World-renowned artist Spencer Finch created *Great Salt Lake and Vicinity*, his largest-ever Pantone color chip installation, in response to the UMFA’s G. W. Anderson Family Great Hall’s architecture. His conceptual and labor-intensive process began with a long journey—the circumnavigation of Great Salt Lake. As he made his way around the lake, Finch logged precise measurements of color, and the resulting installation is a colorful sequence of ready-made Pantone chips affixed directly to the walls of the Great Hall. Each color chip is hand-labeled in pencil with the name of its original color source—the bark of a tree, the water in the distance, the wing of a bird. The line of color reads like field notes, a data-driven abstraction of close observation.

To share his private journey around Great Salt Lake with museum visitors, Finch leans heavily on documentation, a tool that Land artists enlisted in the 1960s and 70s to convey their work from distant locations. Like the non-site works of Land artist Robert Smithson that bring rocks or dirt from remote locations into the gallery in a sculptural form, Finch’s Pantone installation brings a specific landscape into the museum by using color and language to engage memory and imagination in the recreation of a journey. By poetically transporting aspects of the outdoors into the Great Hall, Finch’s installation redefines how we experience the museum and our surrounding landscape.

On the final evening of his three-day circumnavigation via foot, boat, and car, Spencer Finch met with UMFA curator Whitney Tassie to discuss his work, the site-specific project, and his experience in Utah. The following are excerpts from that conversation.
Spencer Finch (SF): The idea came from seeing the museum space and seeing the environment here, coming out to visit, and trying to think about something that works in the space, makes sense for this place, and has a relationship to this place. The Great Hall is so enormous. There were two ways to go, and there was no in-between. The installation either had to be maximal or minimal, and so, I originally thought of it in a maximal way with things hanging in the space, but it always felt like it wasn’t going to be big enough. Because it’s such a cavernous, enormous space, the expectation is that it’s going to be a spectacular, giant piece. So, I thought, so my way to approach it is to do something of smaller that fits the space in a different way.

WT: Conceptually?
SF: Yeah. And also visually in a tiny way. And that’s when I thought about doing the Pantone piece so that something is visible from everywhere in the space. It doesn’t mean when you get up close to it and you realize what it is.

WT: A large installation but intimate in that way.
SF: Right. There is a kind of a difference…. It’s abstract from a distance but becomes representational when you get close.

WT: The piece functions, and can be experienced, at multiple scales.
SF: And it also has a narrative as you move around it. I like the idea of the shape of the artwork referring to the landscape, but of course, it’s not like you could walk around and see it that sort of complete way because the lake is not always accessible. It’s a matter of going around it and seeing the nearby environment, and stepping in and stepping out, it’s so much more, and also more rich, and also a little more complicated than I imagined, but I went around the whole thing. And I saw it from many, many different vantage points.

WT: So, this work is the fourth in this series?
SF: The first one, A Walk through Berlin (with Claudia) (2012), was a very short one. Then I did Ulysses (September 19 (2009), which was shown in Marfa. And then I did the Yellowstone hike last summer. But this is different because it involved being in vehicles and being in boats, and it’s not just walking.

WT: The scale is just different. It’s just huge.
SF: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But, the idea of creating this narrative of a landscape by reducing it to these chips of color is consistent. And people, especially, the more I learned about the lake, the more I realized was a lot of people who live right near the lake never go to the lake. No one’s interested in it. They think it’s polluted; they think it’s smelly; they think there are lots of flies; they think it’s ugly; it’s not a natural wonder. But it’s pretty spectacular; I mean, it’s pretty amazing.

WT: It’s otherworldly.
SF: It’s otherworldly. It’s like some sort of ocean from Venus. Very odd, you know, with all the salt, all the different colors… And when you go out on the causeway, you can see that. You can see the division of the colors. The south side is blue, and the north side is reddish-purple. I’ve been interested in using Pantone as an art material for a while. About five years ago, I used it for a piece that was a spinning wheel in the Folkestone Triennial. I used different Pantone colors on this wheel that people spin. They looked at the ocean, matched the color of the water with a Pantone, and then a flag that color was raised. I think that was the first time I use Pantone as a way to standardize.

WT: It was a cyometer, an instrument for measuring blueness.
SF: Yes, a cyometer is an amazing thing. The Pantone, because it’s a standard, allows for repeatability. It allows for shifting
to different media. For example, a lot of colors will repeat through-out this piece, and I’m sure that same thing. But I also realize, I mean someone would look at the Pantone book and think, “Oh, there’s so many colors in this book.” But I think if you realize there’s not a perfect match in most cases. You realize how many colors our eyes can see, and all the subtle differences.

WT: There is a limit to reproducibility.
SF: Well, yeah, the limit of creating a certain system of color. And the thing is, I could get closer if I was out there mixing paint, but I couldn’t do over a thousand colors. It takes a long time to mix colors, so this process has a sort of quickness, an immediacy, and a facility. I know the Pantone book well, even though it’s not in any real particular order. There are oranges in the front, oranges in the back, so it’s a little bit mixed up. Mostly it’s organized by color, but not completely.

WT: But you use it a lot, so you know it.
SF: Yes, I know it more or less. I know there are these two pur-plush-gray pieces in the middle, sort of blue section. They are not in gray, they are not in purple. But, I know they’re there in that section. It is limited, but there is still an incredible variety. And, there is a huge variety of color around the lake and its environment. Color is a fun way to think about a trip. There are plants, there are animals; there are insects; there are birds. There’s a lot of color, and there’s a lot of water. The more I saw the lake, the more I wanted to really have a lot of different views of the lake, and to see the variety of color. It’s just a huge area. It depends on the angle that you’re viewing it from; it depends on the part of the lake; it depends on where the sun is; it depends on the weather; it depends on the light; it depends on all sorts of things, so there’s a lot of variety, which is great.

WT: I think it’ll be surprising. I think people will be surprised to see the variety of color. Because like you said, many don’t go out the lake.
SF: Yeah, Great Salt Lake is like another planet somewhere. It is really a strange, strange place. I do think the installation will be a sort of shock for people, but I think once they enter it, they’ll be engaged and it will take people a long time to go through it.

WT: I’ve been thinking about the translation that happens between your experience, the production of the artwork, and the visitors’ experience.
SF: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

WT: The installation really represents your personal experience, but as soon as the visitor starts to look, read, and experience it, they draw from their own memory to create their own narrative of a journey.
SF: I think people will see, say Antelope Island, and they’ll think, “Oh, it’s this really that color?” Or just the lake, or Spiral Jetty, or Willard Bay, or the color of those evaporation ponds. To see all of these colors might be surprising for people. If the piece has a pur-pur-pur color and to create a color wheel. Every day of the Folkestone Triennial to see the natural world differently, to appreciate the huge range and splendor of it.

WT: When people experience the documentation of your performance, or performance, you will have their own different experience. Even though you’re painstakingly documenting your experience, they cannot know your experience. From a

SF: Yeah, no, it’s not so deep. But when you’re out there… I mean, we drove 45 minutes out, full speed with these double, 300 horsepower outboard, you feel like you’re going forever. When you’re there at the south marina, and you look north, you see the water, and it feels like an ocean. It really does go on.

WT: It’s quite vast. Did you see a bunch of birds?
SF: I saw a lot of birds, mostly in Willard Bay. There were pelicans; there were lots of different kinds of gulls; there were various birds nesting. These birds make floating nests out of the grasses. They’re just floating in the water, so the parents keep the nest until the eggs hatch, and then when the eggs hatch, they don’t need the nests anymore, so they just disintegrate. They’re pretty amazing. There are all kinds of things. There are deer, there are foxes, there are badgers and so on. Dragonflies.

WT: I know. People love to say there’s no life in Great Salt Lake, because there are no fish. But, it’s not really so. It supports a lot of life.

SF: Yeah, I’d never been there. At first, I was underwhelmed by it. It sort of felt smaller and lower than I thought. And then, walking out on it, I thought it was really great, and it felt more modest, and then, interestingly, you know? It was made almost 50 years ago, and it has this kind of modesty, like an artist just got a guy with a dump truck, more or less. Not at all like some of Rembrandt’s production value. But just someone who’s really determined to make something interesting.

SF: Yeah, yeah. It’s really useful. It reminds me that I need that kind of time. It’s so much more useful than answering emails, or doing conference calls, or whatever. And actually, being and doing this, I have ideas for other work. When you take a break, you see things that are different from what you see normally. It’s nice to be out in the world and getting ideas. It’s hard to find time to think and look, and be exposed to different things. It’s nice just being on my own, driving around and going to new places, like today at the National Conservancy in Layton, the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve. I was the only person there for a while. It’s just a really beautiful place.