



SPENCER FINCH

11.1.15



### BACK TO KANSAS, 2015

Color aquatint and chine collé. 43" x 60"; Edition of 35

Spencer Finch likes to explore the unknown aspects of a known place, to disassemble and make it known again in a new way. He does this with bodies of water like the East River and Walden Pond, places like Giverny, and even the film *The Wizard of Oz*, which he says is about everything. He offers both a subjective observation and an

objective analysis of the environment, most often light and water, as well as a chance to see phenomena all over again. His print for Paulson Bott Press entitled *Back to Kansas* is based on a wall painting of his that has been temporarily installed in several locations. The squares of color, although different from those in the painting, are also based on colors found in

*The Wizard of Oz*. This print fulfills the promise of the temporary piece in that collectors and viewers will be able to witness the piece change from black and white to color and back to black and white again every day.

– Kenneth Caldwell

**Paulson Bott Press:** How did you start on this, your first project with us?

**SF:** Well, we started talking about doing something, and I wanted it to be something that made sense as a print. At the time, I was working at SFMOMA on this wall painting called *Back to Kansas*, which is what this piece ended up being. It's changed a bit—there are more colors in the print than in the wall painting. It was something of an odd idea, because it exists in time, and it's something that you have to spend time with in order for the work to become complete. In that way, it works well as a print.

**Q:** Was *Back to Kansas* done for the new SFMOMA?

**SF:** No, it was done while they were closed during their expansion, so it was one of their offsite projects. This one was in Los Altos. When I was originally thinking about the site for the wall painting, I was thinking about Silicon Valley and how everyone's always looking at their devices, and they're not spending time looking at the world. I wanted a work that would really slow people down, in that they would have to spend half an hour sitting and watching the light change, which people used to do, but they don't do anymore. That's me being bossy and trying to change something that's impossible to change. A little bit of a pushback against this huge machine.

**Q:** Was the piece in Los Altos a temporary piece?

**SF:** It was up for six months or so.

**Q:** And then it disappears like Sol Lewitt's wall paintings?

**SF:** Yes, it's gone.

**Q:** Interestingly, the print gives the idea permanency.

**SF:** The print is the same proportions as the painting. The shape of the paper and the shape of the painting were both based on the aspect ratio of the film version of the *Wizard of Oz*. The idea was to reference the movie itself but also the idea of watching a movie and the idea of something changing in real time. This print changes in different light conditions. And really, the point of it is watching the color disappear and turn to gray. Which really only happens at dusk. The reverse happens at dawn.

I really wanted this to be filmlike in that it changes; its intention is to change over time and to exist in these different light conditions. I wanted to deal with issues of the subjectivity of vision and viewing, and also, on a certain level, to dissect the apparatus of vision, where you say, "Oh, the blues and the purples are disappearing first, and the reds and oranges are disappearing less. Why is that?" There is also a sort of comparative analysis if more than one person is doing it at the same time.

**Q:** The big wall piece then went to Turner Contemporary in Margate?

**SF:** Yes. I wanted to do it outside on the beach, like a drive-in movie. And they didn't have the money to do that. So we put it inside. About six times during the exhibition, they kept the gallery open late so people could sit and really experience the piece. The light in that room is so beautiful. The SFMOMA space was a storefront in Los Altos, which was okay. But the light in that David Chipperfield-designed space is just so beautiful. I would have loved to have just left those galleries empty, but I had to do a show.

**Q:** How did you create the print?

**SF:** First, I watched the entire *Wizard of Oz* film, especially the whole Technicolor part, after Dorothy lands in Munchkinland until she goes back from Oz to Kansas. And then I matched the colors of the film in the painting. So this color—that's actually Oz itself. This one is Dorothy's cheeks. This is a bouquet of flowers she was holding. This is the smoke of the witch when she arrived. That's the witch's face. That's one of the horses.

So when I saw a color that I thought would be interesting and was special, I froze the frame and then just matched the color. I mixed the paint and then sent samples of those paint colors to Renee, who then matched it in ink. That was the process. And I actually got exactly 70. So the very last one is a green swirl that happens when Dorothy goes back to Kansas, and then it's black and white again. So it ended up being exactly the right number. There's a nice range of color. And then I just moved them around randomly so they're not in the sequential order of the film. They're in an order that works formally for me and that has range, both of color and density, tonality, throughout.

**Q:** Why 70?

**SF:** Well, it fits in this 10x7 grid, which seems like enough. It's a lot. But as you scan across the frame, it seems like the right amount.

**Q:** And then in the final print, each square of color is adhered to a large piece of paper?

**SF:** Yeah, they're printing each square separately and mounting them all on a large piece of paper. So each of the 70 colors has to be done for each of the prints. It's very labor intensive. But I think it's going to look fantastic. I'm very excited about it.



Renee Bott visiting Spencer's Studio.

**Q:** Is there a secret to the color disappearing?

**SF:** Because our eyes are more sensitive in low light to long wavelength light, the reds and the oranges disappear later. It's just a matter of the physical makeup of our optic nerve and our retina. So it takes time for our color vision to disappear. And this takes about half an hour for it to go from the short wavelength to the long wavelength.

**Q:** And that would be in a room with no artificial light.

**SF:** Yes, it has to be in a room with no artificial light. You have to turn all the lights off.

**Q:** Would be true of any painting, then, or any piece of art?

**SF:** Yes.

**Q:** But here you're taking it all apart?

**SF:** One of the things I like about this is that it looks like a grid painting. It looks abstract. The colors are somewhat randomly distributed, but in fact it's a very specific picture of the *Wizard of Oz*, and it's about looking at something over time and about this change from color to black-and-white. So it's also about perception and about our ability to see. ✎



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2390 C FOURTH ST. BERKELEY, CA 94710  
T 510.559.2088 • F 510.559.2085  
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