers then produced a huge colored window from fused glass, which Finch installed slightly in front of the original curtain wall. At certain times of day, the building’s atrium becomes bathed in saturated colors, “lux” turning into “lumen.”



For “We send the wave to find the wave,” a recent solo exhibition at James Cohan in New York, Finch focused on the concept of “seeing.” The central work, *RGB (White)* (2022), consisted of an LED light box with red, green, and blue dots diagramming the components of white light as the eye sees them and allowing us, as he says, to see “how we see.” The first of two exhibition spaces in the gallery was devoted to works exploring color and optics in a variety of media, dominated by *Bauhaus Light (Kandinsky’s Studio/Klee’s Studio, afternoon effect)*. Arrayed on either side of a freestanding wall (the Bauhaus studios of the two friends shared a common wall), rows of vertical LED tubes (11 per side) with stripes of filtered gels keyed to specific colors used by Klee and Kandinsky cast tinted light reproducing colorimetric measurements that Finch took in the artists’ studios on an afternoon visit. When a version of this work was shown in Berlin in 2017, the two sets of lights were on facing walls of a single gallery space. Here, they turned away from each other, still constituting a single work, though it could not be seen all at once—a subtle distinction, but one that in its literal two-sidedness hints at the relativity and subjectivity of vision, the theme of the second gallery space, where Finch presented a new and, in some ways, unexpected work.



Bauhaus Light (Kandinsky’s Studio/Klee’s Studio, afternoon effect), 2022. 22 4-in. LED fixtures, 22 LED lamps and filters, each side: 48 x 145 in., overall dimensions variable. Photo: Dan Bradica, © Spencer Finch 2023, Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York

North Atlantic Ocean (April 14, 1912, 11:40pm) was preceded by an explanatory text that read, “No one on board the Titanic, not even the lookout who alerted the captain, saw the iceberg in its entirety on the moonless night of April 14, 1912.” Exactly what the iceberg looked like has been the subject of conjecture and disagreement; the best extant images (three photographs and a drawing) were made either the day before or the day after the sinking of the Titanic, depicting likely icebergs in the general area. Finch took those four images as the basis for a single sculpture, with each one represented “at 90-degree intervals around the sculpture.” After entering the room, viewers were asked to allow three minutes for their eyes to adjust before walking around the sculpture.

At first, the space was bathed in darkness. With time, a ghostly, whitish peak started to become visible; then more pinnacles and crags emerged. After several minutes, one could see well enough to examine and walk around the large and rather strange object: a 16-foot-long, simulated “iceberg” elaborately fashioned from layers of sheer white fabric draped over an unseen wooden armature, sitting on a black table in a black space. A single, fuzzy white LED light barely illuminated the sculpture from overhead, while almost



North Atlantic Ocean (April 14, 1912, 11:40pm), 2022. Dowels, tulle, chiffon, and magnets, 180 x 192 in. Photo: Ofer Wolberger, Spencer Finch Studio, © Spencer Finch 2023, Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York

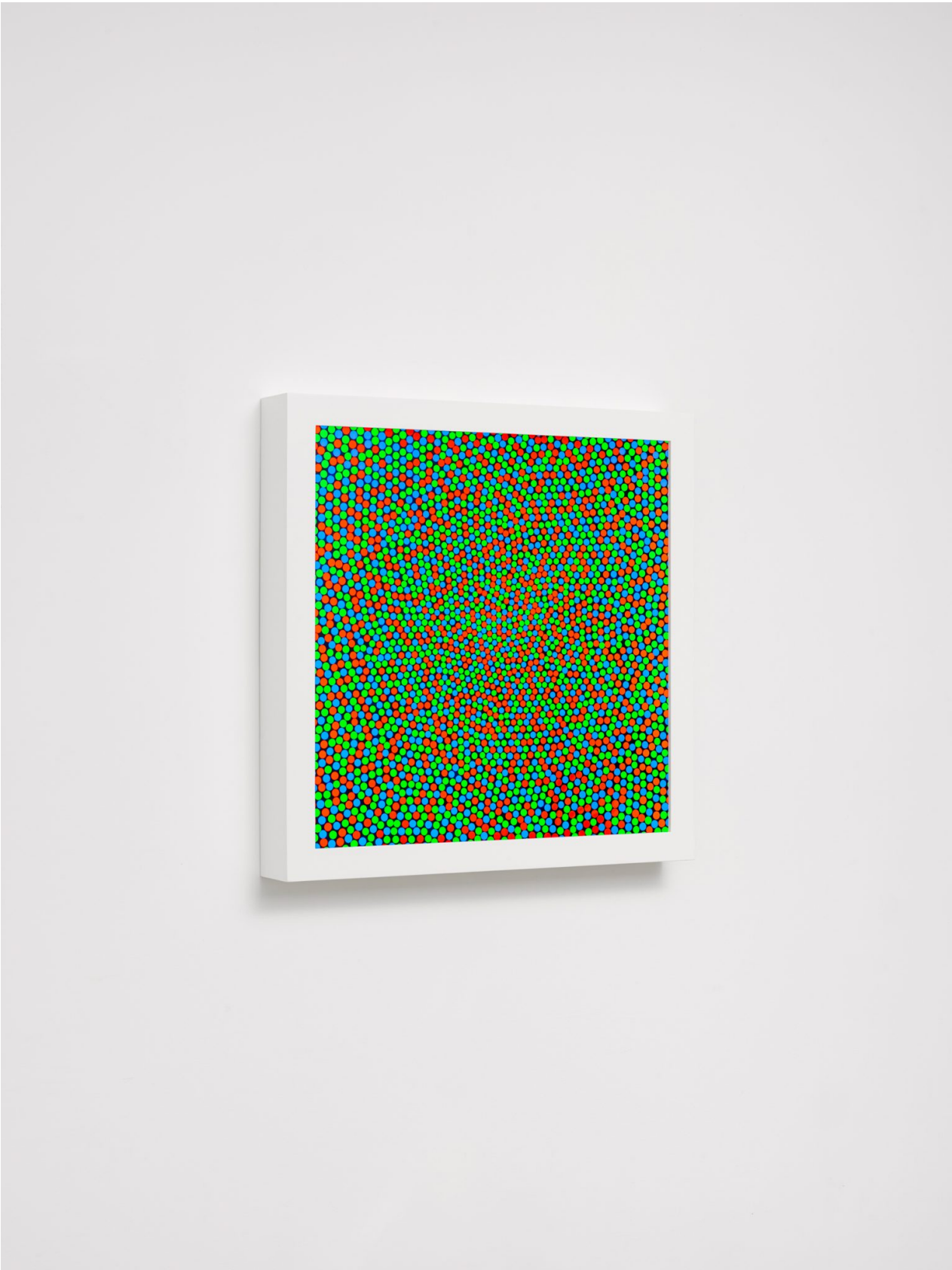
The uncharacteristically theatrical staging and the work’s almost trompe-l’oeil illusionism mark a notable departure for an artist who typically lays bare his materials and means of assembly. And yet one would scarcely mistake the folds in the filmy fabric for channels in hard ice—the sumptuousness and frivolity of the layers of silky material were evident, and, for those who allowed their eyes to adjust fully to the low light, the underlying structure of dowels and magnets could be discerned.

Finch’s iceberg connects to his well-known “passing cloud” sculptures, including *Passing Cloud (after Constable)* (2014), fashioned from crumpled white translucent gels fixed together with clothespins and suspended from filaments overhead so that ambient light showed through at varying degrees of opacity. Like these works, *North Atlantic Ocean (April 14, 1912, 11:40pm)* is a do-it-yourself, provisional arrangement (icebergs are similar to clouds in some ways: ever-changing configurations of water molecules that float around until they dissipate). Through materials and lighting, Finch’s iceberg offered the same play of reflectivity and translucence featured in his clouds and also in certain of his suspended glass works. But here, the ephemeral play was slowed down and submerged in darkness, revealing itself only over time.



Passing Cloud (After Constable), 2014. Filters, monofilament, and clothespins, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy Spencer Finch Studio

Unlike other contemporary artists who have shown iceberg-inspired sculptures—Olafur Eliasson exhibited actual pieces of icebergs in Copenhagen, Paris, and London (*Ice Watch*, 2014, 2015, and 2018–19); New Zealand artist Gabby O’Connor imagined the below-sea portion of an iceberg rendered in folded paper and illuminated from within, in the gallery-filling *What Lies Beneath* (2011–14); Monica Bonvicini installed a 50-foot floating glass iceberg (*She Lies*) in the Oslo harbor in 2010—Finch does not think of his work in relation to climate change. Instead, its subject is something more subtle and ineffable, namely the inability to know objectively what has happened in the past. The folds of fabric conjure, Finch suggests, less the shards of calving glaciers than the ubiquitous drapery in European history paintings. Indeed, he sees the work as a sort of “history painting,” layered with levels of interpretation. His “iceberg,” a three-dimensional conflation of four uncertain and conflicting two-dimensional representations, becomes, for him, a “metaphor for how we understand history.” The irreconcilable images of the iceberg suggested to him the *Rashomon*-like “relativity and subjectivity of history,” a theme that he has previously explored with regard to the 9/11 attacks, the Kennedy assassination, and other momentous events.



RGB (White), 2022. LED lightbox, Fujitrans, 32 x 32 x 4 in. Photo: George Darrell, © Spencer Finch 2023, Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York

“We send the wave to find the wave” the title of the James Cohan show is like many of

Finch’s earliest works, done almost 30 years ago, involved him literally “sending a wave” in multiple senses—he recorded his brainwaves as he watched the blue wave from the opening sequence of “Hawaii Five-O” on television, then transmitted that image as a microwave signal into outer space, aimed at Rigel, the bluest star in the night sky). In a statement released for “We send the wave to find the wave,” Finch explained, “Sometimes I am just trying to see clearly, even though I know that is impossible. Other times, I am trying to not see clearly, hoping it gives insight into that very impossibility.” In contrast to *RGB (White)*, which allows us to see how we see, *North Atlantic Ocean* tries to gives insight into the very impossibility of seeing clearly, highlighting the sometimes great distance that separates seeing and knowing.

“Lux and Lumen: Spencer Finch,” at the Hill Art Foundation in New York, remains on view through March 4, 2023.

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