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The Searing Blues of the 9/11 Sky

By RANDY KENNEDY

Like many people who were in any proximity to the events of Sept. 11, the artist Spencer Finch often thought later about the color of the sky that day, the kind of crystalline blue that pilots and meteorologists call "severe clear."

And when he was chosen more than two years ago to create the only work of art commissioned for the National September 11 Memorial Museum, he knew that the sky — or more accurately its continued existence in collective memory — would be his subject. The problem was how to find a way to get at something so evanescent and powerfully evocative. "It had to be believable," he said, explaining what believable meant to him in such a case: "It had to be about that human quality of remembering, how it's so fuzzy in

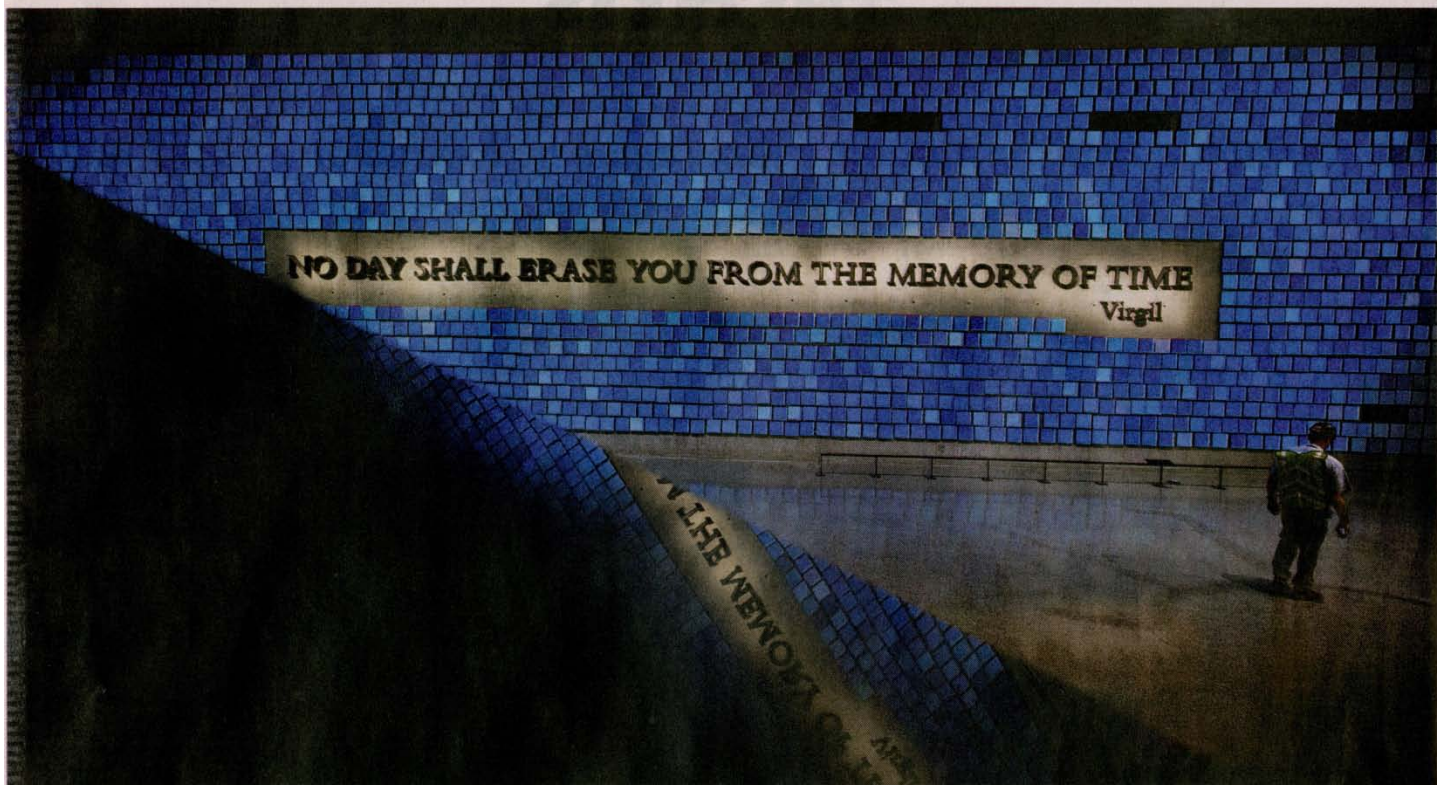


The artist Spencer Finch, 51, at his studio in Brooklyn, with part of his work for the Sept. 11 memorial, top, and his watercolor blues, above.

some ways, and in other ways it's so completely clear."

When the museum opens this week to survivors and family members of Sept. 11 victims, and on Wednesday to the public, Mr. Finch's solution will be put to the test in a kind of consecrated and highly contested space that would put any work of art under intense pressure to play a meaningful role. "Trying To Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning" is a monumental but at the same time delicate work made up of 2,983 individual squares of Fabriano Italian paper — one square for every person killed in the Sept. 11 attacks and in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center — each hand-painted a different shade of blue by Mr. Finch. He said he likes to think of them as drawings, and he

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"Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning," the work by Spencer Finch, at the National September 11 Memorial Museum, which opens to the public on Wednesday.

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has arranged them in a wide grid that towers almost 40 feet high, covering most of a central wall at bedrock level, behind which lies the repository, closed to the public, for unidentified remains of those who died at the World Trade Center.

From a distance, in the museum's soaring subterranean space, which is clad mostly in concrete and aluminum, Mr. Finch's work looks as if it could be a decorative stone mosaic. But as the viewer approaches, it becomes clear that the color is simply watercolor paint on unframed paper, hung on a wire armature like children's artwork at a school fair or, more so, like the missing-person notices that papered the city after Sept. 11. The work, which surrounds an inscription in steel taken from Virgil's "Aeneid," also brings to mind the reams of office paper that floated over the city on the day of the attacks, some

of it drifting as far as Mr. Finch's studio near the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn.

Over several weeks in the late winter, Mr. Finch, 51 — whose work often focuses on the interrelationships of light, color and memory, operating in a territory somewhere between poetry and science — mixed subtly varied shades of blue and, day after day, painted the papers, managing to complete as many as 150 on a good day.

"I don't ever get bored by it," he said one March morning, as he worked on square No. 2,435, moving his brush in consistent, measured vertical and then horizontal swipes that looked as if they were being applied by muscle memory. "I'm very tired at the end of the day, but I'm never bored."

He said that he remained uncertain about how the work would look, writ large, in the museum, and how people, especially those who had lost loved ones in the attack, would respond to it.

He recalled creating a small prototype

of it almost two years ago at ground zero. "A construction worker came by — a kind of wise guy — and looked at it and said, 'You forgot the red ones,'" Mr. Finch recalled. "But then someone explained to him what the work was about, and he said he had been at the Trade Center, and he walked up to one of the colors and said: 'This is the color. This is what the sky looked like that day.'"

"That was the extent of my focus-group testing," Mr. Finch added. "But just that one experience gave me some hope."

During eight years of planning for the museum, amid fights over fundamental issues such as how to portray the terrorists, the question of whether to include a work of art among the scorched and damaged artifacts and personal items of the dead was never a high priority. But some people involved in the project felt strongly that art was essential. "That wall is a very important wall," said Paula Grant Berry, a chairwoman of the program committee of the Sept. 11 Me-

morial Foundation's board, which chose Mr. Finch and his work.

"It was a risk, certainly, to do," said Ms. Berry, whose husband, David S. Berry, was killed in the attack. "Even when we tested it, we never really knew what it was going to look like." But she added: "I got to see it early and I became a real advocate. I think it's extraordinary, and it's so needed, and it brings in the light of day on so many levels and in so many dimensions."

The work can be seen across vast sight lines, drawing visitors' eyes into the space the way a recessive sky blue does in a painting. "It's kind of amazing to me how warm the blue is," said Emily Cramer, an exhibition project manager for the museum, looking at the installed work Tuesday with Jane Cohan of the James Cohan Gallery, which represents Mr. Finch.

The work echoes a much smaller one Mr. Finch made two decades ago, "Trying to Remember the Color of Jackie Kennedy's Pillbox Hat," a series of 100

pink pastel ovals on paper, based in part on the range of recollections of John F. Kennedy's assassination as recounted in the Warren Commission report.

Susan Cross, a curator at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, which organized a major show of Mr. Finch's work in 2008, said: "Spencer's work is about memory and subjectivity and everyone coming to this museum is going to need something different from it and project something different onto it. And I think the piece is designed for that."

In his studio in March, surrounded by empty tubes of paint — French ultramarine, indigo, Antwerp, indanthrene, cerulean, cobalt, Winsor — Mr. Finch said: "I don't know if it's going to be successful. But I feel that if I just do it in an honest way and work hard, maybe it will be."

He added: "As an artist, I don't feel like my motives are always pure. But I feel that they're pretty pure here. I'm a New Yorker, and I was here that day."