

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Spencer Finch

25 October – 29 November 2008



Ways of Seeing

“My Dear Sir, I return your specimen of Photogenic drawing, which has interested the Glasgow people very much, especially the muslin manufacturers ... it also excited great attention at a scientific meeting when Professor Gregory pronounced it to be: a discovery likely to be productive of most valuable results.”¹

So wrote William Jackson Hooker, in 1839, from his home on Woodside Crescent, Glasgow, just a few hundred metres from the building that is, today, home to The Common Guild. Hooker was professor of botany at the University of Glasgow. He was corresponding with William Henry Fox Talbot who, four years earlier, had created the first ever photographic negative. In 1839, Talbot's ideas on the “art of photogenic drawing” had been presented to the Royal Society, London and were about to receive worldwide attention.

Like a photographer, Spencer Finch is concerned with light and time. In his work he attempts to capture, investigate and recreate memories and fleeting moments or impressions. His exhibition of works on paper at The Common Guild presented photographs, pastels, ink and watercolour drawings that offered an intimate look at the core interests he draws upon in his practice. A display of his large-scale installation work was shown concurrently at Dundee Contemporary Arts. *102 Colours from My Dreams* (2002) was displayed in the stairwell at The Common Guild. It consists of numerous vividly-coloured ink drawings that were produced from notes written in a dream diary over the course of a two-year period. The drawings have been folded so that they resemble inkblots or Rorschach tests. The colours match those that Finch ‘saw’ in each dream and each title refers to the contents of his written notes: *Dream 3/10/02 vest (Bob Dylan in skyscraper)*, *Dream 8/18/01 pickle juice*. The work demonstrates how Finch often blends scientific fact with imagined, lyrical and witty scenarios.

Sunlight In An Empty Room (Studio Wall), September 2005 (2005) is a large watercolour for which, as the title suggests, Finch used an instrument to measure the colours appearing on his (white) studio wall at intervals throughout the month of September 2005.

Each of the painted colour circles is rendered as accurately as possible and labelled in pencil with a date and time. This work can be seen to reference similar investigations in optics by twentieth- and twenty-first-century painters, such as Bridget Riley, Gerhard Richter or Agnes Martin but Finch's use of watercolour also points to artists such as JMW Turner and an era that pre-dates the invention of photography. This is also the case for an earlier painted work included in the exhibition: *A Poke in the Eye* (1997). Here Finch has playfully attempted to record and visually recreate the action suggested in the title, a physical gesture against the human organ that gives us sight.

Butterfly Drawings (2004) filled the upper room of Finch's exhibition. These 11 watercolour paintings depict individual butterflies, each represented by small colourful marks at the corners and edges of sheets of watercolour paper. The works record Finch's experience of peripheral observations of butterflies. In order to achieve the most accurate visual sense of the colour of each insect, as originally perceived by the artist, it is necessary for the viewer to focus on the centre of each work rather than directly on the colours to which our eyes are drawn. At the bottom of each work the butterflies are labelled in pencil with their Latin names, a taxonomic gesture that is reminiscent of Victorian classification processes such as in the field of botany, for which the cyanotype process, an early form of ‘cameraless’ photography, was pioneered.

42 Minutes (After Kawabata) (2004) is the only photographic work by Finch that was included in the exhibition at The Common Guild. It highlights the obvious shortcomings of photography's ability to record to the levels of exactitude that Finch achieves in other media. This series of six images, each taken after a seven minute interval, documents the same view from the window of Finch's family home in Vermont, USA. Finch's photography does not allow us the same way of seeing as his drawings and paintings, but it is capable of revealing the beauty and magic of waning light at dusk.

Ben Harman is director of Stills, Edinburgh.

1. William Jackson Hooker, *Letter to William Henry Fox Talbot*, 20 March 1839, Fox Talbot Collection, British Library, London.