THE FIVE SENSES
We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones.¹

— Henry David Thoreau, Walden, 1854

Consciousness is always in rapid change…. It is the continuous readjustment of self and the world in experience.²

— John Dewey, Art as Experience, 1934

scottsdale museum of contemporary art
A visitor to an art museum naturally expects to see the art, not hear it. To anticipate smelling, tasting or touching the art requires an even more radical leap. The Five Senses begins with a simple premise: five senses, five works of art. However, as with many perceptual, cognitive and phenomenological issues, closer examination reveals a more nuanced web of interrelationships. The imaginative sculptures of renowned international artists Janet Cardiff, Olafur Eliasson, Spencer Finch, Roelof Louw and Ernesto Neto activate the body and mind (or mind-body if one rejects a distinction between mind and matter), cross boundaries and dodge museum conventions.

The human body experiences sensation through an inextricable aggregate of biology, physics, neurology and chemistry. Recent scientific research into human perception and sensory awareness indicates a very rich spectrum of experience. This increasing understanding of complex sensory modalities suggests that perceptions of time, space and temperature are as significant as sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. That premise is confirmed in the artworks in this exhibition. Artist Spencer Finch’s careful synchronization of electric fans, 2 Hours, 2 Minutes, 2 Seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007) melds the unexpected, visceral thrill of wind to the romance of philosopher Henry David Thoreau’s cherished forest and creates a liminal space between technology and nature, body and consciousness. Beauty (1993), an installation by Olafur Eliasson, constructs a setting of sensory contrasts — shifts between darkness and light, warm and cool, dry and damp — that amplifies the spectacular visual experience of standing amidst water and a beautiful spectrum of fractured light. The stretched, sagging, globular forms of Ernesto Neto’s spice-filled structures, Cai Cai Marrom (2007) infuse the gallery with rich scents and heighten awareness of the architectural context around the sculpture. Soul City, Roelof Louw’s colorful pyramid of six thousand ripe oranges (1967) perched atop one another, invites the visitor to select a piece of fruit — activating four of the five the senses: taste, sight, smell and touch. In Janet Cardiff’s audio installation, The Forty Part Motet (2001), a 40-voice, 16th-century choral composition drifts among 40 speakers, each projecting the voice of an individual singer.

Encounters with these five works are forthright and direct: hearing the haunting tones of ecclesiastical music, tasting the tart flesh of an orange, seeing a rainbow, feeling the wind on one’s skin, inhaling the heady scent of spice. Just as effortlessly, one perceives the rich yellow-orange color of turmeric, the acoustic hum of box fans cycling on and off, the vibrations of music skipping from speaker to speaker, the sharp smell of citrus, the humidity of a mist-filled room.

4 For more information about how new scientific research on sensory modalities challenges traditional philosophical views (including phenomenology, a touchstone for much art-historical theory), see The Senses: Classic and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives, ed. Fiona Macpherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
For The Forty Part Motet, Canadian sound artist Janet Cardiff commissioned the congregational choir of England’s spectacular Gothic Salisbury Cathedral to perform a choral arrangement written by 16th-century composer Thomas Tallis. *Spem in alium*, an a capella composition often referred to as Forty Part Motet, is considered a masterwork of counterpoint, in which individual voices harmonize, but with varying rhythm and pitch. To maximize its power and uniqueness, Cardiff recorded each singer’s voice on a single channel.

Cardiff’s installation is more than a technically complex recording of Tallis’s music. Her 40 synchronized loudspeakers are carefully arranged in a large oval in eight groups of five — mirroring the way Tallis composed the piece for eight quintets. The speakers, mounted at eye level, occupy an oddly anthropomorphic position. Visitors meander freely among them, as music fills the room and each voice lifts, blends and disperses.

In a live choral performance, the sound travels in one direction toward the audience; even the privileged choirmaster receives the unified sound at once. By isolating each voice and projecting sound from 360 degrees, Cardiff creates a radically different sensory experience. She describes her motivation in the simplest terms: “I just wanted to climb inside and hear them individually.” For Cardiff, feeling the vibrations of the music is as essential as hearing it. Step by step, visitors move through the shifting boundaries of sound. She explains the piece is “about how our bodies are affected by sound. That’s really the driving force.”

Janet Cardiff (b. 1957 Brussels, Ontario, Canada) lives and works in Grindrod, British Columbia, and Berlin. She graduated with a BFA from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada in 1980 and received a Master of Visual Arts degree from the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 1983. Cardiff and her partner, George Bures Miller (b. 1960 Canada) with whom she often works, exhibited large-scale installations at the Venice Biennale in 2001 and 2011, as well as at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany in 2012. Three major surveys of Cardiff’s work have been organized by the Museum of Modern Art and P.S. 1 Contempory Art Center, New York (2001); Modern Art Oxford, United Kingdom (2008); and the Art Gallery of Ontario (2013). Cardiff and Miller are also the recipients the German Academy of Arts’ prestigious Käthe Kollwitz Prize.
Olafur Eliasson's *Beauty*, consisting of an electric light, water and a hose, is technically simple. This intimate, human-scale work from 1993 predates Eliasson's massive outdoor and architectural installations. Danish-Icelandic, Eliasson grew up in close proximity to the ocean. The natural world features throughout his art, whether sculpture, installation or photography and light projections. Eliasson invites viewers into an environment to consider their place in nature and amidst fluctuating elemental materials. Distinctions between mind and body are blurred in the perceptual experience.

Viewers enter *Beauty* through a series of dim corridors in which humidity and temperature shift incrementally. The floor slopes gently upward and seemingly all at once light spills through a doorway opening onto a cloud of mist and a rainbow. In the split seconds before the eyes adjust to the drastic change in light levels, sight, temperature and time all seem heightened. As viewers intuit and enter the space of the room, they experience subtle changes in the rainbow from different angles.

Although the installation requires a specific environment, the artwork itself is the light fractured through the multitudes of water droplets. *Beauty* truly exists in a liminal space—a threshold between the outside world and an interior world—and serves as a metaphor for the delicate and subtle shifting of sensory perception.

American artist Spencer Finch is highly regarded for his aesthetic experiments in visual perception and sensory experience working with natural phenomena: light, color, wind and water. In *2 Hours, 2 Minutes, 2 Seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)*, Finch used scientific methodology in an attempt to replicate his encounter with wind on a spring day. Forty-four box fans stacked four high are arranged in a semicircle. A computer program regulates the fans to blow air at the exact speed and from the precise direction as the wind on March 12, 2007 during Finch’s visit to Walden Pond. Using an anemometer and weathervane, Finch scrupulously measured, recorded and calculated wind speed and intensity at the body of water in an effort to quantify sensation, and therefore consciousness.

Finch regularly fuses the scientific with the literary in his art. *2 Hours, 2 Minutes, 2 Seconds (Wind at Walden Pond, March 12, 2007)* points to the American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau’s autobiographical account of his sojourn in the woods alongside the picturesque Walden pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau lived this isolated existence for two years, two months and two days. Finch’s homage to Thoreau’s simple and sincere commitment to the basic elements of life re-creates an experience Thoreau likely had, standing at the edge of the water and feeling the wind on his skin. Eschewing the Romantic literary tradition with which Thoreau was associated, Finch delved into physics to quantify sensation.

**Spencer Finch** (b. 1962 New Haven, Connecticut) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He attended Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan, and received his BA from Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, in 1985, and his MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, in 1989. Finch’s many exhibitions include the 2004 Whitney Biennial, the 2009 Venice Biennale and the 2011 Folkstone Triennial. In 2007, Finch’s most significant survey, *What Time Is It on the Sun?* was organized by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams. A second mid-career retrospective, *Spencer Finch: My Business, with the Cloud*, was organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 2010. In 2012, the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design commissioned the monumental site-specific installation *Painting Air: Spencer Finch*. The Indianapolis Art Museum presented his most recent solo exhibition, *Spencer Finch: Following Nature* (2013). Finch also collaborated with the nonprofit Creative Time in 1999 to create an alternative audio guide for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and more recently with the High Line in 2009 to create the public art installation *The River Flows Both Ways*. 
Roelof Louw maintains a willful irreverence toward modernist notions of the immutability of sculpture. With the exception of the Surrealists and Dadaists, sculpture prior to Conceptualism was defined by its permanence. Louw is a British artist educated in London during the late 1960s—a hotbed of groundbreaking conceptual art. Like much of the work from this milieu, according to art historian Joy Sleeman, Louw’s art represents the “transition from the constructed object to something less formally bounded and in direct dialogue with its environment.” Louw’s inspiration for Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges) came as he walked through the famous fruit and vegetable market Covent Garden.

The sculpture consists of a pyramid of six thousand carefully stacked oranges. Louw selected the orange because of two qualities: each unit is small enough to hold in one hand and the similar spheres are capable of being shaped into a larger structure. Although the sculpture bears no clear directive, visitors are welcome to take and eat the oranges. As the fruit disappears, the solid geometric configuration of the pyramid transforms into new and unpredictable shapes. The visitor’s perception of the oranges—their surface, texture, color, weight, smell and taste—is heightened by the subversive act of removing a piece of artwork from a museum and consuming it. Louw acknowledges the hippie ethos of the 1960s informed the project. Accepting a gift from a stranger enables the visitor to participate in the creation of the artwork and engage in a personal exchange with the artist.


Brazillian artist Ernesto Neto designs interactive sculptures and architectural interventions that engage smell, touch and sight. His beautifully chimeric work is a hybrid of anthropomorphism, minimalist form and the conceptual, sensory-driven sculptures of the Brazilian avant-garde in the 1960s. “I’m not trying to make design-based works. I try instead to create a kind of fantasy of nature, and a hypothesis about a structure of a body.”

The word “organelle” is often used to describe Neto’s sculptures. The lumpy, globular and sagging nylon forms resemble the internal structures of living plant and animal cells.

*Cai Cai Marrom* is a beautiful example of Neto’s spice works. The delicate netting holds pounds of the sensuous spices turmeric, pepper and cinnamon. The pungent smells waft through the gallery, allowing viewers to encounter the artwork before they see it. The rigid structures necessary to suspend and support the biomorphic forms are easily visible. Neto asserts, “If you look at my work, you see there’s nothing hidden. I always want to be very honest. I want everything to be very transparent…. [I] wanted to develop things so you could see the structure.”

However, despite the straightforward materials—spicy-sweet aroma, rich colors and pliable nylon—and formal composition, the artwork is nonetheless dependent upon each unique visitor’s perception.


---

9 Ibid.


© Ernesto Neto. Photo: Sid Hoeltzel.


© Ernesto Neto. Photo: Jean Vong.

Opposite Page, Bottom: Turmeric spice.
It is tempting to consider the sculptures in *The Five Senses* from a strictly dualist position: does one experience the artworks or encounter the art objects? An early attempt to describe the in-between or transitional space between individuals’ distinct perceptions of reality is metaxy, a concept from Plato’s philosophical symposiums. More recently, this prescriptive line of questioning has become deeply rooted in the tussle between modernism and postmodernism. And yet somehow, the works by Cardiff, Eliasson, Finch, Louw and Neto resist categorization within the argument between the primacy of subject versus object. Instead, these sculptures resonate with what art historian Nicolas de Oliveira argued was the viewer’s contribution to an artwork as one of many essential components in its meaning:

> The perceived absence of apparent control mechanisms or the lack of an explicit message in these works suggests an understanding shared between the artist and the audience. The audience is encouraged to choose its own interpretation without relying on that of the artist. Artists and curators are indeed motivating spectators to experience works in an open-ended manner and become authors and generators of their own meanings.

In each of the works comprising *The Five Senses*, the hand of the artist is not obscured, but absent. In the sincere effort to abolish any obstruction between the action and the participant, the artists removed themselves from the relationship between viewer, sculpture and experience.

The playful artworks inspire a sense of awe and wonderment, curiosity and imagination. The 18th-century Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the term “esemplastic” to signify the way an artist’s active imagination weaves together the commonplace — words, images, emotions, thoughts — to create a unified composition. In fact, words are an essential framing element for each sculpture in *The Five Senses*. Finch and Cardiff assigned their artworks titles drawn from other works of art. The title of Ernesto Neto’s sculpture, *Cai Cai Marrom*, evokes the syncopated rhythm of a poem. Eliasson assigned the fundamental definition of aesthetic pleasure to his work *Beauty*. Roelof Louw’s title, *Soul City (Pyramid of Oranges)*, gently refers to the individual and the larger city, which in turn also references the formal organization of each orange within the sculpture’s larger geometry.

The ability to assign, dissect and define sensory experience does not alter the fact that the senses remain inextricably interconnected. One cannot taste an orange without seeing its bright color, touching its pitted skin, smelling the oils as it is peeled. Similarly, objective definitions of aesthetic encounters are thwarted by the fusion of visceral input, philosophical inquiry, emotional response and creative imagination that lies at the core of art’s expressive power. The five seminal sculptures in *The Five Senses* render mute the traditional static presentation of the aesthetic object. Instead, they transform the museum into a place to be exposed to art that draws on imagination. Each work extends an invitation of welcome: Please explore with us. Listen, touch, see, taste, smell the world around you. Embrace...

**"THE DELICACY OF THE WORLD."**

---


