APRIL 2018

A CLOUD OF LIGHT

Moon Dust (Apollo 17) | Spencer Finch

Spencer Finch (American, born 1962). Detail. *Moon Dust (Apollo 17)*. 2009. Installation view at The Baltimore Museum of Art. Collection of Joanne Gold and Andrew Stern. ©Spencer Finch, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nordenhake Berlin/Stockholm. Photo by Maximilian Franz

VISIT THE BMA

and see *Moon Dust (Apollo 17)* in the Fox Court through October 14, 2024.

When Apollo 17 astronauts returned from space in 1972, they reported that moon dust is, above all, a nuisance. Unlike ordinary house dust, the fine gray powder that covers the surface of the moon clings to everything it touches. Tiny particles of moon dust, sharp as glass, cut into astronauts' boots, gummed up the joints of their space suits, and clogged their equipment. Those vexing problems are far from our thoughts, however, as we delight in an elegant, glittering cloud of "moon dust" envisioned by artist Spencer Finch.

This captivating artwork is composed of 417 LED lights suspended from the ceiling of the BMA's Fox Court on 150 "chandeliers." Whether we see the lights as sparkling particles of moon dust or as bright stars overhead, they invite us to dwell for a moment on the vastness of our universe. At the same time, they form models of microscopic chemical molecules. When scientists analyzed the samples of lunar dust that Apollo astronauts brought back to earth, they discovered that they were composed largely of silicon dioxide glass, as well as iron, calcium, magnesium, and other elements. Finch assigned atoms that make up each of these chemical elements to four sizes of light bulbs (the heavier the element, the larger the bulb). Then he used the light bulbs and their fixtures to demonstrate how individual atoms are bound together to form the molecules from which moon dust is made.

Looking towards the horizon at sunset, Apollo astronauts reported seeing a mysterious, cloud-like glow over the moon's surface. Scientists suggest that the phenomenon was caused by the rise and fall of particles of lunar dust in constant motion. Finch's earthbound cloud of lights provides a glimmer of what the astronauts witnessed from space.

CHALLENGE

Imagine that Finch had suspended all the light bulbs on cords of equal length and had used frosted instead of clear glass light bulbs. How would such changes have affected the appearance of *Moon Dust (Apollo 17)*?

Write a haiku poem inspired by *Moon Dust (Apollo 17)*.

Learn more about:

- Problems that Apollo astronauts had with moon dust. n.pr/2EAhdZ8
- Characteristics of moon dust, and the mysterious moon glow that astronauts witnessed. bit.ly/2qmcGUZ
- Collecting soil samples from the moon's surface. s.si.edu/2Jzf6Zb

PRINT THE IMAGES ON PAGES 2 AND 3 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.

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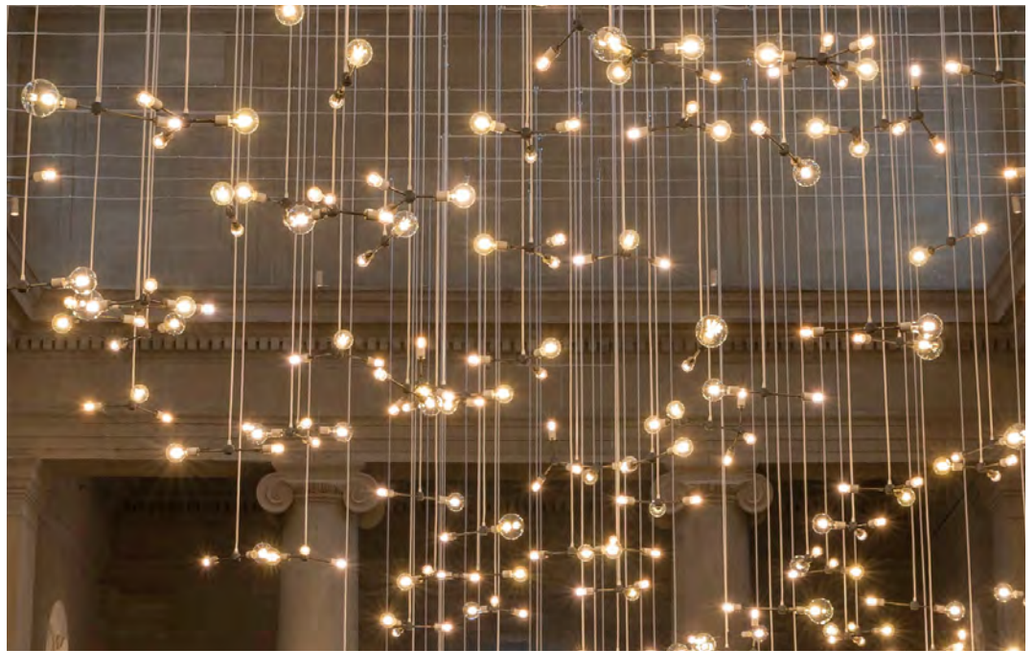
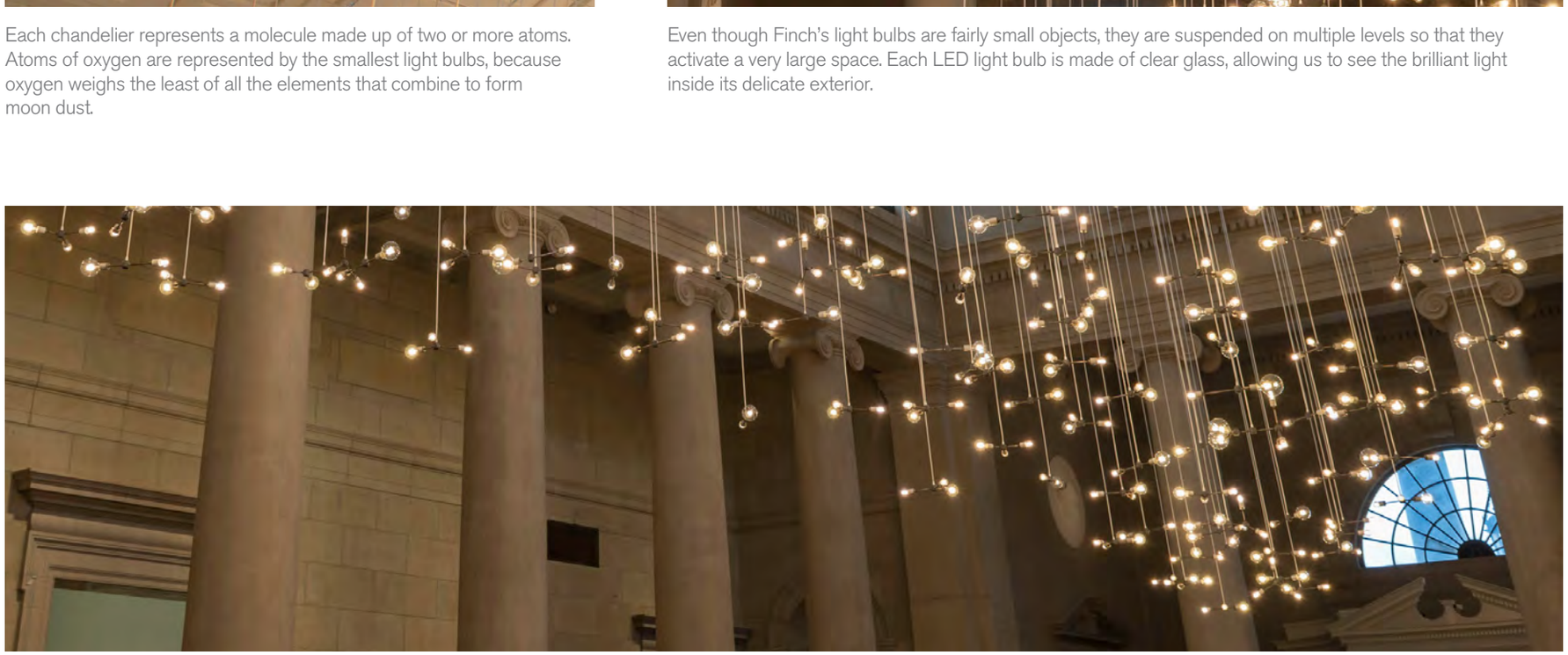
Each chandelier represents a molecule made up of two or more atoms. Atoms of oxygen are represented by the smallest light bulbs, because oxygen weighs the least of all the elements that combine to form moon dust.



Even though Finch's light bulbs are fairly small objects, they are suspended on multiple levels so that they activate a very large space. Each LED light bulb is made of clear glass, allowing us to see the brilliant light inside its delicate exterior.



The light bulbs are screwed into fixtures suspended from cords of varying lengths, forming a cloud of lights with irregular borders that contrast with the straight lines of the surrounding architecture.

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