"A Celebration of Glass"

Spencer Finch in conversation with Mark Godfrey

Hill Art Foundation, September 9, 2022

Mark Godfrey:

So Spencer, the show is called *Lux and Lumen*, and as far as I understand its title is inspired by the concepts of an abbot who wrote about light several hundred years before the stained-glass window by Valentin Bousch was created. And this abbot believed that stained glass turned *lux,* which was secular, into *lumen*, which was sacred. In your own thinking about light, how do you understand that relationship between the secular, scientific approach to light and the metaphysical character of color and light, and our experience of them?

Spencer Finch:

I'm not really a religious person, but I'm interested in the idea of how light can be transformed from one thing to another. For me, it can be landscape, taking the light from one place and re-creating it somewhere else. So for example, the LED light piece that's now downstairs is actually based on the rose window at St. Denis in Paris, which was where Abbot Suger developed his ideas of Gothic architecture and this theory about light. I measured the light there; then, using colors that match those of Gothic stained glass, combined them to re-create the average light of that rose window. In that way, it's like taking light from one place and bringing it to another place, changing the quality of the light from New York City to a cathedral in Paris.

MG:

You say you're not religious, but are there times that you yourself experience light and feel that there's more to it than something that you can measure?

SF:

Yes.

MG:

I'm not religious either, but there are times when a sunset or something like that makes me feel that it's more than simple light reflecting off the sea or the clouds.

SF:

I think light can also transcend time in a way. For me, the first time this happened was when I first measured light, which was about twenty years ago. I measured the light at ancient Troy at dawn for my first light piece, which is called *Eos (Dawn, Troy, 10/27/02)* (2002). And for me, that was a magical moment. I felt some weird connection to Achilles–Seeing what he saw. It

sounds like bullshit, but I felt there was something really special about that, a connection to the time of the Illiad. And I think light does have this quality that it can be, I guess, special. Maybe not sacred, but special and different from the everyday..

MG:

The Christian idea that Abbot Suger developed... Was he saying something that didn't exist at the time or in other religions?

SF:

I think it was a new approach to thinking about illumination in a church. And it also had to do with light coming through images of the gospel. So it wasn't just the glass itself that shifted meaning, but it was light passing through the pictures of the gospel.

MG:

So it was a kind of a technological and artistic revolution, plus the ability to produce stained glass and make pictures of the gospel, that prompted the abbot to come up with his theory?

SF:

Yes. I don't know what inspired him, but I guess it was probably a mixture of technical and theoretical, religious ideas.

MG:

This show was in part inspired by the acquisition of this stained-glass window by the Hill Art Foundation. Did they invite you to gather these works together as a response to that acquisition, or was it just in combination with it?

SF:

Well, the idea was that it would be in combination, and I wanted it to be a response with a thematic connection. Because I've done a lot of work with glass in different ways, I thought that would be a good way to organize the show, limit it, and start thinking about works that would go together and have a conversation with the stained glass by Valentin Bousch, so that it didn't seem totally arbitary.

MG:

But there's a range of work from different time periods here. You've gathered them to make some very clear connections.

SF:

In some ways it's also a celebration of glass, which can be a very cheesy material, but is also a magical one. And I think that goes back to Abbot Suger and this idea of what glass can do, even on an almost invisible level, and how amazing it is as a material: something that's transformed

from sand, which is such a base material, into this stuff that's like diamonds. It's fascinating material that I've been interested in in different ways over time. The earliest being these trompe l'oeil pastel drawings of glass. And trompe l'oeil is something I've been strangely attracted to for a long time, and this idea of making a drawing of something transparent using something opaque—that contradiction was interesting to me. The trompe l'oeil works are just pieces of glass. I would put a piece of sheet glass on a piece of paper and then do a drawing based on that.

MG:

And they've got a range of titles, and those titles make you see the drawing differently. The drawings look very similar to one another, but the titles take you off in very different directions toward the art historical, and the humorous, the cheeky.

SF:

I'm not sure I would use those titles today, but I did. And I started thinking about this idea of how ridiculous it is to make a history painting, because there's not just one view of history. And so that's where *Hannibal Crossing the Alps* (2001) came from, which I thought was a Delacroix painting. At least in my memory it was a Delacroix painting, though later I couldn't find a Delacroix painting with that title. So I don't really know where it came from, probably Turner, but it is a historical painting... No one saw Hannibal crossing the Alps. No one was there when it happened, certainly not Delacroix!

MG:

My read of that drawing was that more it's to do with the white-out, that there's no scene because there's snow everywhere in the Alps.

SF:

Yes. There was that kind of joke aspect to it too.

MG:

And it struck me, looking at those drawings, only because I saw them in this show next to *Painting Air* (2022), that there are two different attitudes toward painting here. I guess twenty years ago, you were much younger and had a more jokey attitude toward famous art. There are works that joke about Suprematism, for instance, versus a later work that takes very seriously Monet's time in Giverny. So how has that relationship to painting and its histories changed for you?

SF:

I guess I do admire it more. Still, my favorite drawing in the world is the 1923 diptych pencil drawing by Kazimir Malevich of two squares that's called *Suprematist Composition*. It's 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. I didn't always love Impressionist painting, but

I began to think about Impressionism as a way of looking at the world in a subjective, relative way. And once I started thinking about it that way, especially with the serial work by Monet from the 1890s, which to me seemed against the camera, anti-photographic, trying to capture something with repeated views. I think that's when I started really liking it. Also, I think as I became more comfortable making things and being less conceptual in my practice, I really enjoyed thinking about color, working with it, and creating art that is visually engaging.

MG:

When you started *Painting Air*, which you've installed a couple of times before as early as 2012, how did you come to its actual medium? There's wall painting and then there's glass that hangs from the ceiling. There are other works that you've done that translate a phenomenon, a work of art, or a time or place that have different manifestations, whether it's glass or LED tubes. But this one is a wall painting with hanging glass. So how did you move from the interest in Monet's Giverny to this specific installation?

SF:

I guess it came from visiting Giverny, where I've been a few times, going there once or twice in the morning, when you could get an artist's pass and be there alone before the tourists arrive. I really spent time being there, recording colors, thinking about it. And it was then that I realized that Giverny, for Monet, was not a landscape, but more of a laboratory. It was a laboratory for him to study these optical events and interesting manifestations of light and color, that relationship between the flora on the shore and the water in the pond, which was his focus for almost forty years. I realized: "Oh, that's what it's about. It's really about seeing, it's about the complexity of this combination, this relationship between reflection, refraction, and image." That's when I came to the understanding that I wanted to create a laboratory like that: three-dimensional and constantly changing. So then, I thought, "I can put glass in this space with different levels of reflectivity." I used colors that are taken from Giverny on the wall that will interact with that water glass, creating something that is in spirit similar, but in presence quite different from Monet's garden.

MG:

That's interesting, the difference between spirit and presence. I think that in many of your works what you're actually looking at is wildly different from the thing that you might be thinking about. For instance, in *Rose Window at Saint-Denis (morning effect)* (2022), which translates Parisian light from the rose window at Saint Denis, what we are actually looking at is a series of fluorescent fixtures with gels. And what I've always been intrigued by in your work is the difference between what you're actually seeing, the hardware, which is sometimes quite prosaic or just in your face, and then, if you turn away from the hardware, you are looking toward the colors emitted or you're thinking about what that light looks like in Paris and what it looks like in New York.

SF:

With that piece, the honest way to look at it is to turn your back to it and see how it illuminates the facing wall. In a way, it is really about the light and less about the way the light is created. I spent a lot of time on the composition while also considering the relationship between the size of the fixtures that relate to the design of the rose window at Saint Denis. That's something that I've become more interested in as time goes by; earlier in my career, I would have made just a single tube with those colors. But I've become a little more interested in making a pictorial connection as well.

MG:

When your works are photographed and reproduced, nine times out of ten, the image shows, let's say, the hardware and not the effect of the hardware on the surrounding space. Is that fine with you or do you conceive of the work as the atmosphere within those spaces?

SF:

There's no perfect exhibition situation, and there's no perfect documentation of the work. I used to get more upset about that, but now I'm more accepting of it. For me, my interest is more that viewers can have a very specific experience. But you can't photograph a lot of this work, because at the spectral level on which these light works exist, the camera behaves very differently from our eyes. And so, in a sense it's pointless, but also I live in the world and I have to go along with it to a degree.

MG:

There is another way to think about the difference that is staged in your work between a site you have visited and the site of your exhibition. Many of your pieces start with a visit where you have enjoyed a particular experience of light and color and felt a strong connection to the history of that place, where people before you might have had a related experience. And the work is later staged in a different time and place, usually in a gallery, where viewers experience your translation of that experience. They see the hardware you have used (tubes and gels for instance), as well as the light produced. This all reminds me of Robert Smithson's idea of site and non-site. Smithson would visit a 'site' that could be a wasteland in New Jersey or a salt-lake in Utah. The 'non-site' would be what he then presented in a gallery or magazine or cinema: a metal bin filled with rocks, photographs of mirrors laid out in the site, a film of a structure he'd built. By calling these 'non-sites' he always drew attention to the idea that the viewer's encounter of the work was never complete.

SF:

That is absolutely something that I've used and that I love. This dialectic between two places is something that I've definitely taken from Smithson and that I admire so much

about his work. So that is something I think that totally runs through to me. He has been one of the most influential artists for me.

MG:

Something else in the work that I wanted to ask you about is about the way you measure a particular phenomenon and then translate that measurement into a work of art. But the measurement or the translation is only accurate for a fragment of time. We see this in the work *Candlelight (CIE 529/418)* (2022), a series of hand-blown glass panels affixed to a window. The different colors translate daylight into candlelight, but they only do it for four hours in the afternoon on sunny days. And I imagine they only do that if there's no other source of light in a room. So right now, we're looking at that work, but there are many other windows in different spaces. So you expend an incredible amount of research and energy to create a work of art that will produce something that's accurate, but will only be accurate for a precise amount of time and if conditions are met that aren't always there. It's almost like a heroic failure in some way.

SF:

It's true. It really is in afternoon light that it works perfectly. So the work in its full meaning only exists with those conditions, but that doesn't mean that it can't be beautiful to look at and close to candlelight, the rest of the time.

MG:

Of course, I know that it's beautiful whenever you look at it, and that it attains its full meaning for only a short amount of time. But are you interested in the fact that its full meaning is precarious? Or that it only works for a little bit of time, but that this translation isn't perfect?

SF:

Yes. I don't think it needs to work all the time. I like that it's difficult. That's the kind of work by other artists that I admire a lot—work that requires some effort to experience, say something like Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* (1977). You have to put in real time and effort to go see it, and it only really attains its full meaning if you're there during a lightning storm, which is very rare. When I went, there was no lightning. But I still feel like that it is a wonderful, amazing artwork.

I'm also so interested in daylight, which is such an essential element in many of these works that I'm kind of at its mercy. Daylight is for me the connection to the world, and that connection to the world is a really important thread throughout my work.

MG:

Another thing that's interesting to me about the *Candlelight (CIE 529/418)* piece is that the quality of the glass is not fully transparent. You get a sense of the materiality of glass because of the way it's handblown. And it's shown here adjacent to a group of photographs that were made in 2018 in Emily Dickinson's house looking out as the day darkens into dusk. In the photographs,

what we're seeing is the reflection of the interior space as well as the view outside. But you also have a sense in these photographs of the oldness of the glass.

SF:

Yeah, it's handblown.

MG:

What's your interest in handblown glass and putting these two pieces next to each other?

SF:

I think it has to do a little bit with the materiality of glass. We're so used to glass being totally clear and I think it is important to understand it as a material with a complex history. By emphasizing the materiality of glass, I want to make it more of a membrane and less of something that's invisible.

MG:

As far as I understand, glass is a liquid, an incredibly slowly moving liquid. Do you like to work with that aspect of glass?

SF:

Yes. It is that paradox that we all learned in grade school: glass is technically a liquid, but for all practical purposes it's a solid. You can lift it and break it and you can't pour it out of a pitcher. It's a beautiful material both in its materiality and also in what you can do with it. And I could spend the rest of my life just looking at windows at dusk turning into mirrors. That sort of moment for me is related to the kinds of observations that Emily Dickinson made in connecting the inner and outer worlds. My aspiration is to be like her in some way, searching for those kinds of small observations that can expand into something more... not necessarily universal but meaningful and rich.

MG:

You've gone back to Emily Dickinson's house over the years.

SF:

Yes. I've been there so many times. I'm a groupie. At first, it was very hard to get in and now there is a kind of open-door policy.

MG:

And when did you make this particular work?

SF:

This was about four or five years ago, I think.

MG:

So it wasn't by any means the first work around Dickinson that you made?

SF:

No. I've made many, many works around her. She's also often a source for titles.

MG:

But *The Outer—from the Inner* with a huge dash in between *outer* and *from*. Is that from her?

SF:

Yes, of course. She loved dashes.

MG:

We've talked about some works which are made, let's say, away from the studio, going to Emily Dickinson's home or thinking about Giverny or the rose window in a cathedral in Paris. But, of course, a huge site for your research and practice is your own studio. Where is your studio now? Has it changed? Tell us about the life of the studio and what it means to use the studio as a source of inspiration or the light outside the window and so on. I'm also interested in what it felt like during those years of COVID, when people weren't traveling that much, to just mine the studio even more.

SF:

There's a long tradition of artists making pictures of the studio, of course Velasquez and Matisse's *Red Studio* (1911) up at MoMA now, or work by Bruce Nauman. I love the idea of finding what you need in the studio and just working. The most fun and exciting thing about being an artist is that there are times when you start the day and there's nothing, and by the end of the day, there's something. So, you have something that comes from nothing and you don't leave the studio. And those are still the best days of my life, I think. It doesn't happen that often, but you don't need to go to Paris or Troy or Amherst, Massachusetts.

I think Nauman is the great example of this in our time, how he can take something that seems so ordinary or prosaic and just by doing something in the studio, transform it into something deep. Also, I just like working alone. And I think that's why I feel so lucky to have more studio time than I used to have when I had a regular job. It also has to do with a sort of modesty of materials. Of course, I've done things that require a lot of fabrication, but I prefer to work with smaller things.

MG:

So, it's important to the way you work as an artist to have the big commissions, the big projects, but at the same time, to do things in the studio that are an equal part of your way of working. They're not subsidiary works. They're absolutely core.

SF:

Yeah, I think they're more important ultimately.

MG:

A work at the Hill Art Foundation, *Studio window, summer* (2022), translates the temperature of heat on windowpanes into color zones. The colors that you chose are randomly picked—for instance red doesn't necessarily indicate a hotter temperature than blue. And one question would be: is the research an excuse for just making nice abstract works?

SF:

It is, a little bit. As you know from engaging with my work for a long time, usually there is a reason for the color decisions. But I am interested in false color images because they show things that we cannot see with our eyes. They're used for showing things that are often very big, like an exploding galaxy, or very small, like changes in chemicals in the brain. I like the idea of false color being on one level very poppy and colorful, but at the same time it's about something that we can't see. And that sort of contradiction is interesting to me.

There certainly is a sort of indulgence in these works. But I am also trying to make a picture of something that's invisible—the changing temperature of the light through the day—while also picking up on this idea of Impressionist serial painting, showing the changing light on haystacks, or poplar trees, or a cathedral.

MG:

It's nice in this show to have the work which is about false color adjacent to the candlelight work, which is about measured color that may be precise for only a moment of the day. It's almost an entirely different idea about color.

A lot of your work concerns distant moments of time, whether it's Troy or the time of Emily Dickinson, but are you interested in color changing over time and light changing over time?

SF:

Yeah. I've done works in the studio that I've never shown in which I expose a colored paper to light for different periods and work with those. They end up being so fragile that it's hard to exhibit them. But I do lots of those sorts of archival tests just for my own purposes, just to ensure that things will last. But also because I love seeing what time, and especially the sun, does to color. So I've played around with things like that, but they're not really artworks.

MG:

I wanted to take up something you said about daylight as an overriding concern in your work. Daylight seems so apolitical and ahistorical. You said something very beautiful about being in Troy and feeling connected to the people at the time of the *Iliad* who were fighting there. And yes, you saw the same daylight as they did and so you have this transhistorical human connection, but daylight obviously changes with pollution and with climate change. Do you think that daylight can be treated as if it doesn't ever change? Or do you think you have to, as someone exploring daylight, consider the impact of smog on daylight or how different people living in different places have different degrees of access to clean daylight just like they have varying access to clean water?

SF:

Yes. I think clear daylight is a gift like clean water. It's changing all the time, of course, and in some cases with environmental cleanup, it's gotten better rather than worse, despite climate change. Because a lot of the changes that are driving climate change are invisible in terms of how they affect daylight. It's not particulate so much as it is carbon dioxide. For me, it's not so much the politics of daylight, it's more the humanity of daylight, and the daylight of specific places, like where I have lived in New York City. And sometimes the light is magical in New York. One of the reasons I love the city are those moments a few times a year when I'll be walking somewhere and the light will just be so incredible and it will just feel like... maybe this is a sort of sacred light. It feels like my city, like this is the best place in the world. And then it passes. You then get back onto the subway and you have some horrible experience. But for a moment, it feels like a magical, wonderful place. It's almost the Holy Spirit entering you or something. What W. H. Auden called *Agape,* before he went back to church.

MG:

We started off with *lux* and *lumen* and I asked you whether there's a sacred dimension to your thinking about light and you immediately said no. But you've just used the word "magical."

SF:

I think that also comes out of some sort of love of this place, a love of New York City, because it doesn't happen in other places for me.

MG:

Interesting. Do you think that's because of just the way light is playing off skyscrapers or is it something more personal?

SF:

I think it's because I love this place so much, but I think also the light in New York is quite wonderful. For example, there's winter light in New York that you don't get in, for example, Northern Europe, the other place where I'm most familiar with light. I remember when I was working in publishing and I worked my way up to a corner cubicle. It was on Union Square and I

had a great view. I remember just looking out at that light during the winter and just thinking how beautiful it was and how lucky I was to have this spot. My friends joked that it was the finest cubicle in the nation because I had this amazing view of New York City.

MG:

One last question, just to take up the word "humanity" that you've used in connection to daylight. One aspect of the politics of our moment is the sense that there are so many different people with different backgrounds, sexualities, races, class positions and so on, who have such radically different experiences and opportunities in the world that one can't account for anything in common and that one has to be attentive and respectful for all aspects of difference. And the politics of that recognition have made some people skeptical of the idea of a humanism that connects people. But I think you are someone who believes in an idea of humanity and things that we share. And I think that daylight is central to that belief. I'm reminded of something: In Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*, there's a moment where a character says "The selfsame sun that shines upon his court / Hides not his visage from our cottage but / Looks on alike." Is that idea something that's strong in your feeling that that is a connector between people?

SF:

Yeah, I think it is. It reminds me of something that happened many years ago when I was on the subway coming out of the tunnel in Brooklyn. I looked out of the subway train, and it had just been raining and I saw a rainbow across the sky. It was the F train, and there's a huge variety of people on that train. And everyone was enthralled. Everyone moved to that side of the car to look at it, so the whole train car was tipping in the direction of the rainbow. And I think that is daylight made manifest in a sort of magical way. And I felt an incredible sense of common humanity in that train car.

MG:

It seems very important that you're focusing your interests in something that's democratic, shared, and appreciated by people across different parts of society and moments of history and geographies.

SF:

It's important for me that the work be shared with people who share its spirit. And I know that's not everyone, but nothing would disappoint me more than for the work to only be appreciated by art world insiders. That, I would consider a total failure. So when people see the work who are not insiders, who are maybe not typical art viewers, or children, or people who don't have much opportunity to look at art because their lives are so busy, and they find some sort of connection, that, for me, is what makes me want to keep making art. I don't expect everyone to be interested. I'm not that presumptuous, but I do think that kind of connection is important.

MG:

Great. I think that's a good place to stop.

SF:

Thank you.