

L I S S O N G A L L E R Y

*Widewalls*  
7 April 2022

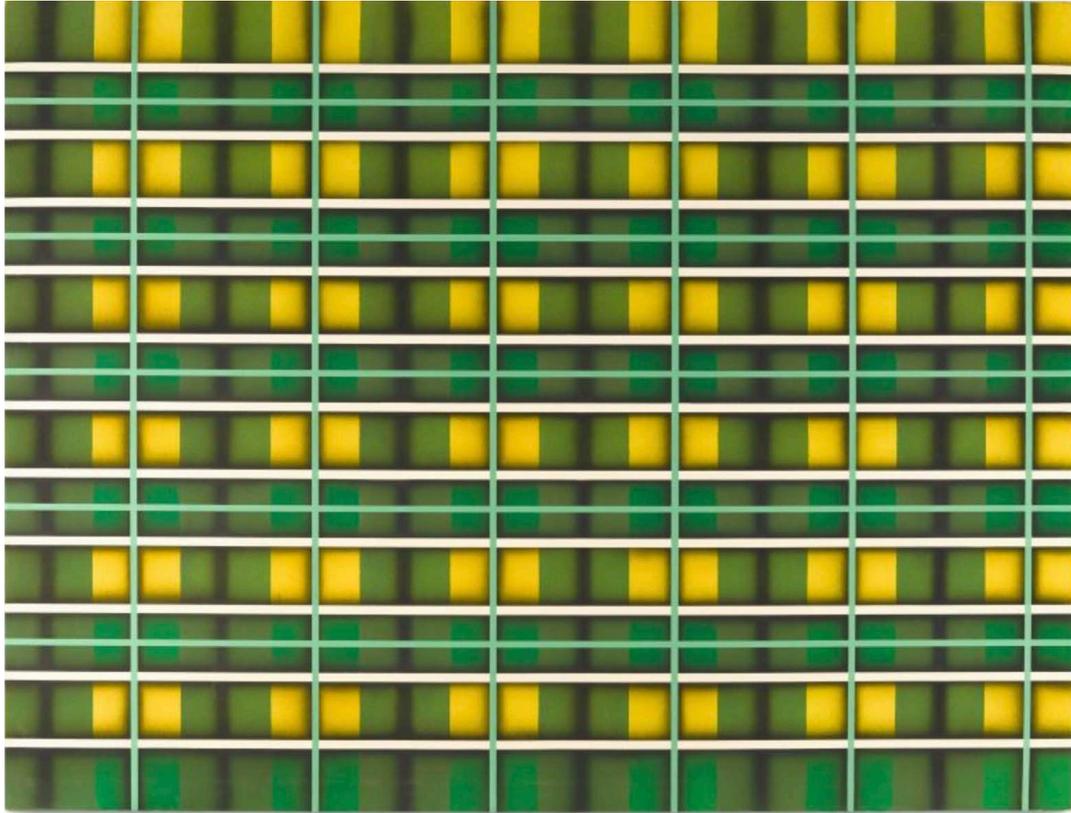
# WIDEWALLS

## The Philadelphia Museum of Art Charts Sean Scully's Significant Contribution to Abstraction



A recipient of numerous awards for his experiments in abstract art, Irish-born American artist Sean Scully developed his practice based on formal experiments over five decades. A major survey of his works is due to open at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, featuring paintings and works on paper covering the period from the early 1970s to the present.

*Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas* will chart the artist's contributions to the history of abstract painting both in Europe and America and will emphasize the integral relationship between his paintings, prints, watercolors, and drawings, rarely exhibited together.



## Scully's Contribution to Abstraction

Over 100 works featured in the exhibition showcase [Sean Scully's](#) vision that progressed over the years, opening new possibilities for abstraction. His compositional structures are simple, relying on basic geometrical forms and patches of color, developed in various scales. *"He has also distinguished himself as a brilliant colorist, drawing inspiration from his immediate surroundings,"* said Timothy Rub, Director Emeritus of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who curated the exhibition with Amanda Sroka, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The exhibition was previously shown at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, with its Philadelphia iteration expanded with additional paintings and works on paper. It is developed over several galleries, starting with works Scully created during his fellowship at Harvard University in 1972-73. *Green Light* (1972-73) that shows Scully's experiments with the grid created with vertical and horizontal stripes of tape and spray paint is joined with *Insert #2* (1973), representing a hallmark of his practice, 'a painting within a painting' or 'insert'.

Multi-panelled works created in the early 1980s occupy an adjacent gallery, where panels of contrasting colors and formats are combined into complex compositions of stripes. *Backs and Fronts* (1981) is a notable piece on display, comprising 12 attached canvases.



Sean Scully - Backs and Fronts, 1981

## Continued Experimentation

The artist's residency at the Edward Albee Foundation is covered in the following room, featuring small paintings made with scrap wood. These works, including *Swan Island*, *Ridge*, *Bonin*, and *Elder*, all from 1982, represent a turning point in Scully's career regarding scales and materials he used. The artist traveled to Mexico several times during this period and drew inspiration from its architecture, light, and saturated colors.

The late 1980s characterized Scully's experimentation with the stripe, which he combined with checkerboard and the insert, as in *Pale Fire* (1988), *A Bedroom in Venice* (1988), and *Union Yellow* (1994).

His best-known series, *Wall of Light* is featured in another room. The works were made in response to a particular sensation, memory, or location and are characterized by vertical and horizontal blocks of richly painted surfaces. The artist continued with the experiments in the *Doric* series painted on aluminum. The final room is dedicated to Scully's series *Landlines*, showing large gestural paintings made of thick bands of color.



Sean Scully - Mexico Azul 12.83, 1983

## The Shape of Ideas at Philadelphia Museum of Art

The exhibition *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas* will be on view at the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) in Philadelphia from April 11th until July 31st, 2022.

Featured image: Sean Scully - Heart of Darkness, 1982. All images courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.

# LISSON GALLERY

*CBS Philadelphia*  
7 April 2022



## New Exhibit Showcasing Irish American Artist Sean Scully Opens Monday At Philadelphia Museum Of Art



PHILADELPHIA (CBS) — There is a new exhibit coming to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Eyewitness News got a sneak peek on Friday of “Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas.”

It’s a survey of the work of the Irish American artist.

Scully is described as a key figure in contemporary abstract painting and has been creating pieces for more than five decades.

“This retrospective tells a story and it shows a typed geometry that moves gradually through decades to a more expressive, emotional, looser kind of painting,” Scully said.

“For those who don’t know Sean Scully’s work, I am confident this will come as a revelation to them,” Timothy Rub, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, said. “He’s one of the great figures, in my view, in the history of contemporary painting.”

The exhibit opens to the public on Monday and runs through early July.

# LISSON GALLERY

*ARTFIX daily*  
17 January 2022

**ARTFIX***daily*  
Curated Art World News & Exclusives

ArtfixDaily News Feed™

## Major Survey of Sean Scully Is Expanded for Philadelphia Museum of Art Exhibition This Spring

January 17, 2022 20:55



"Pale Fire," 1988, by Sean Scully. Oil on linen, 8 feet x 12 feet 2 1/2 inches. Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, Museum purchase, Sid W. Richardson Foundation Endowment Fund. © Sean Scully.



"Backs and Fronts," 1981, by Sean Scully. Oil on linen and canvas, 8 x 20 feet. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of Courtesy Magonza, Arezzo. Photographer: Michele Sereni. © Sean Scully.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art will present a major survey of Irish-born American artist Sean Scully, featuring paintings and works on paper from the early 1970s to the present. *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas* will chart the artist's significant contributions to the American and European history of abstract painting as it has developed over the last half-century, while emphasizing the integral relationship between Scully's paintings, drawings, watercolors, and prints, which are rarely exhibited together. The exhibition will be on view to the public at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from April 11 to July 31, 2022.

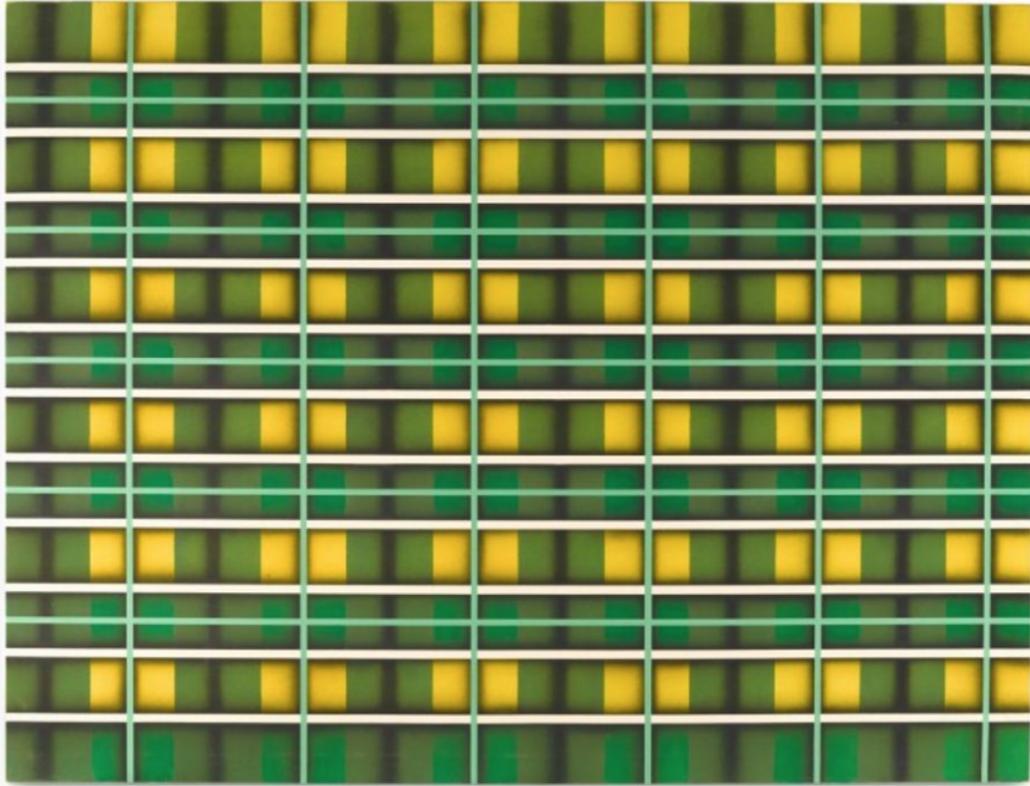
"Sean Scully is one of the leading painters of our time," said Timothy Rub, the George D. Widener Director and CEO of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and one of the exhibition curators. "Over the decades he has pursued a vision that has progressively opened new possibilities for abstraction, often working with deceptively simple compositional structures and on a variety of scales that range from the intimate to the monumental. He has also distinguished himself as a brilliant colorist, drawing inspiration from his immediate surroundings in places as various as Mexico, the remote islands of the Outer Hebrides, and the dense and dynamic urban fabric of New York, where he lived and worked for many years. We are pleased to share with our visitors this survey of Scully's career, which illuminates his unique contributions to the history of Contemporary art."



"Wall of Light Orange Yellow," 2000, by Sean Scully. Oil on linen, 9 x 11 feet. Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin: Donated by the artist, 2006. Collection & image courtesy of Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. © Sean Scully.



"1.21.89," 1989, by Sean Scully. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 15 x 18 inches. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Brian Buckley. © Sean Scully.



"Green Light," 1972–73, by Sean Scully. Acrylic on canvas, 8 feet 1/2 inches x 10 feet 6 3/4 inches. Private Collection. Image courtesy of Bonhams & Butterfields, New York, 2020. © Sean Scully.

The exhibition, previously on view at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, has been expanded for the Philadelphia Museum of Art presentation to include additional paintings and works on paper, bringing together over one hundred works that reflect the many phases of Scully's long and productive practice. Several galleries will be devoted to the artist's virtuosic prints, featuring color lithographs, woodcuts, etchings, and aquatints. Among the highlights of this section will be a series of color aquatints from the museum's collection, each accompanied by the verses of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) along with a selection from the recently acquired portfolio *Landlines and Robes* (2018). The display of the artist's prints both mirrors and offers an introduction to the galleries devoted largely to Scully's painting practice with pastels, drawings, and watercolors integrated throughout, further emphasizing the ongoing relationship between his paintings and works on paper.

The first paintings that the visitor will encounter are important works that Scully created during a fellowship year at Harvard University in 1972–73. This experience afforded him opportunities to travel from London to New York, a major center for Minimalism and abstract painting at the time. (He would move to New York permanently in 1975.) In these works, such as *Green Light* (1972–73), Scully experimented with the grid, using tape and spray paint to layer the canvas and create an optically vibrant painting composed of vertical and horizontal stripes. On display nearby is *Inset #2* (1973), an early example of the artist's interest in creating a "painting within a painting," or what Scully terms an "inset," which remains a hallmark motif within his practice.



"Heart of Darkness," 1982, by Sean Scully. Oil on canvas, 8 x 12 feet. Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Society for Contemporary Art, 1988.259. Image courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource NY. © Sean Scully.

An adjacent gallery will be devoted to the complex multi-paneled works that Scully began to make in the early 1980s, a compositional format that would occupy the artist's attention throughout the remainder of that decade. In these paintings, he combined panels of contrasting colors and formats into large and increasingly complex compositions, each structured by his signature "stripe." Notable among these is Backs and Fronts (1981), an 8 x 20-foot work comprised of twelve attached canvases, which drew considerable notice when first exhibited at PS1 (now, MoMA PS1) in 1982.

The next large gallery will feature selections from a series of pivotal works produced during the artist's residency at the Edward Albee Foundation in Montauk, New York, in 1982. These small paintings were made using scraps of wood that Scully found in Albee's former barn, which doubled as Scully's studio. He then pieced the scraps together to create sculptural compositions in relief, which are represented in the exhibition through works like Swan Island, Ridge, Bonin, and Elder all from 1982. Together, these paintings reflect a turning point in the artist's use of scale as his work became increasingly architectural. This new direction was solidified by a group of monumental paintings, among them Heart of Darkness (1982), a colossal three-panel work in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as The Fall (1983)—from the museum's own collection. Around this same time, Scully also made the first of several trips to Mexico where he found inspiration in its architecture, its light, and its saturated colors. These travels spurred him to begin to explore watercolor as a medium, as seen in Mexico Azul 12.83 (1983).



"Union Yellow," 1994, by Sean Scully. Oil on linen, 7 x 8 feet. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist. © Sean Scully.

In the late 1980s, Scully extended his experimentation with the stripe, using it in combination with compositional structures such as the checkerboard and the inset. These ideas were given form in some of the artist's most expressive paintings, among them *Pale Fire* (1988), *A Bedroom in Venice* (1988) and *Union Yellow* (1994). In them, and in many other works of this period, we can trace Scully's development as a gifted colorist.

Another gallery will feature his best-known series, collectively titled *Wall of Light*, which Scully began working on in earnest in 1998. Many of these works were made in response to a particular location, sensation, or memory. Their richly painted surfaces, composed in a quilted pattern of vertical and horizontal blocks (Scully calls them "bricks"), are evocative of, as the title of the series suggests, walls of stone that are paradoxically, as Scully has put it, "inhabited by light." A selection of these paintings will be seen together with works on paper including pastels and watercolors from the same series, foregrounding the artist's facility with working across different scales and mediums.

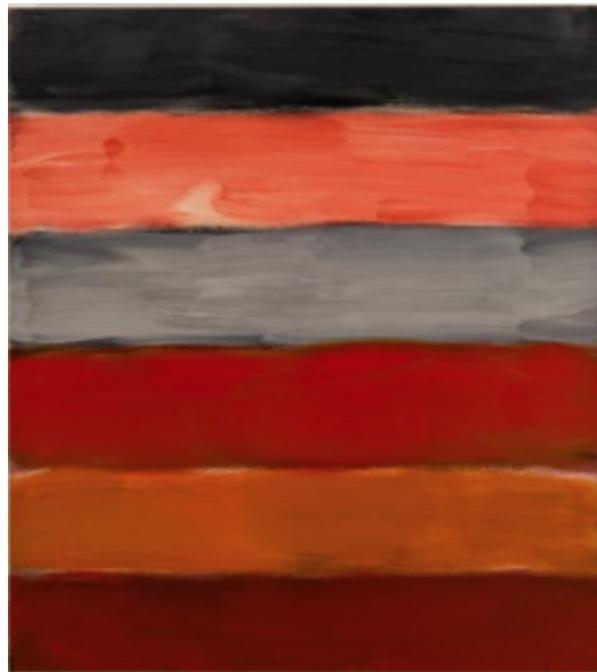
These *Wall of Light* paintings led to the development of Scully's other, closely related compositional formats, chief among them the paintings of the *Doric* series, which will occupy another spacious gallery. Scully created this series as an homage to the heritage of ancient Greece, reflecting ideas of strength, resilience, and stability. Painted on aluminum, these works are more austere in their palette, which is predominantly grey and black, and more sonorous in their visual rhythms.



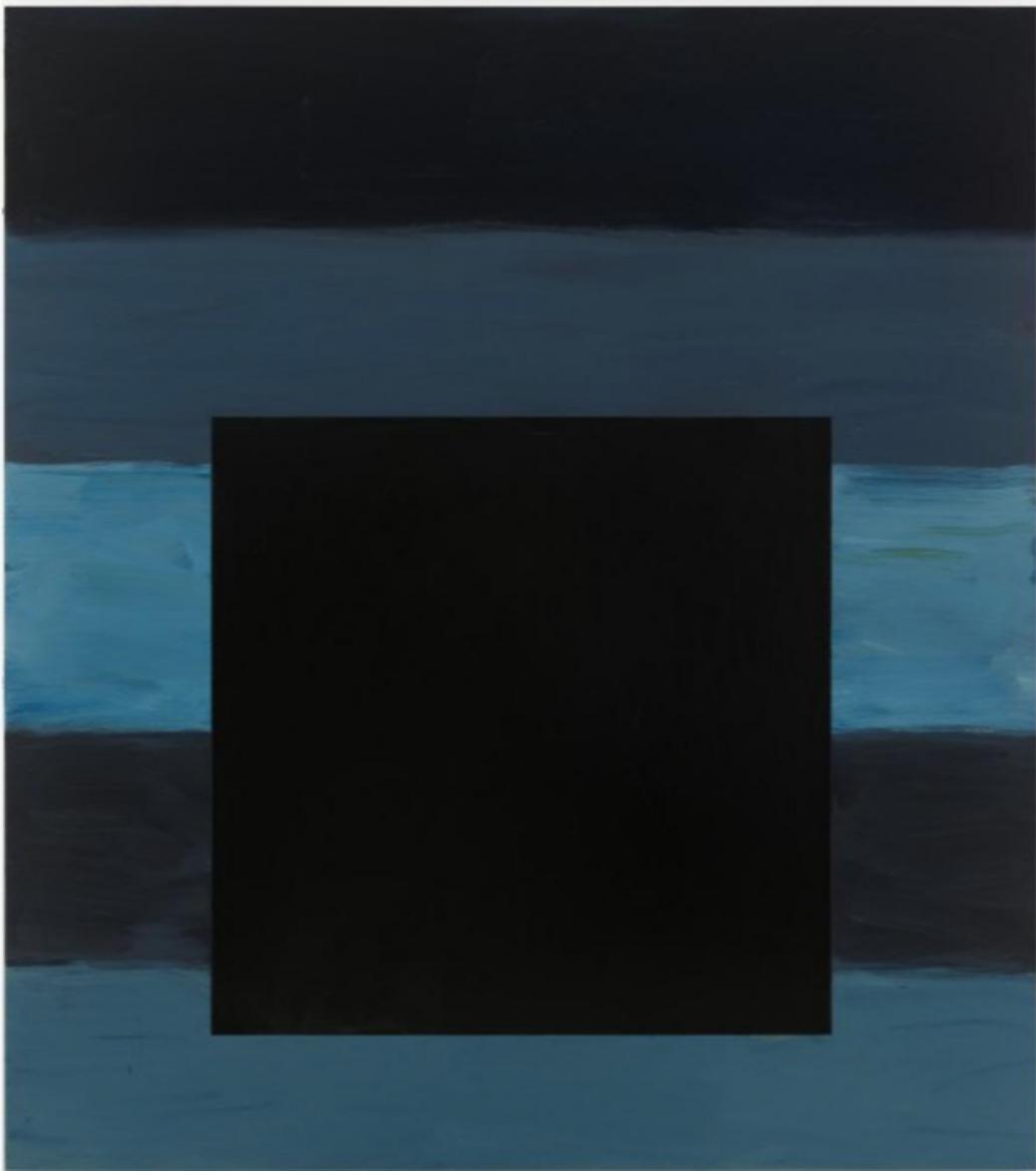
"Mexico Azul 12.83," 1983, by Sean Scully. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 9 x 12 inches. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Rob Carter. © Sean Scully.

A final gallery will focus on the work that Scully has made during the past decade, most prominently a series titled Landlines. These large gestural paintings are made up of thick horizontal bands of color that harken back to the elegant and spare canvases that Scully produced after he came to New York in 1975. At the same time, the Landlines are among the most freely painted and unabashedly romantic works Scully has ever created. Considered together, they reflect the artist's continuing belief in the expressive potential of abstraction and his ability to register a precise tone or mood through color. The exhibition concludes with several recent works, among them *Black Blue Window* (2021), a work dominated by a gaping black square that reflects Scully's personal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marla Price, Director of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and contributor to the exhibition's catalogue, notes that the artist's work, as it has evolved over the course of more than five decades, remains intimately connected: "Scully has spoken of his career as a 'rolling cannibalization,' in which he scavenges his own work and that of others to expand, develop, and move forward. The systematic elements in his early works have never really disappeared as he continues to explore different combinations of building units or motifs and then pair them with emotion and content."



"Landline Pink," 2013, by Sean Scully. Oil on linen, 47 x 42 inches. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Christoph Knoch. © Sean Scully.



"Black Blue Window," 2021 by Sean Scully. Oil on aluminum, 7 feet 1 inch x 6 feet 3 inches. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist.  
Photographer: Elisabeth Bernstein; © Sean Scully.

Exhibition co-curator Amanda Sroka, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, adds: "In this exhibition, by integrating paintings and works on paper, we can understand and appreciate – in new and meaningful ways – Scully's relationship to scale, materials, and color and the complementary roles that each have played in both the trajectory of his artistic development and in affirming his place within the Western art historical canon."

An exhibition catalogue is available now at [store.philamuseum.org](https://store.philamuseum.org)

# LISSON GALLERY

RTE  
21 December 2022



## Interview - Sean Scully

Updated / Tuesday, 21 Dec 2021 10:50



Sean Scully's paintings come in at \$2m each

Sean Scully is one of the most successful artists of our age.

The Dublin-native's paintings come in at \$2m each.

He had turned to crime in his teenage years, but his creative flare always shone through and he tells his story to The Business.

**Sean Scully**  
CLIP • 24 MINS • 18 DEC 21 • THE BUSINESS

00:00 24:20

Share Open

*BBC Culture*  
28 September 2021



ART | ART HISTORY

## Backs and Fronts: The painting that changed the course of art

*(Image credit: Sean Scully)*



*By Kelly Grovier* 28th September 2021

**The artist Sean Scully's *Backs and Fronts* 'peeled peel back the superficial veneer of things to reveal the invisible geometry that pulses beneath', writes Kelly Grovier.**

**S**ome great works of art give us symbols to decode. Others decode us. Sean Scully's *Backs and Fronts*, an enormous 20-foot-long, 11-panel painting of strident stripes and raucous rhythms that thrums beyond the borders of itself, is one of those. It changed the course of art history in the early 1980s by restoring to abstract painting a dimension it had lost – its capacity for intense feeling. Last year, when global lockdowns were forcing the world to look inside itself, I spent dozens of hours on the phone with the Irish-American artist, now in his 70s, discussing everything from his homeless infancy on the streets of Dublin in the 1940s to how he came to create one of the most important works of the past half century – a work widely credited with rescuing abstract art from the brink of irrelevance.

What emerged from those conversations with Scully – whom the legendary art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto once described as "an artist whose name belongs on the shortest of short lists of major painters of our time" – is an unexpectedly inspirational tale of personal struggle, resilience, and creative triumph. The soulful stripes and bricks of battered colour that have come to define Scully's visual language in the decades since the watershed creation of *Backs and Fronts* in 1981 are anything but coldly calculated, meticulously mathematical, or emotionally inert. Scully's canvases are loaded not only with a profound understanding of the history of image-making – from Titian's command of colour to the way Van Gogh consecrates space – but with the mettle of a life that has weathered everything from abject poverty, to the death of his teenage son (who was killed in a car accident when the painter was in his 30s), to the envious resistance of a critical cabal in New York that begrudged his achievements. Time and again, art has proved Scully's salvation.



*Backs and Fronts, 1981 (Credit: Sean Scully)*

*Backs and Fronts*, whose very title suggests a determination to peel back the superficial veneer of things to reveal the invisible geometry that pulses beneath, was created at a moment in the early 1980s when the dominant movement in abstract art, Minimalism, had painted itself into a corner. Minimalism had succeeded in stripping from its austere surfaces every trace of human emotion. For decades, ever since the American artist Frank Stella had begun cramming his canvases in the late 1950s with sullen strips of bleak black paint, Minimalism gradually sank deeper and deeper into the black hole of its own aesthetic aloofness, leaving the hearts and souls of observers further and further behind. As the American sculptor Carl Andre, who would himself become a leading figure in the Minimalist movement in the 1960s and 70s with shallow piles of drab bricks, noted in a catalogue essay that accompanied an exhibition of Stella's canvases at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959, "Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity," Andre observed. "His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting."

By the late 1970s, it became clear that fewer and fewer people were content to be abandoned in and by a painting. What one wants, has always wanted, is a way back to themselves and to arrive as if for the first time. In the face of Minimalism's relinquishment of motives and emotion, Scully's Backs and Fronts blared defiantly. So much so, that the British conceptual artist Gillian Wearing **has hailed it** as having "broke[n] the logjam of American minimalist painting". Its clashes of colour and discordant cadences of gestural stripe – shoving this way and that, and bouncing like the bars of a digital equaliser – were more than merely an audacious rejoinder to Minimalist severities. They were a call to arms. "I was working my way out of what I considered to be the Minimalist prison," Scully told me in one of the many exchanges chronicled in my new book **On the Line: Conversations with Sean Scully**. "At that time, my contemporaries and friends in New York were absolutely stuck in Minimalism or process art – repeating brushstrokes or making geometric divisions that were relentlessly rational... So Backs and Fronts caused a lot of attention. It made noise."



*Araby, 1981 (Credit: Sean Scully)*

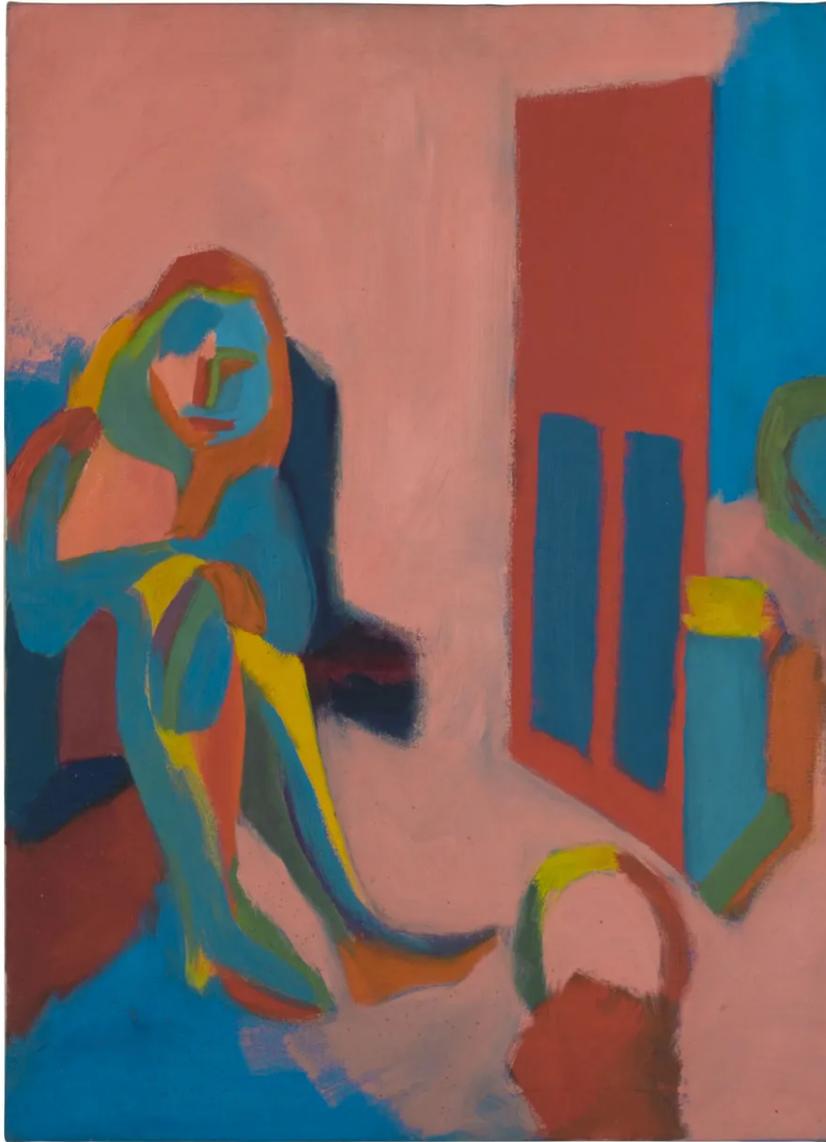
---

Among those who were present to hear the commotion caused when *Backs and Fronts* was first exhibited in New York's PS1 art centre (part of the Museum of Modern Art) in 1982, was the art historian and writer Robert Morgan, **who recently reminisced on the impact that the work made at the time**. "This painting took the exhibition by storm. Nothing like it had been done before: 11 panels moving horizontally across an open field, an infinity of coloured stripes, optically moving up, down, and sideways as if they were the notations for a musical score." Morgan's equation of the work's vocabulary with the swell and grammar of musical composition is perfectly in tune with the very inception of the painting, which began life as a smaller, more intimate and contained response to Pablo Picasso's famous 1921 Cubist portrait *Three Musicians*.

"I thought it would be better to have four musicians," Scully told me, recalling how he set out, initially, to create a relatively modest quartet of panels riffing off the rhythms of Picasso's famous trio. Scully had been resident in New York for five years, an aspiring young artist patiently paying his dues, after graduating from university in England in 1972. "I managed to make the painting by, in a sense, returning to Europe, because Picasso is European and I always loved his geometric figures, which were close to abstraction but never crossed the line. As it went on, I somehow got the courage to start expanding the work. And then I started expanding it stylistically until, by the end, it was thunderous."

Also witness to the thunderclap of *Backs and Fronts* was the US art historian and philosopher David Carrier, who regards the arrival of the painting not only as pivotal to the unfolding story of contemporary art, but a turning point too in his own development as a thinker and a writer. "Soon after it was shown." **Carrier has written**, everything changed for [Scully]. Usually an art historian has only a bookish experience of the events he or she describes. But I know this story by acquaintance, because I was there. I remember as if yesterday, walking into PS1. At that time, Scully didn't have a dealer; nor was he much known in New York. Immediately his art inspired me, I met him and when I sought to explain it, I became an art critic."

For Scully, the breakthrough that *Backs and Fronts* represented, personally and creatively, cannot be overestimated. It was, he tells me, "a very big step". Like all big steps, however, countless little ones before it made that ultimate leap possible. As a teenager apprenticing with a printer in London (where his family had moved from his native Dublin when he was a toddler), Scully routinely found himself slipping off to meditate on the humble grandeur of Van Gogh's *Chair* (which then resided in the Tate) – learning from a master how weightless colour can be alchemised into the heft sacred substance, and how even the space surrounding an object can be sanctified into something at once tactile and transcendent. Subsequently, as a student at Croydon School of Art, the only institution that was willing to give him a chance, Scully made the decision to step away from painting figuratively, with which he had experimented with precocious panache – breaking the body down into a jigsaw of humid hues in paintings such as *Untitled (Seated Figure)*, 1967. Infatuations with the spare spiritual grids of Piet Mondrian and the poignancy of Mark Rothko's alluring swathes of mysticised colour began percolating in his mind.



*Untitled (Seated Figure), 1967 (Credit: Sean Scully)*

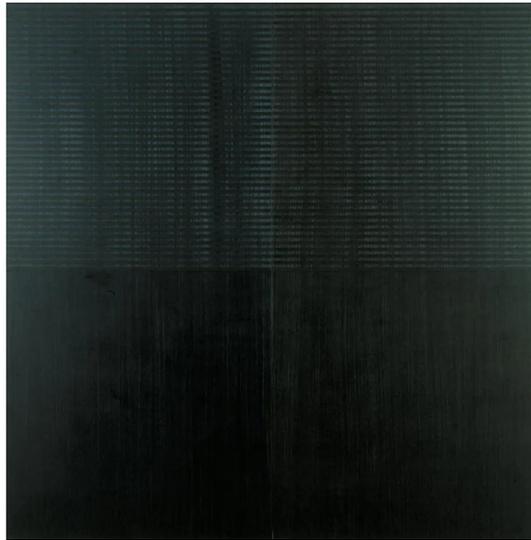
"I've taken a lot from both of them," Scully tells me, "but particularly Mondrian, because what I took from Rothko already existed in Romantic painting in Europe – in Turner, for example. I took a lot from Mondrian – his ideas of rhythm. But I tried to make them more of the street, you know, more knockabout, so that people could get into them." A seminal step in Scully's journey to forge a "more knockabout" rhythm of the street was a trip south to Morocco in 1969, while he was still a student in Newcastle upon Tyne. There, he discovered the living lexicon of stripes woven vibrantly into an unspoken text of textiles – scarves and sashes, robes and rugs. He had encountered the aesthetics of stripes before, of course, in Bridget Riley's rippling optical riddles and in Mondrian's carefully calibrated grids. But the stripes he found in Morocco breathed new air. These weren't merely latitudes of the mind; they were real.

*Scully's had been a life of compacted feeling, intensified by the formative hardships of poverty and serial displacements... something had to give*

The power of the stripe as a palpable syllable for intense expression would ferment in Scully's mind for more than a decade. In the meantime, he did his best to paint within

not just colour and depth of space, but every vestige of the fictions and frictions of human relationship. "My father said wisely," Scully tells me, "when in Rome do as the Romans. He imparted that wisdom to me. When I went to New York, I took that literally. I integrated myself into New York and I sacrificed a lot. Because I love colour. I love making space, I love making relationships. I gave all that up to integrate myself into what I consider to be the toughest city in the world."

The result of Scully's complete immersion in New York's Minimalist scene is a striking series of forbidding, grille-like paintings that adhere to the letter of the movement's unrelenting laws. The stark lines in which these works are tightly knit required the stretching and stripping of miles of masking tape in order to create layer after layer of meticulously measured matrices. To look in hindsight now at works like Tate Modern's *Fort #2* (1980), is to detect a dark, brooding energy painstakingly compressed into its pressurised surface – like a device bracing to detonate. Repressing the urge to unleash expressive colour and any metaphor of emotion was ultimately unsustainable. Scully's had been a life of compacted feeling, intensified by the formative hardships of poverty and serial displacements – Dublin to London, Newcastle to New York. He was ready to burst. Something had to give.



*Fort #2, 1980, Tate (Credit: Sean Scully)*

The eventual explosion was not only *Backs and Fronts* – a painting that cleared the stringent air by cluttering it with an eruption of rhymeless colour and unregulated rhythm – but a sequence of smaller, preparatory, satellite canvases that similarly shuddered with the coining of a new kind of emotionally intensified, expressive stripe. "I'd been working up to [*Backs and Fronts*] with other paintings like *Precious* and *Araby*. *Araby* is a very important painting. You can see in *Araby* that I am going to do something. I remember asking several friends around to look at these paintings that I was making at the time, and every single one of them was just bamboozled by what I was doing." Scully's stripe, the celebrated art critic Robert Hughes, author of *Shock of the New*, **once noted**, is "something fierce, concrete and obsessive, with a grandeur shaded by awkwardness: a stripe like no one else's". The sudden, if inevitable, arrival of *Backs and Fronts* and its posse of preliminary paintings, signalled not only a beginning but an end. Minimalist painting was passé.

*I think of art as something profound – as our salvation – Sean Scully*

In the four decades since the making of *Backs and Fronts*, Scully has steadfastly fortified and refined his signature style, allowing it to absorb and echo back the trials and triumphs of life. The year after *Backs and Fronts* went on display at PS1, announcing the reintroduction into geometric abstraction of intense human contours and concerns, the artist's teenage son, Paul, was tragically killed in a car accident. Suddenly, almost before it

"Paul's death," Scully tells me, "provoked many dark paintings – fierce paintings, I would say – because there's nothing like a geometric rage. That is the most angry of all, I believe, because it's strapped in and seething. There is something very dark and brooding about the paintings that scare other paintings away from it." Scully is referring to the long sequence of majestically mournful, monochromatic canvases like *Durango* (1990) that he created in the decade after his son's accident. "In *Durango*, there's really very little relief. The triptych, and the bulge in the middle – which gives it even more body, more weight – is constantly disrupting the attempt of the brushstrokes to unify the surface, physically, with its drumming. The surface keeps trying to break down."



*Durango*, 1990 (Credit: Sean Scully)

---

Though he was rocked to his core, what never fully broke down was Scully's confidence in the spiritually restorative power of painting. "I think of art," he told me, "as something profound – as our salvation". Throughout the past decade of the 20th Century and the first two decades of the 21st, Scully has continued to interrogate the stripe and the endless rhythms into which it can be woven to compose a redemptive eye music for the world-weary soul. The reverberations of *Backs and Fronts* still register in the shudder of horizontal bands from his recent ethereal series, *Landlines* – whose lithe, lyrical latitudes seem to map an interior terrain deep inside us. And he hasn't stopped arguing with Picasso, either. "Here's another thing that I don't agree with," Scully says to me – the last comment he makes in our conversations for *On the Line* – "and that's when Picasso said that art is war. Art is not war. War is war. Art is the enemy of war. Art is love."

***On The Line: Conversations with Sean Scully*** by Kelly Grovier (Thames & Hudson) is published on 30 September.

If you would like to comment on this story or anything else you have seen on BBC Culture, head over to our [Facebook](#) page or message us on [Twitter](#).

And if you liked this story, [sign up for the weekly bbc.com features newsletter](#), called *The Essential List*. A handpicked selection of stories from BBC Future, Culture, Worklife and Travel, delivered to your inbox every Friday.

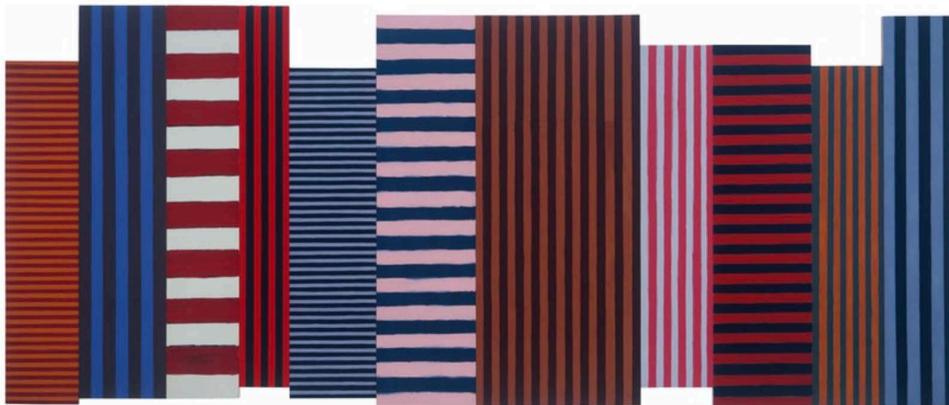
*The Brooklyn Rail*  
3 September 2021

## BROOKLYN RAIL

**ArtSeen**

### Sean Scully: *The Shape of Ideas*

By [Robert C. Morgan](#)



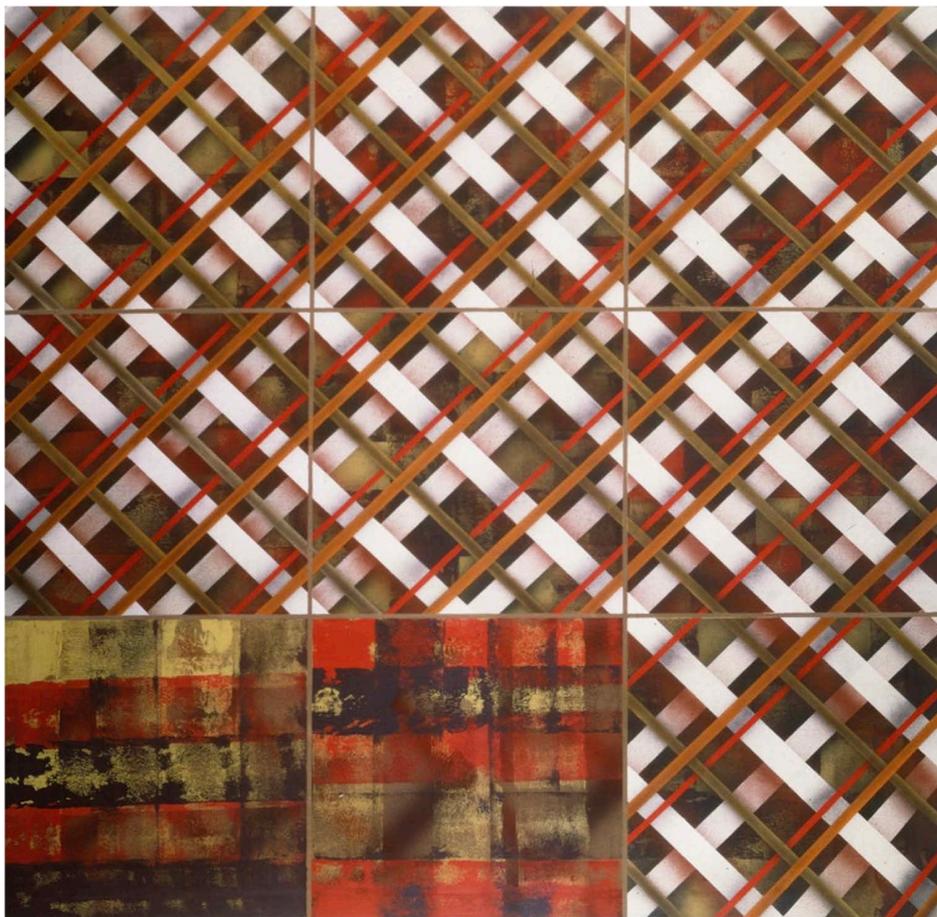
Sean Scully, *Backs and Fronts*, 1981. Oil on linen and canvas, 96 x 240 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Magonza, Arezzo. © Sean Scully. Photo: Michele Sereni.

The Irish-born, London-educated, American artist Sean Scully has held to his aesthetic convictions despite both the rancor and the praise that have accompanied a brilliant, if somewhat controversial, five-decade career. While there are those who regard Scully's work as a major revival in the recent history of abstract painting, others are critical of the high esteem in which he is held. Given his readily identifiable style—he focuses on stripes and “bricks” of color—Scully's work has a Neo-Constructivist underpinning that combines irregularity with modular forms. While the term “minimalist” has often been used to describe his work, it is not only inaccurate, but its connotations of impersonality have led to misleading assumptions regarding the meaning of his work. In fact, Scully's paintings emerge from experiences and events in his background, and not from the desire to conform to the critical categories of others. Scully has always worked in accordance with his own point of view, adhering to no collective agenda or system of aesthetic values.

Well-known writings on “Minimal Art” in the 1960s, by artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris, are typically quite hostile to painting, privileging instead the construction of three-dimensional form. Despite this, painters such as Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman have also been subjected to “minimalist painting” by critics seemingly oblivious to the contradictions implied. Coming

from a more recent generation of painters, Scully has denied any association with this term, insisting on a more personal understanding of abstraction that includes sources of inspiration in ancient Greek architecture. Scully does not give in to the temptation of engaging trends or theories that serve only to generate attention.

Sean Scully's work has a consistency that gives it a heightened level of energy reflected in both its convincing visual impact and the artist's diligent production. To see *The Shape of Ideas*, the retrospective currently on view at the the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth in a building designed by the architect Tadao Ando is an experience with a resounding impact. Although it is curated by Timothy Rub, Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where the exhibition will travel in the spring of 2022, the current installation in Texas consists of 49 paintings and 42 works on paper, brilliantly laid out in Ando's majestic chambers by Director Marla Price of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. As I traversed the various galleries, apprehending Scully's magnetic paintings, it was clear that Price's insight had influenced the manner in which I perceived and contemplated these works.



Sean Scully, *Inset #2*, 1972-73. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist. © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Upon encountering the multi-paneled, ultra-majestic *Backs and Fronts* (1981), an extensive work of 11 panels, alternating between vertical and horizontal stripes, I recall visiting the artist's studio on Duane Street in lower

Manhattan as this work was being painted. As I understand it, the painting began as an homage to Picasso's *Three Musicians* (1921) and was later transformed into one of the major abstract paintings of the late 20th century. It was shown the following year at MoMA PS1. This painting took the exhibition by storm. Nothing like it had been done before: 11 panels moving horizontally across an open field, an infinity of colored stripes, optically moving up, down, and sideways as if they were the notations for a musical score. Then, in the same year, we were given *Precious* (1981), considered by many to be Scully's premiere paneled painting, both an observation deck and a launching pad for his developing career.

In another space within the galleries, we are shown early paintings that are not often seen, made prior to Scully's move to New York in 1975. They include *Harvard Frame Painting* (1972), *Green Light* (1972–73), and *Inset #2* (1973). Of the three paintings, *Inset #2*, with its diagonal grid pattern painted in a hard-edge style, is the most intellectually challenging and visually striking. There is an intrusion in this painting: two square panels are situated side-by-side at the bottom edge, painted in a loose expressionist style. One might conclude that the two squares allude to the painterly structure that was initially beneath Scully's diagonal grid. *Inset #2* is the kind of painting that retains a degree of mystery in terms of how it came to be. However, the searching quality in each of these early paintings is confident and exhilarating. They require careful attention. Although they are experimental—naturally given the time period in Scully's career—the artist never lost sight of the fact that he was painting, and that painting commands our attention.



Sean Scully, *Mooseurach*, 2002. Oil on linen, 60 x 66 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist. © Sean Scully.

We find more recent works in another gallery where the later *Doric* paintings are shown—works based on Scully’s travels to Greece more than a decade before their inception. These multidimensional paneled works are being shown together for the first time. They include the masterful *Iona* (2004–06), *Doric Pink Light* (2012), and *Doric Hermes* (2012). The Classical pulse runs high in these works. But they open the door to another source as well, suggesting that perhaps the origin of art is a reality that defines itself, and that acknowledges the fact that the present, too, will eventually belong to the past. These paintings—each in their own way—assert the desire to achieve an actual, sustained perception that functions in total contrast to the immediacy of the gaze.

Despite the common threads found throughout Scully’s work, the artist’s ability to stretch the parameters of his painterly style are made profoundly clear in this exhibition. Whether early or recent, Sean Scully’s paintings hold their own. For several years, he has been spending time in an area of Bavaria called Mooseurach for which he has named several paintings. One, in particular, *Mooseurach* (2002), included in this exhibition, is an extraordinary painting. It is not a landscape but there is the feeling of a landscape, which is normally the direction that Scully takes his work—not towards the thing, but towards the feeling of the thing. For some artists, this point of view is confined to gestural painting that tends toward expressionism. This is not the case for Scully. Committed to his own approach, he found the means to stay on track well before his paintings started to become known in the late 1970s. Since then, he has rarely wavered.

ON VIEW

The Modern Art Museum  
Of Fort Worth

June 20 – October 10, 2021

# LISSON GALLERY

*Financial Times*  
20 August 2021

## FINANCIAL TIMES

### Sean Scully and Lilianne Tomasko – artists coupled

Defying stereotypes, theirs is a partnership of equals, which includes not just joint exhibitions but even a joint painting



Sean Scully and Liliane Tomasko at home in Aix-en-Provence © Vivien Ayroles for the FT

Jan Dalley AUGUST 20 2021

Their wedding rings are tattooed on their fingers.

“That was my idea,” [Sean Scully](#) says. “That’s because artists, we have to wash our hands all the time, you have to take your ring off. Then you watch your wedding ring spinning around in the sink — just as you reach down for it, it disappears down the drain.”

Much has been written about artist couples. The usual story is of the great man whose work and mission take precedence over those of his wife, who works in the shadows until she finally achieves her due much later, if at all. But between Scully, one of the world’s leading abstract artists, now 76, and his Swiss-born wife Liliane Tomasko, 54, there seems to be a deep co-operation. They share studios in New York and Germany — “We can literally work side by side: we didn’t even need different rooms,” Scully says — and even exhibitions. They have shown their work together in Valencia, Rostock and Berlin, and now have their first UK joint exhibition, entitled *From The Real*, at Newlands House in Sussex.

But in the show, Tomasko explains, the rooms *are* separate: the work is parallel rather than intermingled. Her looser, more expressive and gestural abstractions in glowing colours are, she says, based around domestic life; his signature stripes, so much denser and more complex than they first appear, recur everywhere from canvases to sculpture. New work by Scully includes black paintings made in the pandemic year and a sculpture in Murano glass.



Liliane Tomasko with their joint work 'Mejor lo mejor'

This artist couple goes even further. Talking in the airy dining room of their house outside Aix-en-Provence — they moved into the imposing early 19th-century *manoir* just a week earlier — I discover they have even made a painting jointly. When I clamour for a sight of it, Scully brings out his phone, and I see a

photo of a large canvas adorned with Scully's stripes in simmering terracotta, ochre, grey and black, with a square "window" in the centre, filled with a painting by Tomasko in all her freer, psychological intensity. Perhaps surprisingly, it works: it's certainly far more than a gimmick.

Who went first? I ask.

"You did," she replies.

"No, *you* did," he says. "I want us to make some more, and I want to put them in an exhibition which is about duality, about dialectic."

And the title?

"It's called 'Mejor lo mejor', I think?" Tomasko says.

"Yes, that's right. That's hard to translate. The best is better? To better the best?"

The Spanish, which they both speak fluently, is a nod to their years in Barcelona, where they have recently left their home and studio. It was a decision propelled by the growth of nationalism in the city they had loved.

"In Barcelona, you'd go to meetings and they'd speak entirely in Catalan — like saying 'Fuck you'," says Scully. In the playground with their young son, Tomasko was told they should be speaking Catalan, instead of Spanish. "There was too much of that, there — it made it impossible," she says quietly. Scully, in his more robust manner, adds, "In the end we couldn't stand Barcelona because of this shit."

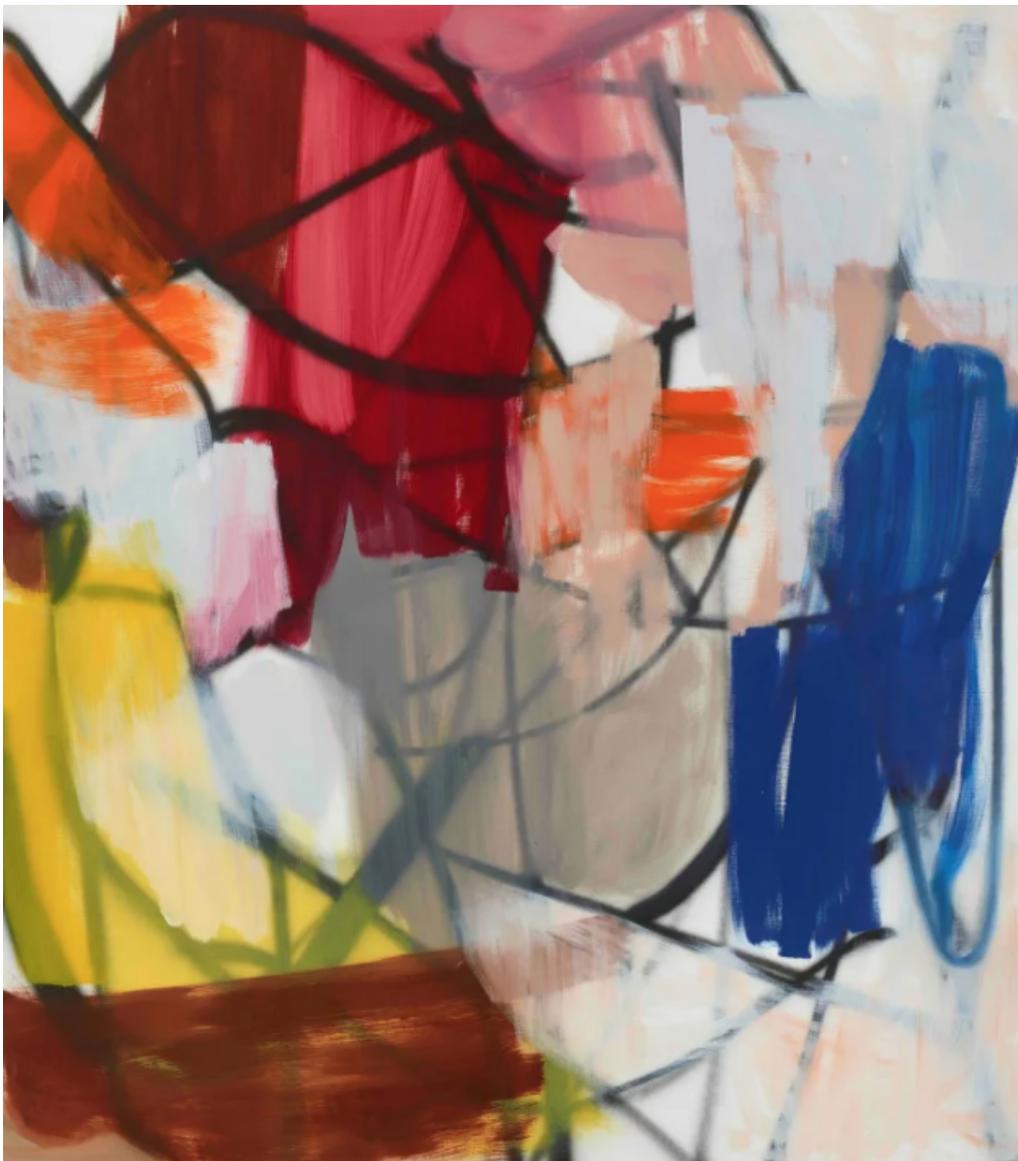


'Landline Green Sea' (2014) by Sean Scully © Courtesy of the artist. Newlands House Gallery

For this multinational couple, with studios and homes in New York, London, Munich and Berlin — and now Aix-en-Provence — the arrival of their son Oisin, in 2009, changed their thinking about the world. As a young artist, Scully received a bursary to travel to Harvard, from where he visited New York, with its astonishing art scene dominated by minimalism and Abstract Expressionism.

“New York was like a rectangle of tension and nervous energy. I was attracted to it because I’m attracted to difficulty. There’s no space between buildings, no forgiveness. Everything is a fight. In a devilish way I enjoyed the difficulty of it.

“I have seen New York destroy so many people, including Americans who come from naive places. If I’d gone to New York first of all god knows what would have happened to me.”



'Hung out to Dry' (2016) by Liliane Tomasko © Courtesy of the artist. Newlands House Gallery

Scully thrived in New York and in the US art scene, however, and made his name by smashing through the prevailing artistic orthodoxies, particularly with one of his most famous works, “Backs and Fronts” (1981). In this, he superimposed a tight grid on a wildly coloured Ab-Ex ground, letting it peep through. One commentator said Scully “broke the back of minimalism”.

“Well,” he says, laughing, “somebody had to do it.”

But as a family man, his feelings about today’s New York have changed. He shows me an image of a work of his in which his stripes have morphed into those of an American flag and the stars in the top left corner are replaced by rows of guns.

Growing up with his Irish immigrant family in a tough area of London, “I’d get into so many street fights,” he says, “but you knew you weren’t going to get shot. [In the US] the gun is intrinsic to their idea of identity. That’s why we’re not leaving our son at school in America — we’ve got to get out of there.”

Family life has also had a powerful impact on his artistic practice. A life-long abstractionist, a few years ago he made a dramatic “swerve” into figuration. Some of these pictures are included in the show at Newlands House: blocky colours, Malevich-like, depict tender scenes of a

woman and child playing together. I’d seen these images in a show in Venice in 2019, called *Human*, which had surprised everyone who thought they knew what Scully’s work would always be.

Every year, Tomasko explains, they holidayed in Eleuthera, a quiet island in the Bahamas with a “strong sense of innocence”. Scully took photographs of Tomasko playing on the beach with their son, yet “although I liked the photographs, despite what people say photography will *never* replace painting. Painting is eternal. I realised that if I wanted to immortalise Oisín and Liliane, and the experience of creating this incredible, beautiful boy, I’d have to make the paintings. So I made the paintings and now I’ve made my detour and I’ve returned to my highway.

“Tell me another artist, an abstract artist, who segued off into figuration but returned to abstraction. It’s not that easy.”



'Eleuthera' (2014) by Sean Scully © Courtesy of the artist. Newlands House Gallery

Tomasko began as a sculptor, and the couple's plans for the property in Provence, with fields and woods in which they hope to make a sculpture park, could include a return to that. After a brief semifigurative spell, she dedicated herself to the abstractions that have made her sought-after: a full-scale solo exhibition in Magdeburg, opening on September 7, is the next important thing on her calendar.

I have to ask the inevitable question — whether her famous husband's work has overshadowed her own. When she answers “NO!” I find I do believe her. “It's always an issue that comes up. But it hasn't in any way [overshadowed]. I don't do well on my own. I love having family.”

Scully adds: “Here's the thing about making art. David Hockney said it recently, but if he hadn't, I would have: art is a question of love. You can't make art competitively. You're not running a race. Picasso was talking nonsense

when he said that art is war. Art is the opposite of war. The antidote to war. Because it doesn't fix hard positions that lead to irresolvable conflict."

During the autumn the family will travel together, as "we always try to do", Tomasko says, to a globetrotting range including Copenhagen, Berlin, Poland and Texas, where Scully has a major retrospective in Fort Worth. It's just one of a dozen international shows for him in the coming year, which is nothing new for this prolific artist.



'Dark Bending' (2019) by Liliane Tomasko © Courtesy of the artist. Newlands House Gallery

We talk a little about this level of success, about the contemporary art world, about the gallery system. They laugh about some journalistic rumour that they own a private jet — "It'd be like owning a shark. I'd rather be in hell," Scully says. He tells me he has a reputation as "difficult" because "I didn't like all that big-gallery shit." He and Tomasko have mostly worked with smaller galleries, but he is now with Lisson and Thaddaeus Ropac gallery. He admits that the demands of the market, and breathtakingly high prices, have meant "it's out of my control now. It's pulling me along.

“In fact, I have intentionally depressed my market.” I don’t press him on what he means, because he has just looked up and out of the window at the rolling gardens of their new home, with its glorious avenue of cypresses and the olive orchards beyond. “If I wanted to be rich, I’d just do the real estate. I’m really good at that.”

To October 10, [newlandshouse.gallery](http://newlandshouse.gallery)

*‘On The Line: Conversations with Sean Scully’ by Kelly Grovier is published by Thames & Hudson on September 16, £25*

LISSON GALLERY

*Patron Magazine*  
September 2021

# PATRON

ART / CULTURE / DESIGN



# THE SINCERE GEOMETRY OF SEAN SCULLY

SEAN SCULLY'S SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO ABSTRACTION  
ARE SHARED THROUGH *THE SHAPE OF IDEAS* AT THE MODERN.

BY TERRI PROVENCAL



Sean Scully portrait taken in Mooseurach, October 2020. Photograph by Liliane Tomasko.



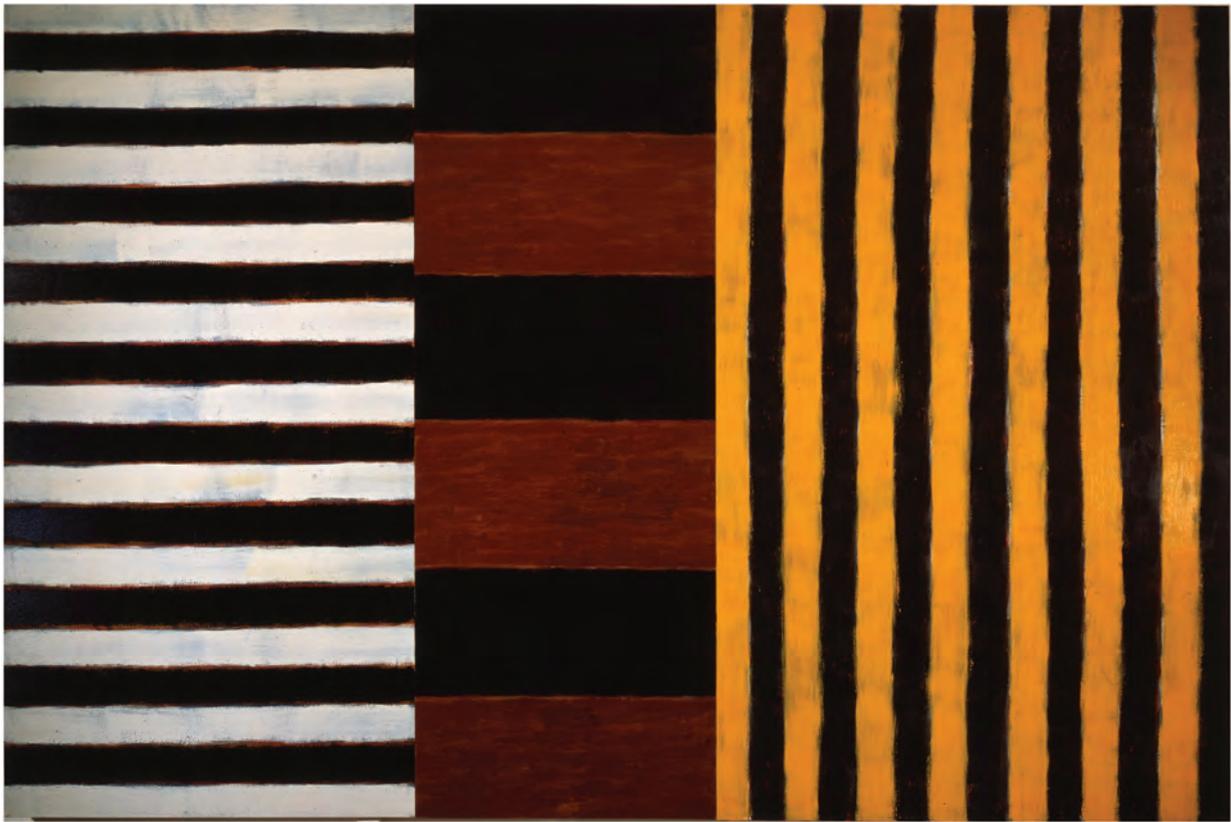


Sean Scully, *Pale Fire*, 1988, oil on canvas, 96 x 146.5 x 5.5 in. Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, museum purchase, Sid W. Richardson Foundation Endowment Fund.

At home in New York, from a brocade sofa in his “TV room,” Sean Scully answers a FaceTime call. After chatting about the sofa, a showroom model he had reupholstered, he points out a James Castle pastel with a bird feather he bought for his wife and his “kid’s theater costume room” nearby. We meet his son later in the conversation as well as his trampoline-engaged dog, a potcake adopted from the Bahamas with a beautiful fan-like tail.

The family home was built around 1986 for Bill Murray he says, on top of an old farmhouse; the original chimney remains, as do the door handles, which he describes as schoolhouse style. Twice nominated for Britain’s esteemed Turner Prize and declared a member of the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2013, the Irish-born, South London–raised artist is immediately disarming.

He has a busy exhibition schedule this year, including a well-received show in Budapest and *Entre ciel et terre* at Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais (which ended in late July, after our interview). Founded in 1983, Ropac’s footprint includes this outpost and a second one in Paris, as well as galleries in London, two in Salzburg, and a Seoul satellite scheduled to open in October. “You know I’ve never shown with what I would call the uber galleries; I’m quite known for this,” Scully shares. About the charming people who run Kerlin Gallery in Dublin he says, “Love those guys—so intelligent, so knowledgeable, and they’ve got in-teg-rit-y,” he says slowly pronouncing each syllable. “I’ve also got a small gallery I work with in Berlin I’m very fond of.”



Sean Scully, *Heart of Darkness*, 1982, oil on canvas, 8 x 12 ft. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Society for Contemporary Art.

Sean Scully, *Swan Island*, 1982, oil on linen, 48 x 38.62 in. Collection of Andrea and Guillaume Cuvelier



He has a second home in Bavaria for which he would soon be leaving for the summer with his wife, the artist Liliane Tomasko, and son.

During this catch-up year, the monumental *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas* is in the artist's lineup. On view at the Modern Art Museum in Fort Worth through October 10, 2021, the sweeping retrospective spans five decades, unpacking Scully's significant and continuing contribution to abstraction. The show was eight years in the making and scheduled to open in May 2020 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art before traveling to Fort Worth but was abruptly disrupted by the pandemic at a time when most things faltered. Timothy F. Rub, the George D. Widener director and CEO of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who organized the show and authored the corresponding catalog, writes, "We agreed that it would be fitting to present it in 2020, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, but this plan, almost fully realized, was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic."

The exhibition title is a nod to another great Irishman, the poet Samuel Beckett. "Beckett and I, of course, have a lot in common," Scully says. "We both have this devilish kind of humor. When I saw *Waiting for Godot* I was in Newcastle, 19 at the time, and I didn't grow up educated, you know. I had to educate myself on the run. I saw this

play and I thought I'd gone to heaven. It was so true; it corresponded perfectly with my own world view."

He continues, "I knew I wanted to be an artist more than life itself. I had to be an artist. I was turned down by every bloody art school (where subsequently they asked me to teach). And then an art school in Croydon accepted me. My dedication was so extraordinary. I was unstoppable." Incidentally, Scully has honorary degrees from several prestigious universities today.

The Frank Knox Memorial Fellowship brought him to Harvard University in 1972—his first time in the US. "I was very lucky that I went to Harvard first. I got \$2,400 a year to live on. It was enough to kind of get going. Then I house-sat a mansion for six months, so I had no rent to pay. And I continued to house-sit, and then these people would buy my paintings. What's very important was that it wasn't New York. I wasn't prepared for New York at age 26. I psychologically could not have dealt with it," he shares. "I thought abstract art was kind of inaccessible—that is what bothered me. I trained as a figurative artist." Today his figurative work is deeply personal. His son, Oisín, with his gorgeous curly hair, is often his muse.



“I knew I wanted to be an artist more than life itself. I had to be an artist.”

–Sean Scully



Sean Scully, *Untitled (Window)*, 2017, oil and spray paint on aluminum, 40 x 35 in. Collection of the artist. This is also the cover of the exhibition catalog, *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*.



Sean Scully, *Mexico Azul 12.83*, 1983, watercolor and pencil on paper, 9 x 12 in., framed: 12.75 x 15.25 x 1.62 in. Collection of the artist.



Sean Scully, *Landline North Blue*, 2014, oil on aluminum 7 ft. 1 in. x 6 ft. 3 in. Forman Family Collection.



Sean Scully, *Landline Pink*, 2013, oil on linen, 47 x 42 in. Collection of the artist

Ultimately, he did move to New York, in 1975. “New York then was like Rome. It was the center of the world. People thought that Minimalism would never fall, and it was practiced by white guys—very few females. I thought to myself ‘this can’t go on,’ and I made all these paintings where I roughed it up. The reaction against me was pretty powerful. I introduced color, and most of all, a collision-based mismatched geometry. And people were so mad about it because the paint work was expressive and very physical.”

Eschewing the expected Minimalism of the day he describes, “I brought back emotion and disorder—and collision—into abstract painting. I said it was metaphorical and humanistic, and when I said this, people wanted to lynch me,” he laughs. “It wasn’t that I was just an immigrant—I wasn’t fitting in.”

The turning point for the artist came when, “The Anderson Collection in Stanford started to buy my work, then Don and Doris Fisher. [The Fishers founded the Gap in San Francisco.] Then (in 1988) this woman arrived in my studio who really talked like a lady. She was from Fort Worth. She had a mind like a razor and she saw this painting called *Pale Fire*, named after the unreadable book by Vladimir Nabokov, but I admired the effort. The painting’s got this inset in it that’s all wrong, and she said, ‘I will buy that.’ And she asked if I had a paper work for it, and I showed her a pastel, and she said ‘I’ll take that too.’” This was Marla Price, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth’s director. “I’ve never had such a decisive visit from anyone, and it belies the way you think of her because she is small and refined. She made my position in America, really. And Arthur Danto, and more recently Deborah Sullivan.”

Price first discovered the artist’s work in 1984 at the exhibit *An International Survey of Recent Paintings and Sculpture* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. “His painting *Tiger* (1983) nearly stole the show,” she writes in the preface of *The Shape of Ideas* catalog. Relationship spurred, in 1993 the Modern exhibited the *Catherine Paintings* (after his then-wife Catherine Lee, a Texas-born artist), which he later donated to the museum. Scully asked Price to write the catalog raisonné of his paintings following the Modern’s exhibition of the *Wall of Light* series presented by the Phillips Collection in 2006. “Sean Scully is one of the most important artists in our collection,” Price shares during an exhibition preview. “This is the third exhibition that we have hosted at the Modern (the second in this building), but this is the first complete retrospective.”

There are 49 paintings and 42 works on paper on view in the Modern exhibition. Timothy Rub writes that the exhibition, “favors breadth to ensure the full scope of his achievement is represented.”

Exhibition co-curator Amanda Sroka, assistant curator of contemporary art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, says of the catalog, “Timothy’s essay marries Sean’s own biography to the narrative that comes through in his work. And you start to see how so much of where Sean was and what he was being influenced by in his life circumstance affected the various ways in which these motifs and his relationship to abstraction really came to be. And so certainly the spiritual dimension or the emotional aspect of the work comes out when you also start to understand the interrelationship between biography and the production. Timothy and Sean have a longstanding relationship, and we knew we wanted to include the

formative works in his career and the development of his practice. Those were the cues we tried to take in putting the show together.”

*The Shape of Ideas* opens with *The Fall*, 1983, in the spot where Andy Warhol’s dramatic self-portrait is typically installed as if the museum’s sentry. Naturally, the Modern’s *Pale Fire* (1988) is among the paintings on view, and the seminal work *Back and Fronts* (1981) as well as work from the artist’s distinguished ongoing series *Wall of Light*. Says Sroka, “I think *Backs and Fronts* is representative of a moment in Sean’s practice when he really made a name for himself in the United States. It first premiered at MoMa PS1 in 1982 in the *Critical Perspectives: Curators and Artists* series. Joseph Masheck was the curator at the time.”

Scully recalls, “When I made it, it was really stressful in a way because I didn’t know what the f\*\*\* I was doing. I had no money, and I was making this 20-foot painting. And PS1 was just about the grooviest place on Earth. My painting was seen, of course, by everybody.”

“You can’t deny its presence when you see it. For us it was absolutely pivotal to be included in a retrospective of Sean’s work,” says Sroka.

The *Wall of Light* series was the subject of a 2006 exhibition at the Modern, curated by Michael Auping, and stems from watercolors Scully made from his travels to the Yucatán in 1983–1984. Auping describes the series in the catalog as a “true tipping point, in the sense that we could say that the artist’s career can now be divided

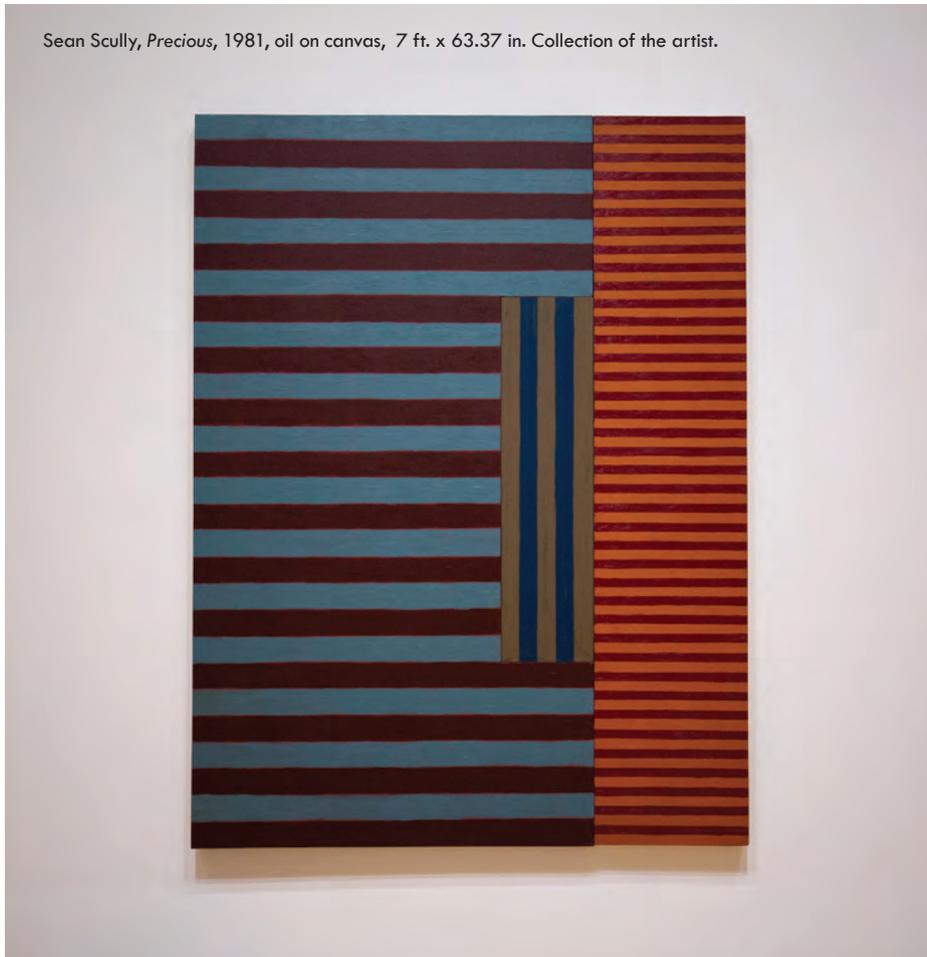
into pre-*Wall of Light* and after.”

Sroka affirms, “The *Wall of Light* is the most significant series in Sean’s body of work. He starts to hint at it in Mexico in 1984, and he returns to it more significantly in the 1990s. It’s a testament to how these motifs in Sean’s work really take the time to grow and develop even while he’s working on other bodies of work. It’s a continual return, and with the *Wall of Light*, a very big part of what makes this relationship between darkness and light. It’s a literal relationship with that. How can a wall either keep things contained or closed in? Whereas a light is penetrating and porous and all-encompassing, so it’s a contradiction. We ourselves as humans are walking contradictions.”

The revered art critic Arthur Danto writes, “Scully is far from a formalist artist, and expects his work to transmit metaphors of the widest human relevance.”

“My paintings have always been about geography,” says Scully about the impetus behind *Wall of Light*. Asked if these relate to childhood through darkness and light he says, “My childhood was traumatic. My parents were completely insane. I went to school in a very rough school—boy, it was very rough. The first school I went to was a convent school, a Catholic school. I became a fighter at my next school. I loved the convent school, but my mother got me kicked out. Then they put me in this state school, and I learned to fight. Irish people are very exuberant but extremely melancholy. We were poor as church mice. And that’s what put the artist in me.” **P**

Sean Scully, *Precious*, 1981, oil on canvas, 7 ft. x 63.37 in. Collection of the artist.



## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

### ART REVIEW

# ‘Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas’ Review: Gridlocked Beauty

At the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, an exhibition organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art surveys the development of the artist’s signature abstract geometric style.



Sean Scully’s ‘Backs and Fronts’ (1981)

PHOTO: SEAN SCULLY MICHELE SERENI (PHOTO)

*By Lance Esplund*

*Fort Worth, Texas*

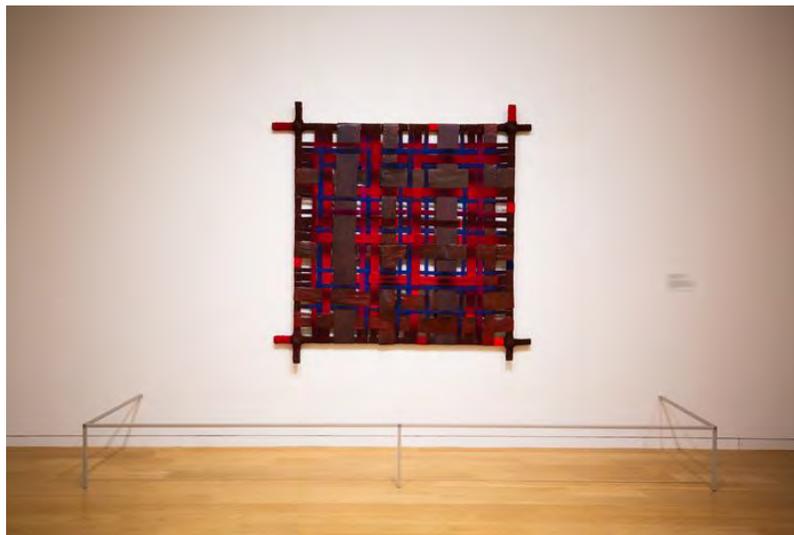
The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, designed by Tadao Ando, includes massive interior concrete walls and ceilings and exterior walls of glass, overlooking a large reflecting pool. Natural light, enlivened by rippling water, bathes the gray cement planes in flickering, steely blues, silvers, greens, yellows and violets. This is the environment—architecture transformed into painting—in which I saw the approximately 100 paintings and works on paper in “Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas,” a nearly five-decade survey of Mr. Scully’s abstractions, co-curated by Timothy Rub, director and CEO of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and PMA assistant curator Amanda Sroka.

Mr. Ando’s impressionistic, concrete rectangles are stiff competition for any artist. But even more so for a painter such as Mr. Scully, a sensualist who makes photographs,

figurative paintings and abstract sculptures, but whose flag is planted firmly in rectangular geometric abstraction, and whose palette favors variously hued grays.

Borrowing chiefly from Paul Klee's gridded, magic-square paintings, Mr. Scully's signature works consist of flat, checkerboard compositions divided into bars and squares (predominantly black, gray and white, mixed with and adjacent to primary and secondary colors). Many of these paintings—8 or 9 feet tall—are mural-scale. "Backs and Fronts" (1981)—encompassing 12 attached canvases of various heights painted with stripes—spans 20 feet. The detached triptych "Iona" (2004-06), comprising black, gray, cream and ruddy bars, overall is more than 40 feet across. Mr. Scully refers to his compositions' individual bars and squares as "bricks" that build his "walls of light"—painting transformed into architecture.

Born in Dublin in 1945, Mr. Scully was reared and trained in London, then moved permanently to New York in 1975. Besides Klee, his evident sources include ancient monumental architecture, primitive textiles, Greek temples, Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Howard Hodgkin, American Minimalism and Mexican light. But what's abundantly clear is that Mr. Scully, the abstract painter, has oscillated between making images and something more, pictures that aspire to be physical objects (especially in his 1980s stepped, bas-relief constructions, which jut out several inches from the wall).



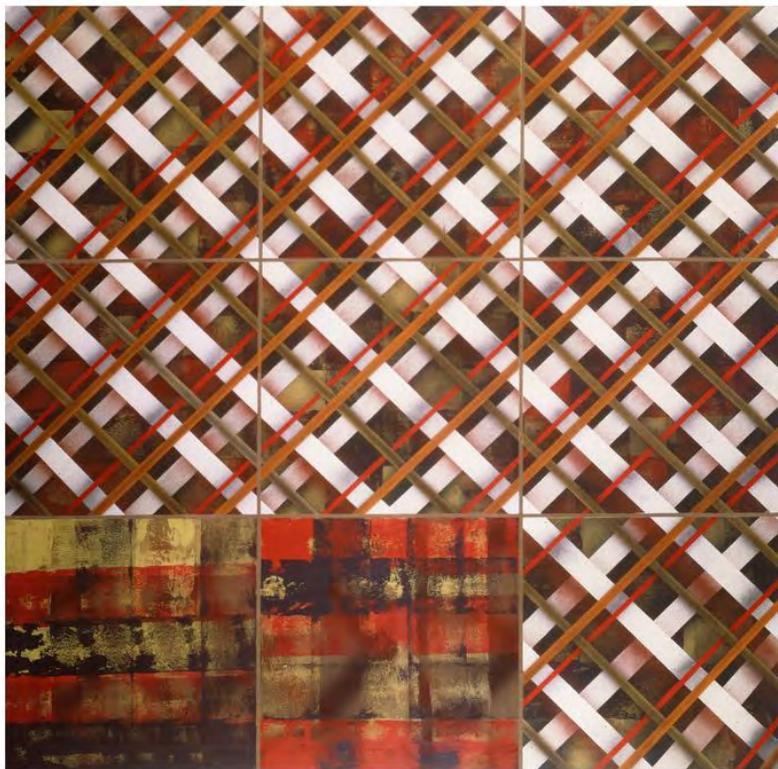
Installation view of 'Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas'

PHOTO: THE MODERN ART MUSEUM OF FORTH WORTH

In the 1970s, Mr. Scully created striped, Minimalist pictures suggesting patterned textiles and *trompel'oeil* spatial effects. Unusual here is the enigmatic, mixed-media "Harvard Frame Painting" (1972)—an open weaving of brown, blue and blood-red strips. Existing

somewhere among painting, ritualistic object and stretched hide, it's the most daring and transformative of his initial abstractions.

During the '70s, Mr. Scully also inaugurated his hallmark “painting within a painting” practice, in which he disrupts the picture’s pattern by overlaying one or more dissonant paintings, as in the unconvincing “Inset #2” (1973) and “Untitled (Window)” (2017). Or, in paintings suggesting Advent calendars, he physically inserts one or more smaller paintings within cutout openings in the larger canvas, as in “Between You and Me” (1988), whose interior paintings feel parasitically other; and the large, predominantly black-and-white “Vita Duplex” (1993)—whose wedged alternating rectangles of hot yellow and striated brown and blue punch to the surface yet remain integrated within the whole.



Sean Scully's 'Inset #2' (1972-73)

PHOTO: SEAN SCULLY ELISABETH BERNSTEIN (PHOTO)

To my eyes, Mr. Scully’s abstractions are generally most compelling at small-to-easel scale and while utilizing pure colors; when he engages with the mediums of watercolor, printmaking and pastel; and when his grays are mixed from unadulterated primaries—as opposed to black, which tends to muddy his palette.

Within the two striking watercolors “2.20.88” (1988) and “9.7.89 #3” (1989), the “painting within a painting” conjures knots, columns, portals and keystones. Also included are velvety pastels with shimmering edges—the “Untitled (Blue Union)” (1994-96), “4.2.02”

(2002) and, over 7 feet tall, the mysterious “Wall of Light Roma 20.3.13” (2013)—glowing pictures whose saturated rectangles are in tension with their encroaching neutral borders and grounds. Likewise, an icy light and start-and-stop urgency infuse “Place 4.20.94” (1994), an oil-on-paper comprising scumbled white and scumbled black bars over a visible pink ground, seemingly seeping upward.

In the 32-by-24-inch oil painting “Pink Blue” (2005), cream, ocher, black and blue rectangles—as if liquefied—jiggle over a russet field. The gorgeous blue, gray and black shapes in “Doric Blue and Blue” (2015)—radiating dusk light—shift and stride forward. And in a lush series of small color aquatints, juxtaposed with the poetry of Federico García Lorca, verse harmonizes with the metaphoric color, tone, rhythm and weight of Mr. Scully’s ethereal forms with indistinct edges.



Sean Scully's 'Untitled (Blue Union)' (1994-96)

PHOTO: SEAN SCULLY BRIAN BUCKLEY (PHOTO)

By contrast, Mr. Scully’s large works can seem sprawling, even decorative; and they’re less likely to maintain that dynamic, essential frontal pressure in the picture plane. (His walls—spread too far—begin to fall away.)

Notable exceptions exist, however. “Wall of Light Desert Night” (1999)—interlocking bars of black, blue, tan and gray, and 11 feet wide—shines like Sahara moonlight. In the

sumptuous oil “Black Winter Robe” (2004)—inspired by the portraits of Titian and Diego Velázquez, and over 7 feet tall—vibrating black, gray and brown rectangles, advancing toward us, hover over a crimson ground, suggesting Venetian light. These and other abstractions by Mr. Scully, in dialogue with Mr. Ando’s lambent, gray planes, transcend mere “bricks” and “walls.” If not actually painting transformed into architecture, they dazzle in their own right.

—*Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.*

*Appeared in the July 26, 2021, print edition as ‘Sean Scully’s Gridlocked Beauty.’*

# LISSON GALLERY

*Artlyst*

4 April 2021

## Artlyst

### Sean Scully: Philosophical Poetic Pastoral The 12 / Dark Windows – Revd Jonathan Evens

---

4 April 2021 / Art Categories [Art News](#), [Exhibition](#) / Art Tags [Dark Windows](#), [Lisson Gallery](#), [Sean Scully](#), [The 12](#)



Since 1999, Sean Scully's Landline paintings have led a transition from what John Caldwell called 'the asceticism of his earlier black paintings' towards the 'emotion, space, colour and physicality' [i] of a more expressive style that has traced the world's contours. As Scully says, 'I change, of course, and hopefully expand'. In the Landline series, Scully seeks to paint his 'sense of the elemental coming-together of land and sea, sky and land ... the way the blocks of the world hug each other and brush up against each other.' [ii]

The series works  
as a guide for how  
to look at or feel  
the natural world

Their colour bands formed of gestural brushstrokes navigating the rhythms of these elemental relationships and revealing the brilliant beauty of these interactions. The 12 is a new work, comprising twelve unique Landline paintings, each with its own distinct personality ranging from spirited to sombre. This grouping, presented in its entirety for the first time, is a lyrical expansion of the series that endeavours to “integrate all the parts” of the horizon – physical, philosophical, poetic and pastoral.

The new works for this exhibition have been created in the world in which we currently live, with ‘the existential threat from COVID and the environmental problems we face’ each of which has influenced Scully greatly in his art. A second significant multi-panelled painting entitled *Dark Windows* (2020), a suite of works created during some of the bleakest days of the COVID pandemic, also features. In *Dark Windows*, the haunting, sinister presence of a black square lurks on the surface of Landline paintings, dislocating the harmony and simplicity of their form. The advent of the *Dark Windows* paintings is described as referencing the nihilistic declaration made by Kazimir Malevich in 1915 and representing the first time in Scully’s career that his horizons have been entirely blackened or effectively erased. The refusal of this opaque viewfinder to reveal anything beyond is viewed as a moment of rupture in Scully’s own career, wilfully severing or ‘disbanding’ the horizontal continuity of his ongoing series of Landlines, signalling a pause or a disconnect with the natural world.



Sean Scully *Dark Windows*, 2020 Oil on aluminum © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Scully has said that ‘if you have Matisse, Mondrian, Rothko, then you’ve got my work’ [iii] yet his linear bands reverberating through his expressive paint application also continue an aesthetic dialogue with hard Abstraction, the squares of Kazimir Malevich, the hard edges of Ad Reinhardt,[iv] and the ‘emotional power’ of Frank Stella’s black paintings.[v] This dialectic is not one that fully explains or contains Scully’s entire oeuvre, particularly as he has said, ‘I feel that Picasso has become a stronger partner to me lately’. That is because of Picasso’s openness, an approach which of importance to Scully too. The problem he sees with Reinhardt and the other extreme abstractionists is that ‘they don’t show everything or both sides of the argument’.

His paintings, by contrast, 'are dialectic, as am I'. He likes the term 'reckoning', is 'a fusionist' and has 'also said we should be druids'. Yet, within the dialectic I am proposing, the chapels and paintings of Matisse and Rothko move his work towards one conception of the spiritual while the black paintings of Malevich and Reinhardt move his work towards another. Understood in this way, Dark Windows may represent a different form of disconnect, which nevertheless reconnects with his exploration of spirituality.

The Matisse, Mondrian, Rothko matrix sees Abstraction as 'a non-denominational religious art' which is 'the spiritual art of our time' because it is about 'an opening up' which has 'the possibility of being incredibly generous' and 'out there for everybody' as 'the viewer is free to identify with the work.' Scully's human idea of spirituality 'embodies an acceptance of imperfection' and 'incorporates it in a built-up, imperfect surface surrounded by complex and uncertain edges' revealing spirituality as 'already in us,' that something 'that accompanies what we already are, humanistic and complex.' [vi] In searching for a more human and spiritual dimension, he began to look 'for a synthesis between colour learnt from nature and cultural memory, as if bridging the divide and going back in time to Cimabue and Velazquez.' He sums up his ambition in this regard as trying to 'express light, and express hope', believing that 'in the end, a ray of light will shine through.' [vii] In his work for the sacred spaces of Santa Cecilia in Montserrat and San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, there has been a gathering of the walls of light that are formed by the bands of colour in his Landler paintings and installations such as Opulent Ascension.

The Malevich, Reinhardt, Stella matrix draws in the first instance on the theology of icons. Malevich's Black Square was 'non-objective, meaning that it did not merely represent reality but was reality because there 'nothing in it by which it could be identified as being separate from the infinity of reality.' [viii] Malevich stressed that Suprematist forms 'will not be copies of living things in life, but will themselves be a living thing.' [ix] This was an ambition drawn from icon writing, as icons are believed to participate in and transmit the divine reality they portray. Malevich signalled this connection by hanging Black Square high up on the wall across the corner of the room at The Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting in 1915; this being the same sacred spot that a Russian Orthodox icon would sit in a traditional Russian home.

In addition to connections with icons, Malevich's Black Square also relates to the apophatic tradition within Christian theology and spirituality in its non-objectivity through which it becomes the infinity of reality. Apophatic theology argues that we come to know God most fully by moving beyond all human descriptions, images or conceptions of God. Ad Reinhardt, the lifelong friend of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and the poet-hermit Robert Lax, began to devote himself exclusively to black paintings from the mid-1950s. These 'encompassed the contradictions inherent in plenitude, which is a kind of emptiness, and negation, which is a kind of affirmation.' Underlying the black paintings was 'the idea of the Void, the field in which action and inaction are one, and which holds in perfect equilibrium these apparent opposites.' 'Reinhardt's notion of emptiness that is fullness, and of darkness that is light, was informed by his readings in both Asian and European mysticism, which left traces in his notebooks that ranged from Lao Tzu's "The Tao is dim and dark" to Meister Eckhart's "The divine dark."' Like Malevich, 'Reinhardt was deeply engaged by how it might be possible to give hidden forces a kind of visible form, that was—like the forces themselves—both present and not quite visible: "Awareness of hidden things, look toward what is hidden . . . Intangible, invisible, illimitable."' [x]

By placing a black square over Landler bands of colour, Scully brings both approaches to spirituality together; an integration of affirmation and negativity, the cataphatic and the apophatic. This might be a response to Frank Stella's argument in his Charles Eliot Norton lectures that painting needed to 'absorb a Mediterranean physicality to reinforce the lean spirituality of northern abstraction pioneered by Mondrian and Malevich.' [xi] It may be a similar synthesis to that found at Santa Cecilia, where his walls of light interact with Holly, his abstract Stations of the Cross, and Doric Nyx, a painting in 'dark shades of grey' 'named for the Greek goddess whose dreaded apparitions only came at the darkest hour of night' that 'conveys a sense of fate, of a life sentence without appeal.' Paul Anel writes that, with this work, 'Scully

introduced into the chapel the darkest hour of his life: the death of his nineteen-year-old son Paul in a car crash in 1983 in London.' Yet, "'Tragedy is part of spirituality," he commented, standing next to Doric Nyx at the press conference on the inauguration day,' [xii] an echo of his statement to Maria Lluïsa Borràs that 'I am not drawn to tragedy: I believe that it is always possible to overcome it and that in the end, a ray of light will shine through.'

The Dark Windows are a further meditation on tragedy. Scully says: 'There is no doubt that they are a response to the pandemic and to what mankind has been doing to nature. What really strikes me as tragic is that what is a relief for nature is a torment for us. And what is a pleasure for us is a torment for nature. That seems to be the conundrum that we've got ourselves into.' This new body of work serves as a reappraisal or a reckoning – not simply suggesting that while the dark clouds hover and we remain in darkness, the blight will soon be over, and the world will heal itself – rather the realisation that a ray of light will always shine through the darkness or, perhaps, as was the practice of Pierre Soulages, that light will be reflected from the black.

**Sean Scully The 12 / Dark Windows, Sean Scully's Studio, 447 West 17th Street, Chelsea, New York Lisson Gallery, 508 West 24th Street, New York, May 6 – Jun. 17, 2021**

**Words: Revd Jonathan Evens Associate Vicar, HeartEdge – St Martin-in-the-Fields London – Photos Courtesy Sean Scully and Lisson Gallery NY**

# LISSON GALLERY

*Wallpaper\**  
21 October 2020

## Wallpaper\*

### Sean Scully on self-belief, election billboards and the perils of rural Germany

Ahead of a major retrospective at the Hungarian National Gallery, Irish abstract artist Sean Scully reflects on six decades of redefining abstraction and doing ‘the biggest stretch in the history of the art world’

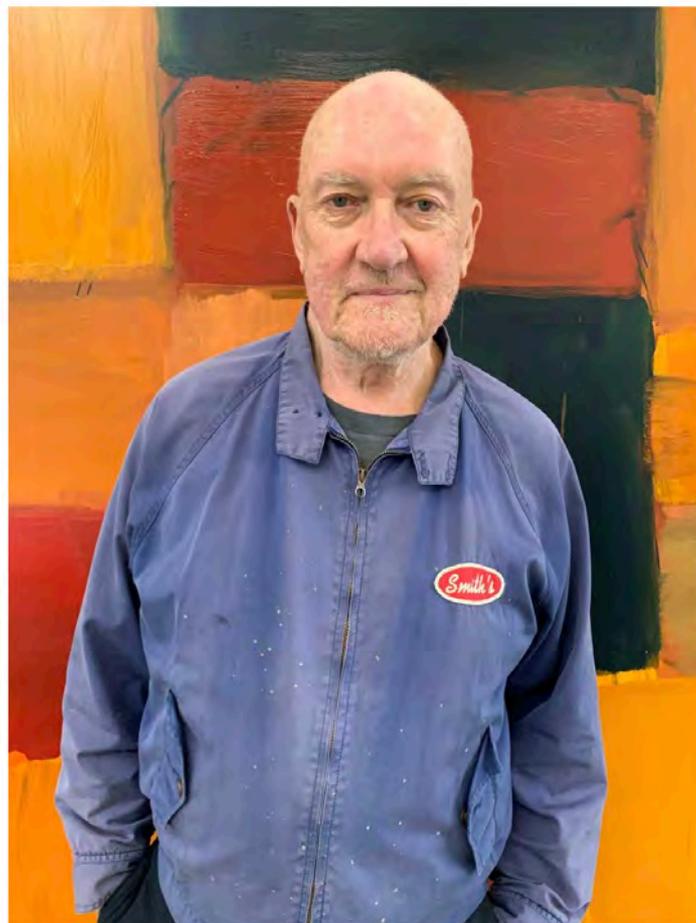


Installation views of Sean Scully's current exhibition, 'Insideoutside' at Waldfrieden Sculpture Park. *Photography: Michael Richter*

**I**t's early September and a plague of flies has just descended on a farm in Mooseurach, Germany where Sean Scully has a studio. 'A fucking fly bit the middle of my tattoo out', says the artist over FaceTime, pointing at his forearm towards the now-dismembered Celtic symbol for fertility.

An interview with Sean Scully is like a portrait sitting with a sitter that needs little direction. He describes his life and work in a quilt of similes and anecdotes stitched together with warmth and wit: his coarse upbringing, familial fondness, traumas, brushes with US politics, fervent spirituality, those he admires – from Agnes Martin to Tess Jaray and Béla Bartók – and vibrantly hued recollections of his rise to become 'the token of abstraction.'

Scully, as he says, came from abject poverty. 'I probably did the biggest stretch in the history of the art world' declares the 75-year-old artist. He's been an immigrant twice: once when he moved from Ireland in 1949 to London, and again when he transferred to New York in 1975. Before breaking into art, he was a brick cleaner on a building site, a Christmas postman, a plasterer's labourer and had a job stacking cardboard boxes in a factory. Fitting, perhaps, that stacks and bricklike forms would provide the building blocks for Scully's inimitable visual language.



Portrait of Sean Scully taken in Mooseurach, October 2020. Photography: Liliane Tomasko

In the 1970s, Scully's paintings sought to fuse American Minimalism and Op Art, which culminated in 'supergrids', stripes and blocks of colour. By 1980, the artist was 'at war' with Minimalism and instead focussed on what he thought painting should be doing: concentrating on human nature.

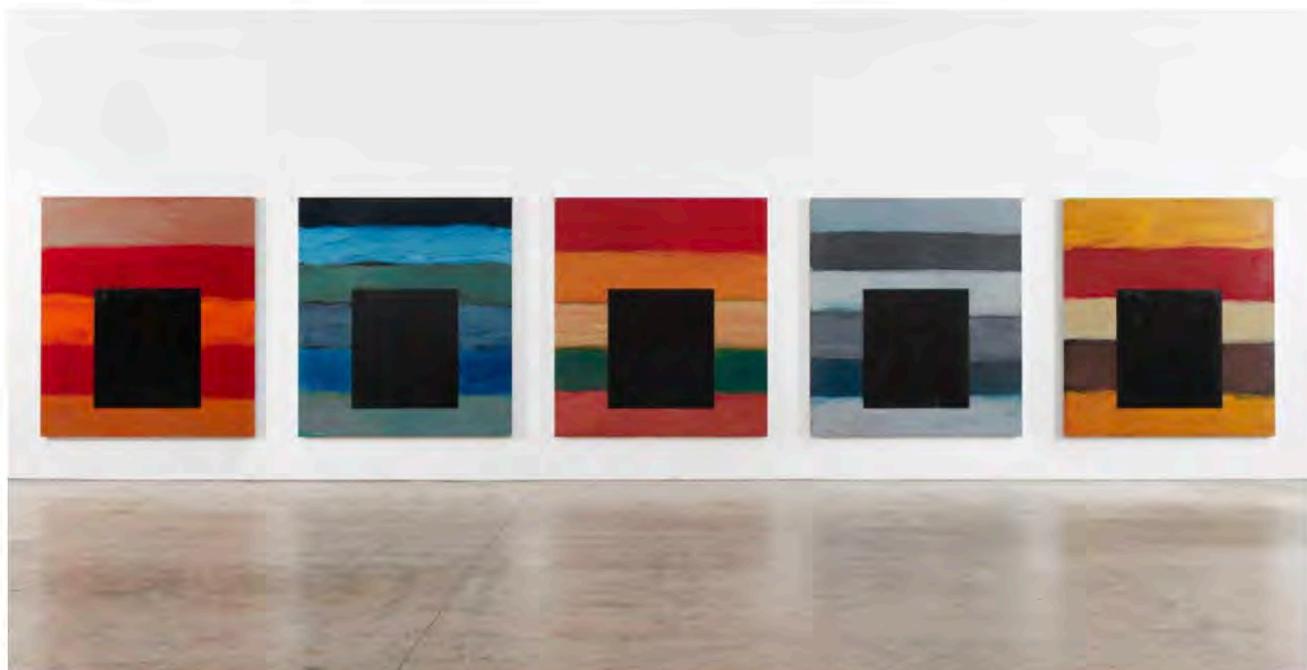
When he moved to New York, he knew not everyone would be waiting with open arms. 'I was welcomed by many; I was also un-welcomed by many,' he says. 'I had a lot of detractors in New York.' Among his 'defenders', however, was the art critic Arthur Danto, who insisted that Scully belonged 'on the shortest of the shortlists of major painters of our time.' 'If I got a bad review, he [Danto] would immediately write an incredible review in the *New Statesman*,' he says. 'His two favourite artists were me and Andy Warhol. I always found it bizarre because you couldn't have two more uncomfortable bedfellows.'



Sean Scully, *Backs and Fronts*, 1981. Copyright Sean Scully

Scully made a swift ascent to acclaim in the 1980s, resuscitating abstraction from self-destruction with bold paintings and a character to match. He began toying with different formats, including the introduction of panels directly inserted into canvases. In came *Backs and Fronts* (1981), an enormous multi-panelled composite of irregular heights, with gestural stripes careering in different directions like a jarring, psychedelic vision of a city skyline. The painting humanised geometry with hand-rendered stripes and 'broke a lot of the rules my colleagues were still obeying'. The painting marked a watershed, both for Scully and the public's perception of his work, paving the way for his formal yet liberated language of unbridled emotion and spirituality.

Earlier this year, Scully's insets turned uncharacteristically black. In his *Dark Windows* series, ominous panels rupture otherwise beguiling stripe paintings, described by the artist as 'nihilistic and negative'. Scully painted these in direct response to Covid-19, a commentary on self-destruction, the 'abuse of nature' and mass uncertainty.



Sean Scully, *Dark Windows*, 2020. Copyright Sean Scully; Photography: Sean Scully

Scully's approach to art is bolstered by an infectious, and seemingly infallible self-belief. And he doesn't do creative block, apart from one 'dreadful' year after he graduated from university. 'I made 25 paintings and destroyed them all, and the world is probably a better place for that,' he says. That episode aside, Scully doesn't have time for self-deprecation or 'bellyaching', a resilience he attributes to his grandmother, an Irish immigrant who, according to Scully, worked 18 hours a day, raised seven children and 'never once complained.'

Scully's paintings are rendered with force, exude force and leave the rest to be reckoned with. In footage of the artist at work, he appears to be in some form of rhythmic and spiritual combat with his paintings. 'In my work, structure and emotion rage simultaneously, and that's a very incongruous mixture,' he says. 'I am madly physical,' he says. 'People say I'm exhausting.'

**‘In my work, structure and emotion rage simultaneously,  
and that’s a very incongruous mixture’**

The artist makes a swift, impassioned pivot to politics, a subject he’s been long engaged in. In his teens, Scully made posters for the CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament]. He has also frequently taken aim at America’s gun culture and, in 2008, he designed billboards for the Obama campaign (one of his paintings boasts wall space in the Obamas’ house). More recently, he’s jumped on the Biden bandwagon, again, in the form of billboards. ‘For Hillary [Clinton], I thought she was going to win so easily I didn’t bother, but she lost. If Joe wins, this will prove that if when I put a billboard up, the person wins. It’s called narcissistic science,’ Scully quips.

Alongside his greatest hits in paint, Scully has demonstrated his aptitude in other media, translating his signature blocks, stripes and volumes into stone, steel, wood and glass. This is embodied in his current exhibition at Waldfrieden Sculpture Park in Wuppertal, Germany, an outdoor exhibition space founded by British artist and ‘old pal’ of Scully’s, Tony Cragg.





Above and below: Installation views of Sean Scully, 'Insideoutside' at Waldfrieden [Sculpture Park](#).  
Photography: Michael Richter

Scully's show, 'Insideoutside' includes sculptures in steel, acrylic and copper, and an architectural tower of glass called *Stack* in conversation with his paintings. 'The interesting thing about glass is it's a wall you can see through. In a sense, it's an object that's not an object. It operates like a ghost or an angel between realms,' he reflects. Consisting of eleven slabs of Murano glass, *Stack* looks as if Scully's more vibrant painted units have dropped off the canvas, lost all opacity and re-stacked themselves in perfect order.

The artist shows no sign of sitting still. Alongside his Waldfrieden exhibition, he's just signed with Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, and will have a show of new work in their space in Marais, Paris in Spring 2021. He's also just unveiled a major retrospective at the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest, his first in Central Europe. 'I've married into that country [Scully's wife, artist Liliane Tomasko is of Hungarian descent], so it has a special significance for them and me,' he says. Titled 'Passenger', the show charts Scully's career from his early experiments in the 1960s, through his musings with Minimalism to his recent, unexpected shift to figuration, and a great deal in between.

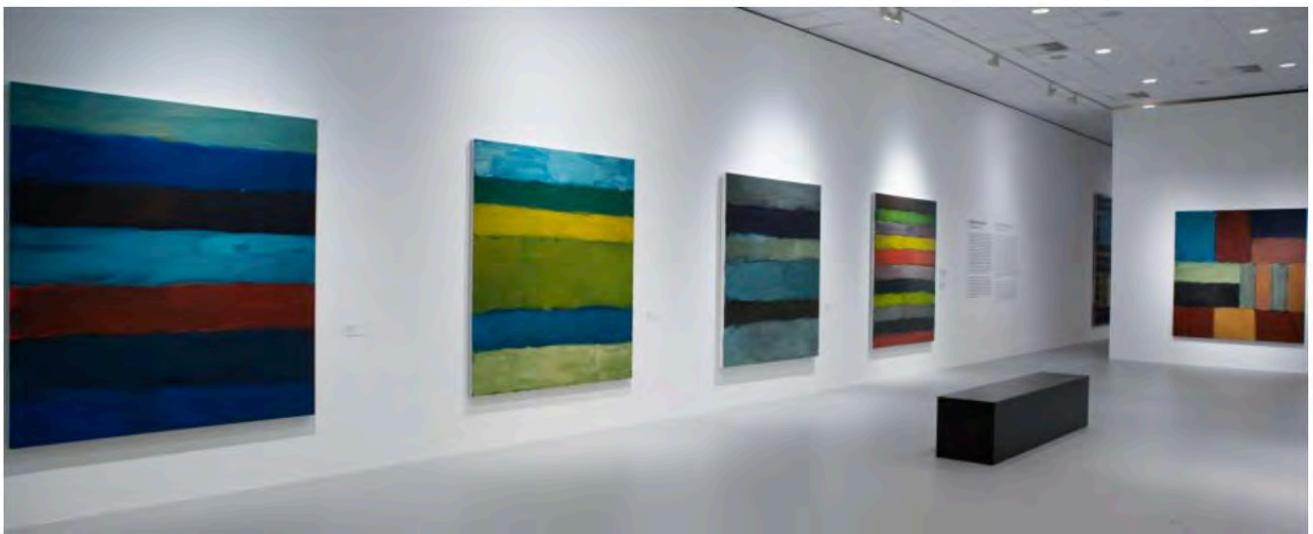
If a Rothko pierces the soul, a Scully will cradle it. His work fuses the cold, hard-edged rigidity of Minimalism with the warm fallibility of humanity, and has, in turn, reformed the very spirit of abstraction. But to what does he attribute his success? 'I'm kind of clever, and I'm also free. If you put those two things together, you get something.' ✱



Sean Scully, *Adoration*, 1982. Copyright Sean Scully. Photography: Sean Scully



Sean Scully, 'Passenger - A Retrospective', 2020, Installation view, © Museum of Fine Arts - Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest / Vince Soltész



Sean Scully, 'Passenger - A retrospective', 2020, Installation view, © Museum of Fine Arts - Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest / Vince Soltész



Sean Scully, *Diagonal Inset*, 1973. Copyright Sean Scully. Photography Sean Scully

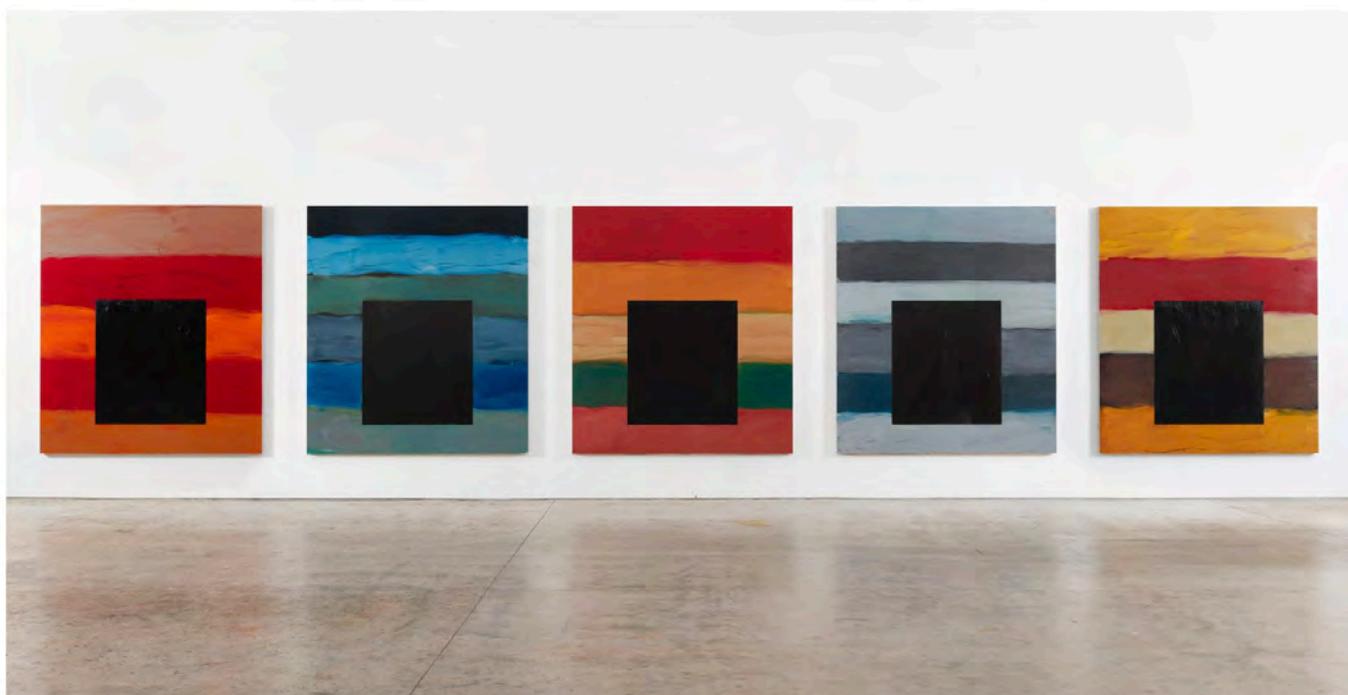
*The New York Times*  
9 April 2020

# The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Sean Scully Closes His Windows

In the wake of the pandemic, the Irish-American artist has rediscovered the color black. We unveil his newest work for troubled times.



Sean Scully's new "Dark Windows" paintings. Sean Scully; Elisabeth Bernstein

By Will Heinrich

April 9, 2020

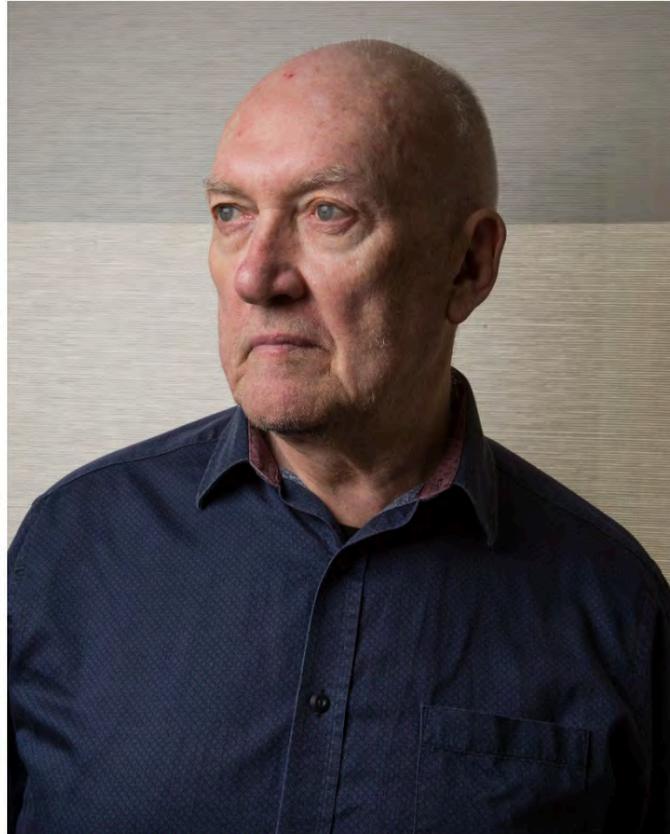


For artists, the new pandemic reality means canceled exhibitions, day-job uncertainty, and fears of an industrywide contraction. Like everyone else, they're trying to adjust. But those lucky enough to be working are also rethinking their practices, pivoting to new forms, media and colors to describe a troubled new world.

We are checking in with some of them about what's changing in their studios, starting with the Irish-American painter [Sean Scully](#). With work in the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), the Museum of Modern Art, and London's Tate, Mr. Scully is most famous for paintings of deceptively simple geometries, especially broad stripes. (He once identified himself to a MoMA desk attendant by

saying, “Sean Scully’s my name, painting stripes is my game.”) But wavering brushwork and unexpected colors infuse those stripes with more passion than you’d think they could bear. By FaceTime, we mostly talked about another longstanding series of his, paintings with rectangular cutouts that he calls “windows.”

These are edited excerpts from the conversation.



“I’ve always thought of art as extremely positive,” says Mr. Scully, shown here at home with one of his paintings. Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

**Your show at the [Royal Museums of Fine Arts](#) in Brussels was postponed because of the virus outbreak, and might yet be canceled. Are you worried about it?**

No, I don’t worry about anything. I had a show in Taos delayed. There’s about five exhibitions of mine that are being either canceled or kicked up the road.

**Why are you making art in light of the pandemic?**

I’ve always thought of art as extremely positive — as I said to you, there’s no irony in me. I make art out of pure passionate belief, and it’s very important as a kind of example of what’s possible against all the things I’m against, first one being war.

**So what has changed in your painting in the last couple of months?**

The window that I put into my work went black. That’s the first time I’ve done that, and it’s the first time I’ve been able to.

### **You weren't able to do it earlier?**

In the late '80s, I started to put a lot of windows into the paintings, and they were real windows. I did try to leave some one color, and I don't know what it was, whether it was my emotion, my insecurity, my need to do something else first, or the general climate swirling around me, but I was unable to make [a solid color insert] happen. You know, my work is always based on metaphor, so the meaning of [black] didn't touch me as true at that time. It was only now when I returned to this window idea that I could see them as black, because of what's in the air.



**You've talked candidly about your rough London upbringing, and about "going insane" after a personal tragedy in 1983. Can you compare making art in the face of your own turmoil to making art during a global catastrophe?**

It's easier to make art now than it was after my son [Paul] died. I was unable to work. You know, I really did lose my mind. The terrible thing about that is that when you're crazy, you don't really think you are.

**In an art or style context, there's something triumphant or powerful about the color black. But if there's no irony in you, can I assume this new black window is an expression of despair?**

I think what I'm trying to do is make myself, and anybody who's prepared to look at my work, look at two things at the same time — because that's what we've got. We have what we idealistically imagine, which is represented by this seductive painting, and what we actually have, which is a blacked-out view, a very uncertain, hard view.

**The colorful stripes are definitely beguiling. So if we succeed in looking at the two things at once, what does that do?**

The consequence is that you can actually think. [Pause] To think

you have to be dialectical. It's actually what women have been accusing men of for a long time, not being able to see both sides at once, which Joni Mitchell writes about in one of her songs, "Both Sides, Now."

**What is an artist's responsibility in times of trouble?**

I think that the artist is somebody who should be pretty engaged in issues. For example, Courbet was put in prison for being kind of a confrontational loudmouth, like myself. You know, I do things that people find pretty edgy — some of the pictures I've put out about Trump are borderline dangerous for me. I think you have to stand up, basically, for what's right.

**How many people do you employ altogether?**

I employ seven. Some of them are feeling guilty. They keep asking me, Is there anything we can do?

**You sent them all home, with pay? How long can you keep that up?**

Two years. Then you can ask me again.

# LISSON GALLERY

*Irish Examiner*  
29 July 2019



Sean Scully started his life in poverty in Inchicore, but as he turns 75, he returns to the Dublin suburb as one of the world's most acclaimed living artists, writes **Richard Purden**.

Inchicore is where internationally lauded artist Sean Scully began his life in lamentable poverty.

This week he will return to the Dublin suburb in very different circumstances the day after his 75th birthday.

After being honoured with a plaque at his childhood home he will tell of his extraordinary life story for the area's youth. "I'm a figurehead and the example of what's possible," he suggests.

"I'm coming to a very emotional place," he says of his visit to Richmond Barracks while nodding to the transformative power of people and place "these can become places for children to excel tremendously".

On the phone from his studio on a farm in Bavaria, Scully points to the Haus der Kunst museum in Munich as an example.

"It was designed by Troost (Nazi architect) and was the centre of Nazi power, things change and now a black artist is showing there. Hitler would be rolling in his grave, and a good thing."

Irish-born with American citizenship, Scully moved to New York in 1975 and retains a base there. His chagrin for America's gun culture for a time diverted him from a calling to "humanise abstraction" in his pulsating art.

A series of paintings entitled 'Ghost' was a response to gun violence.

While he recently described himself as a "left-wing Donald Trump" to indicate his unsettling presence for elements of the art world, he makes clear his feelings about the American president who he suggests is "a fascist pig motherf\*\*er".

"If he was not in a tightly organised, resistant democracy he would be knocking down the rights of people on a daily basis.

"Fascism is like a dirty slug that hides in the corner, waiting to be encouraged for the right time and the right circumstances when people's love and tolerance is waning."

Perhaps a better comparison would have been to his close friend Bono, rather than Trump. Scully says "we have a lot fun together".

The artist admits his Catholic childhood continues to have a profound impact.

"The Mass was very sensual, red, the colour of blood and the cream colour of the biscuits (Communion bread). It affected me, it gave me a kind of religious or spiritual emotional backdrop.

"It's similar to Van Gough as a preacher; that's where 'The Potato Eaters' came from, they were Dutch but it could have been Ireland.

"It came from a desire to put something spiritual and powerful into the world and my ambition is the same.

“

I could never have been a pop artist, you need to be too detached. I've always been interested in profound emotion; something that touches and moves people. There's a certain moral rigour in my work.

”

"Religion at its best is based on love. I think it's easy to throw stones at religion, it has made a lot of mistakes because it's carried out by humans."

It's this identification as a religious or transformative artist that has discouraged him from settling in England.

"One of the reasons it's difficult is because it's an iconoclastic, sceptical country that does not trust feeling.

"I am very fond of London and have lots of friends there but we've failed to go back, we can't really go back there. In Germany people are obviously looking for redemption; they trust deep emotion in art."

Scully's singular approach and abundant sense of self is often misunderstood.

The act of will that is his life has been essential in making him one of the most dominant artists of his generation.

"It came in part from my grandmother who I absolutely worshipped, she worked eighteen hours a day, seven days a week.

"That determination and heroism impressed me greatly, also her humility, her drunkenness and singing in the pub. She was quite colourful and I'm not entirely dissimilar; my will is almost unbreakable.



"My self-regard is also often commented upon but my question would be; how would do you come from a couple of square metres on a field in Clonmel to where I am now without having an exaggerated sense of self-regard – c'mon, it would be impossible."

He adds: "I'm extremely physical and have an extraordinary physiognomy, my health is tremendous and all that in combination has assisted me."

Scully pauses momentarily to get his young son Oisín an ice cream, he suggests the difference in his ambition now and when he began painting is tempered with "certain wisdom".

In terms of fame and notoriety, his gauge was Matisse.

"I wondered what people would expect a young artist to be as famous as; that's not saying that you will be, but it's saying that is your ambition.

"I was measuring myself against my family of great artists who I feel very connected to. Now it's quite different because I have my son who is super important to me and my family.

"My body of work is already achieving part of what I would like it to do."

As Scully suggests he came from a family of "gypsies and coalminers and that has given me what I call impeccable credentials in the lower end of society."

Moving around Ireland as a child, growing in up London and emigrating to New York he considers his sense of Irishness.



"It hurt me privately and helped me professionally. It gave me an option that there could only be one outcome, there was an inevitability it would go the way it went.

"The Irish in America are, generally speaking quite vulgar, the Irish in England are integrated and there's a nice middle ground achieved.

"Most of the great people that have come out of Ireland; Yeats, Beckett and so forth tend to be Anglo-Irish and that is interesting because you have fire and ice in the same person."

He adds: "In Ireland, there is a generosity of spirit that is almost inexplicable, the kindness of people is quite extraordinary."

Scully laughs out loud when discussing the recent engrossing BBC documentary *Unstoppable: Sean Scully And The Art Of Everything*.

"It was hilarious because I'll go anywhere. I was walking around Inchicore which is not a middle-class area and the cameraman and (filmmaker) Nick (Willing) said at one point he was so terrified he didn't know whether to go backwards and escape or follow me.

"Either way, it was high risk but in the end he decided to follow me. There were some guys we met at the church, when I told them I was baptised there it was cool.

"I'm fearless, I'll talk to anyone, it's that very Irish thing, I don't make a distinction."

*A Community Celebration of Sean Scully will take place in Inchicore, Dublin on Thursday. It will be hosted by the Cuala Foundation, For more information see [cualafoundation.com](http://cualafoundation.com)*

## Bono on Scully

---



"I'm lucky enough to live with some of Sean Scully's work.

"They are, of course, very musical, very rhythmic, but it's their discipline I want to be around... to be this abstract requires real discipline... these grids with their frayed edges don't attempt to contain uncontrollable emotions... or corral our galloping urges, but they do suggest boundaries, limits... and limits are important for an artist... I'm told.

"It's a very Irish insight that he brings to these walls we now hang on walls... it's a knowledge of their construction. A skill that requires some physical strength as well as aptitude.

"It's a trade that is the first job application for many an Irish emigrant, in many a metropolis.

"The art of the bricklayer. Sean Scully –bricklayer of the soul."

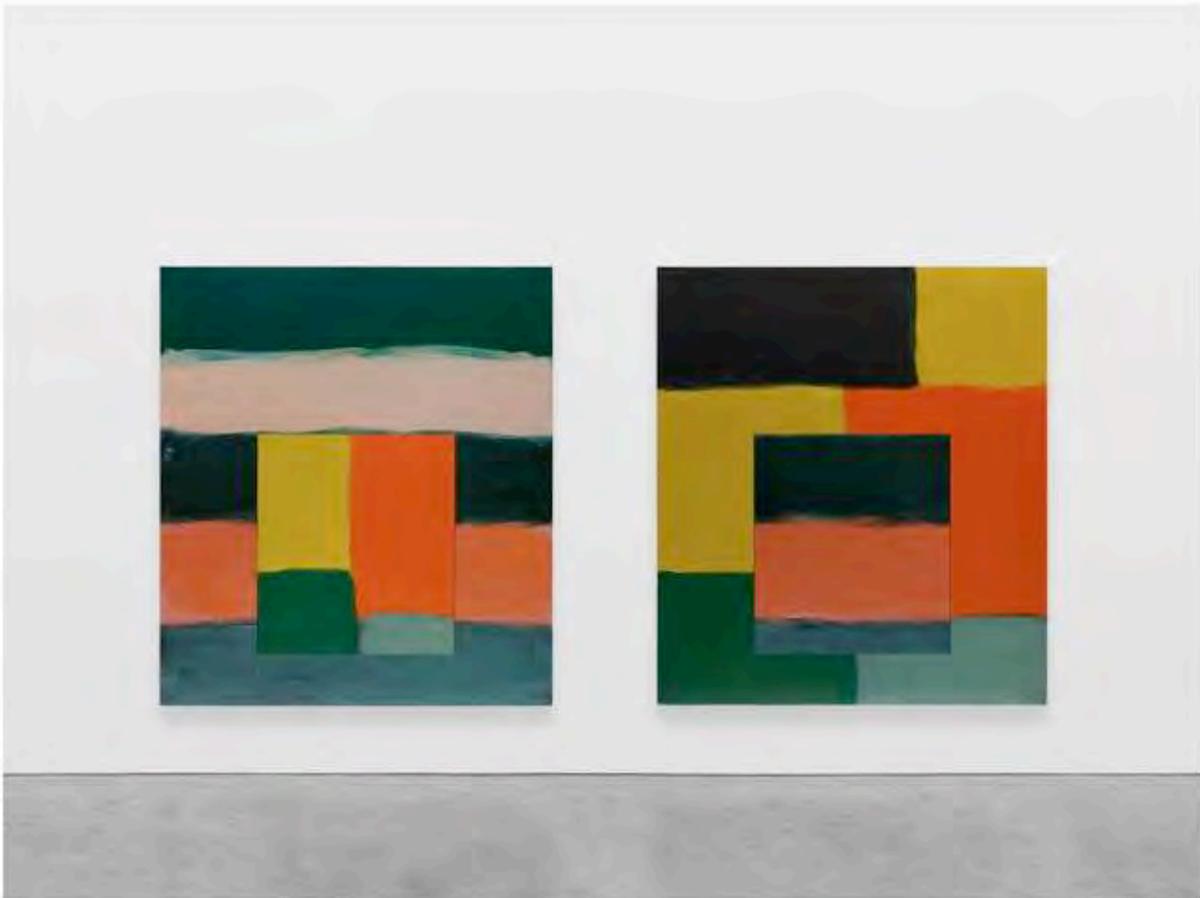
# LISSON GALLERY

*The Brooklyn Rail*  
June 2019

**BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Sean Scully: *PAN*

by [Robert C. Morgan](#)



Sean Scully, *Vice Versa Green*, 2019. Oil on aluminum, two Panels: 85 x 75 inches each. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

I am not sure about the meaning of *PAN*, the title given to this exhibition by Sean Scully, but the Greek origin of the word would appear to suggest sexual prowess. On another level, it might serve as an indirect allusion to Hellenic architecture, which was influential on the formation of his signature style. While the title is not discussed in the gallery's press release, I recall a film on the artist nearly twenty years ago where he practices karate in his studio. It appears this has been recently updated in the BBC production, *Unstoppable: Sean Scully and the Art of Everything* (April 2019). One might conclude that Scully's overwhelming desire to release pent-up energy in one form or another is fitting for his inaugural exhibition in New York at the Lisson Gallery, historically known for introducing Conceptual art to London in the late 1960s.

While Scully is not "conceptual" in the sense of either Sol LeWitt or Robert Ryman—two artists he greatly admires, who were formerly shown at Lisson—the Irish-born painter began developing a grid-like approach to painting prior to the early 1970s when he first arrived in New York. Later that decade, his paintings turned dark gray with evenly spaced horizontal lines that would eventually lead to a more painterly style involving linear blocks of color, placed horizontally and vertically in the picture plane.



Sean Scully, *Shutter*, 2019. Oil on aluminum, 110 x 212 1/2 inches. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

*PAN* is a two-gallery exhibition that clearly emphasizes the diversity of Scully's achievement over the course of his career. In the Gallery's 24th Street location, we are presented with a terse grouping of the various directions in abstract painting he has pursued since the early 1980s yet, the works included here, including the various *Landlines*, were all painted within the past year and a half. As a result, the quality of these works varies from the stylistic sources from which they are drawn. To know this depends on having seen paintings from earlier time periods either in museum collections or in exhibitions shown in past years throughout Europe and the United States (and more recently in Beijing).

For example, the highly prominent, four-panel, oil on aluminum painting, titled *Shutter* (2019), appears less complete than a similar group of paintings from four or five years ago where the strident horizontal felt more self-assured in relation to the tonality of the color. *Shutter* appears to function panel by panel instead of giving the eye a license to move through the painting and across it. The interruptions become too abrupt, as the choice of color often intercedes in a manner that breaks down the visual flow. In addition, the awkward placement of some bands weakens the counterpoint of spatial stability from one panel to the next.



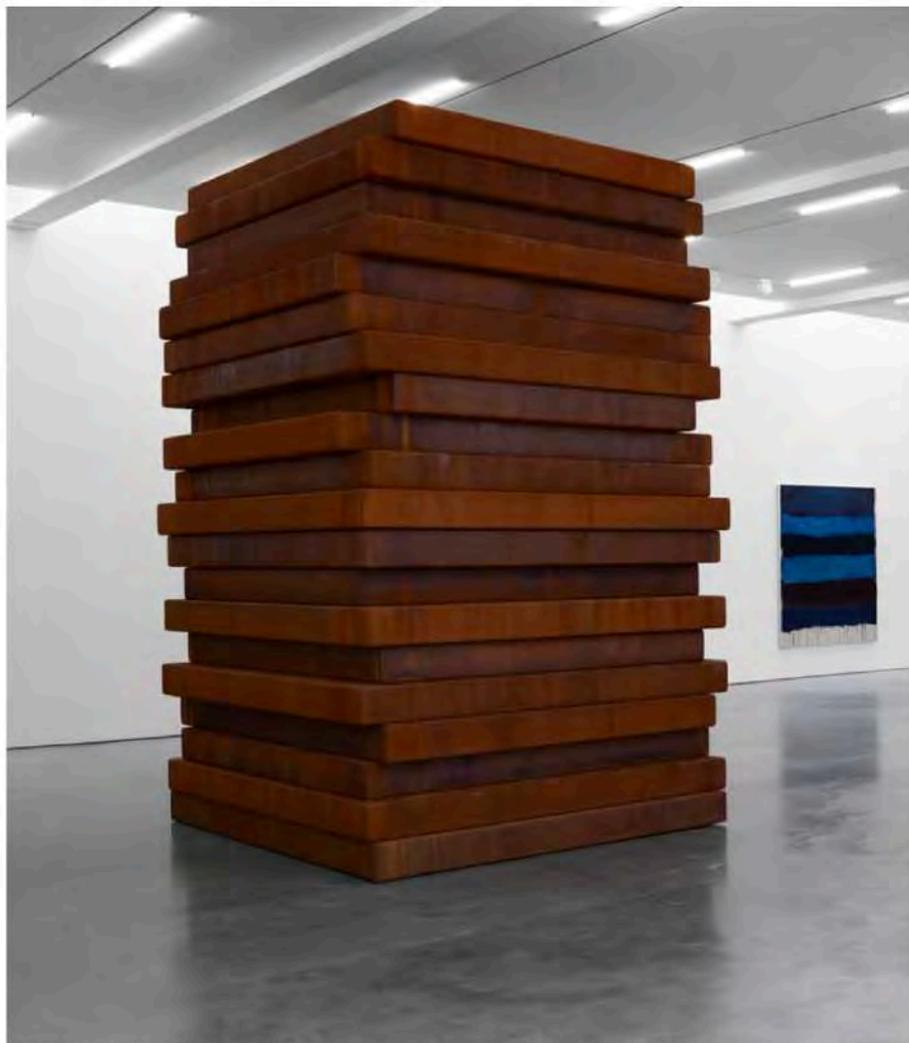
Installation view: Sean Scully: *PAN*, Lisson Gallery, New York, 2019. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

On the other hand, *Vice Versa Green* (2019) takes another earlier idea from the mid-1980s and gives it an entirely new perspective. It is a brilliant two-panel oil on aluminum painting. Each panel measures 85 × 75 inches and is hung side-by-side with a space in-between. A smaller inset painting is wedged in the center of each panel. In doing so, the inset paintings appear to echo the abstract color and form of the larger panel beside it. The result of this complementary visual phenomenon is as clear as it is perplexing, as formal as it is conceptual. Finally, *Vice Versa Green* incites a holistic intensity that permeates the space within and around it.

The second venue of the exhibition continues at the 10th Avenue location (near 19th Street) where emphasis is given to Scully's figurative works, both from the 1960s, and more recently from the past two years. The larger, recent paintings, again on aluminum, are titled *Madonna* (2019). The subject matter in these paintings includes a woman with a young boy (based on a photograph of the artist's son). Another painting in this grouping, *Boy Land* (2019), predictably makes a case of formal resemblance between Scully's abstract *Landlines* and his exploration of a larger-scale approach to figuration, here on two adjacent paintings. I find these paintings difficult to evaluate in terms of consistency given that the expressive content is, at times, difficult to grasp. The painterly resemblance is more accurate than the message the paintings attempt to portray.

The third modality of work shown in this highly ambitious exhibition is the artist's sculpture. The two selected for this showing—one at each gallery—are *Shadow Stack* (2018) in Corten steel at the 24th Street venue and *Ten Ton Ceiling* (2017) in bronze and aluminum. Scully has retained a parallel involvement in working with modular form in sculpture for many years, which has evolved in a relatively consistent manner. This form might also be seen as a three-dimensional trace of what is present in his abstract paintings—a comment he made recently in a dialogue with the art critic Deborah Solomon at the Lisson Gallery—and suggests the aspect of ambiguity in Scully's work. Clearly abstract painting is the source of what he does and is closest to how he thinks of himself as an artist. I would argue his sculpture is more connected to abstract painting than figuration, and will remain the inevitable direction of his work.

## Sean Scully: Disembodied Embodiments



*Sean Scully, Shadow Stack, 2018. Corten steel, 176 3/8 by 98 3/8 by 102 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.*

**By RAPHY SARKISSIAN, May 2019**

*Sean Scully: Pan* will remain on view through June 8, 2019 at **Lisson Gallery** at 504 West 24<sup>th</sup> Street and 138 Tenth Avenue in Manhattan. [www.lissongallery.com](http://www.lissongallery.com)

Austere, monumental and imposing, *Shadow Stack* of Sean Scully is a corten steel sculpture, just about fifteen feet high, audaciously confronting the visitor in Lisson Gallery on West 24<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. With varying yet proximate lateral dimensions no larger than about eight by eight feet, twenty rows of roughly nine-inch high metal are horizontally stacked upon one another, rendering the viewer's body Lilliputian. While inducing a sense of frailty of the perceiver's corporeality, this industrial stack paradoxically transmits an aura of quietude, reassuring the visitor of the sculpture's stability, as the seemingly obdurate mass conveys a sense of the immovable.

The concrete floor upon which *Shadow Stack* rests extends to the supporting ground of the ambulant visitor, whose relationship to this architectonic edifice is transformed into a phenomenological dance: as the dormant stack conveys a sense of permanence, it prompts the viewer's awareness of spatiality, gravity, motility and corporeity—an awareness initiated not only through the scale of the work but also through the rustic brown coloration of weathering steel and its commandeering sense of weight and materiality imparted within the observer's field of vision and in relation to one's corporeal presence. Through the sheer horizontality of its rows, *Shadow Stack* also sets a formal and perceptual tenet (or denouement) of Scully's ten recent paintings that become grasped as transformations of aspects of the material world into the pictorial, as often suggested by their poetic titles.



Sean Scully, *Landline Blue Dark*, 2019 (second from left within this installation view). Oil on aluminum, 85 by 75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Having drawn from an art historical lineage of modernist painters—including Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko—the paintings of Scully mine the formalist vocabularies of twentieth-century abstraction, often conflating abstraction and allusion through such titles as *Landline Blue Dark*, *Landline Long Grey*, *Landline Falling* and *Landline Rust Blue*. This suite of four rectangular oil-on-aluminum paintings hangs on the east wall of the gallery, where each panel measures just about seven feet high and six and a quarter feet wide. The seemingly horizontal, painterly bands of *Landline Blue Dark* (2019), for example, are executed in deeply meditative hues of medium blue, dim grey, maroon and black. The painting captivates the observer through lyrical brushstrokes that appear to be exalting the materiality of paint, pigment and abstraction, without abandoning fragmentary allusions to bodies of water, land, night, horizon or any other association the observer may desire to cast. Scully imbues his hypnotic compositions with dramatic painterly gestures that incite the beholder's subjective reaction. Though the aluminum support of the painting is rectangular, structurally rigid and industrial, upon the surface of that infrastructure Scully reveals a painterly process that conveys a sense of ethereal dynamism which remains historically attached to the legacy of modernist painting.

Whereas the nebular, horizontal bands of Scully may come across as variegated and romanticized nods to Agnes Martin's ascetic compositional syntax, these four paintings remain intimately tied to the painterly language that Mark Rothko established and continued practicing through such works as *Number 11* (1949), *Untitled* (1951) or *White Band (Number 27)* (1954). Thus *Landline Rust Blue* (2019) of Scully can be read as a compositional extension of Agnes Martin's *Untitled #3* (1995), where figure and ground have been transformed into visual synonyms, while the resplendent blue and burgundy bands of Scully here convey a sense of distinctive luminosity we find in Rothko. In *Landline Falling* (2018) of Scully, drips of paint reassert the flatness of the medium, as if to render such indexical marks as envoys of gravity and chance that set themselves apart from the lofty sublime of the upper bands executed in such colors as navy, deep vivid blue and black—colors that disembody the physicality of the medium. For Scully fortuitousness has remained inseparable from his handling of the brush for the past four decades, as luminosity and shadow—insofar as visual perception is concerned—themselves comprise fortuitous phenomenons.

Whereas the nebular, horizontal bands of Scully may come across as variegated and romanticized nods to Agnes Martin's ascetic compositional syntax, these four paintings remain intimately tied to the painterly language that Mark Rothko established and continued practicing through such works as *Number 11* (1949), *Untitled* (1951) or *White Band (Number 27)* (1954). Thus *Landline Rust Blue* (2019) of Scully can be read as a compositional extension of Agnes Martin's *Untitled #3* (1995), where figure and ground have been transformed into visual synonyms, while the resplendent blue and burgundy bands of Scully here convey a sense of distinctive luminosity we find in Rothko. In *Landline Falling* (2018) of Scully, drips of paint reassert the flatness of the medium, as if to render such indexical marks as envoys of gravity and chance that set themselves apart from the lofty sublime of the upper bands executed in such colors as navy, deep vivid blue and black—colors that disembody the physicality of the medium. For Scully fortuitousness has remained inseparable from his handling of the brush for the past four decades, as luminosity and shadow—insofar as visual perception is concerned—themselves comprise fortuitous phenomenons.

Except that Scully translates that reality “abstractly” through his works, relying upon properties of coloration that we find, for instance, in the minutiae of *Venus and Adonis* (1560s) by Titian, *Venus and Adonis* (circa 1617) by Peter Paul Rubens or *View of Notre Dame* (1941) by Henri Matisse. Within *Landline Falling* the horizontal strokes that generate each band remain at a minute distance from the side edges of the aluminum support, further triggering spatial nuances. Here Scully deftly collapses the separations of abstraction and illusion, as the visual perception of light, depth and volume are generated through the concrete reality of the medium of oil. While gestures of the brush in lighter colors appear to protrude the picture surface, the darker ones seem to recede, as if to demonstrate that luminosity and the optical characteristics of color are based upon physical properties of matter and the effects of reflection and refraction of light.



*Sean Scully, Doric Cream Red, 2019. Oil on linen, 28 by 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.*

Whereas the above four paintings of Scully adhere primarily to billowy, horizontal bands, *Doric Cream Red* (2019) and *Untitled (Doric)* (2019) present tessellations of vertical and horizontal bars that call to mind the motif of post-and-lintel construction and thereby continue expanding the modernist romance with the grid through a highly painterly method that has been Scully's eminent feature since the early eighties. These relatively small, oil-on-linen paintings appear as homages to Piet Mondrian's seminal abstraction, except here

Scully has reformulated the rigorous, linear method of Mondrian through a highly gestural one. The composition of these paintings of Scully also recall, for instance, *Color for a Large Wall* (1951) of Ellsworth Kelly, where the Cartesian grid has been materialized through sixty-four panels. Despite the planarity of Scully's composition, each section of the partly irregular grid usurps flatness through accumulated layers of impasto that appear wet, reveling the medium of oil in one of its most intrinsic forms, while transfiguring the planarity of each cell of the matrix into a bulbous rectangle that shifts the idealized, utopian modernism through the voluptuous thickness, sensual stratification and fleshy materiality of oil paint. Along with the suggestion of brick, there is the impression of an abstracted, flattened, ethereal pillow that each painterly cell of Scully imparts.



*Sean Scully, Time, 2018. Oil on aluminum. 85 by 75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.*

*Time* (2018), on the other hand, relies upon vertical blue bands and brown stripes to set a ground that frames a multicolor inset of horizontal stripes. Within the gallery, vivid coloration reaches one of its utmost heights here, where the painting seems to reassert the sensuous pleasure of opulent, Matissean colorfulness within the arena of the abstract. This vibrant palette of Scully brings to mind, for instance, *Large Reclining Nude/The Pink Nude* (1935) or *Woman in Blue/The Large Blue Robe and Mimosas* (1937) of Matisse. The compositions of such paintings as *Day-Glo Prison* (1982) or *Decision* (2011) of Peter Halley are also evoked by *Time* of Scully. Though Halley retains Mondrian's sharpness of line only to systematically reinvent the palette and texture of the surface through fluorescent acrylic and Roll-a-Tex, *Time* translates Mondrian through gestural traces of color. As suggested by Halley's titles that include such words as conduit, cell, prison, his seemingly abstract paintings are references to such mediums of communication as the telephone, fax machine, cable television, Internet and Instagram of our times—systems and agencies that continue restructuring society and the individual through the technological and digital. The *caesura* of *Time* of Scully, that block that is inset, renders it a painterly counterpart of Halley's compositional language and hence for a moment can be read as a visual

representation of our data-drenched society. But perhaps the bouncing fluidity within Scully's pink, yellow, dark blue and red multilayered bands conveys a sense of return to nature, recalling the critique of technology by Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer: "Man has reduced nature to an object for domination, a raw material. The compulsive urge to cruelty and destruction springs from the organic displacement of the relationship between the mind and body."<sup>1</sup>



Sean Scully, *Vice Versa Green*, 2019. Oil on aluminum, two panels, 85 by 75 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

Each panel of the diptych *Vice Versa Green* (2019) holds a block that appears to be extracted from the other panel. Here Scully invites the observer to a *gestalt* type of an experience in deciphering the whole-part dialectic the four parts furnish. Formalistically, *Vice Versa Green* synthesizes *Doric Cream Red*, *Untitled (Doric)* and *Time*, conjuring up such notions as opticality, tactility and the *prägnanz*—a principal of visual perception that underpins concision and meaning. As simplistic as it might be to figure out the relationships between the reciprocated interior panels to their formerly exterior ones, for a moment the beholder may have to strive for grasping those associations not only within the diptych but also among the other paintings on display. *Vice Versa Green* inevitably lends itself as a brilliant visual metaphor of the artist's oeuvre, connoting a set of associations of his style to modernist precedents and contemporary practices.



Sean Scully, *Shutter*, 2019. Oil on aluminum, 110 by 212 1/2 inches (left). Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

With its monumental scale, *Shutter* (2019) expands the vaguely horizontal motif of the luminous Landline paintings, only to disrupt continuous horizontality through four vertical segments, each consisting of two bands of alternating colors. While its title may suggest the Venetian blind or camera, each of the four sections of the painting evoke, for instance, *Untitled (Stack)* (1967) of Donald Judd, whose advocacy of “rationalism” within Minimalism was a denunciation of the Abstract Expressionist “sublime”—as contended in his 1965 essay “Specific Objects.” *Shutter* offers the spectator a consolidation of that diametrical opposition, whereby such contrary pairs as singularity and repetition or the subjective and rational may become regarded as restrictive linguistic categories.



Sean Scully, *Ten Ton Ceiling*, 2017. Bronze and aluminum, 34 by 40 by 47 inches (foreground). *Madonna*, 2019. Oil and oil pastel on aluminum, 85 by 75 inches (background right). *Boy Land*, 2019. Oil and oil pastel on aluminum, two panels, 118 by 75 inches each (background left). Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

Within Lisson Gallery located at 138 Tenth Avenue, *Ten Ton Ceiling* (2017) of Scully greets the visitor with piles of Duchampian readymade objects, as worn ceiling tiles appear to have been placed there temporarily in order to be disposed. Yet as these “ceiling tiles” are cast either in bronze or aluminum, their art-historical reference becomes expanded. It is unlikely not to find associations between *Ten Ton Ceiling* and *Steel-Aluminum Plain* (1969) by Carl Andre of the Art Institute of Chicago. Whereas the “tiles” of Andre suspend the distinctions of the ideal geometric form and material reality of the object, this sculpture of Scully brings together Duchamp, Minimalism and Pop. And yet unlike the *Brillo Boxes* of Andy Warhol that mimic commercial packaging, Scully transforms the mundane, mass-produced commodity into an object that is both art-historically charged and biographical, as *Ten Ton Ceiling* is cast out of ceiling tiles from the studio of the artist.

The six partly figurative drawings of Scully, executed in 1966, echo the compositional elements and palette of *Zulma* (1950) of Matisse. In these painterly drawings bright colors give rise to recognizable human figures, although a certain degree of abstraction and flatness also prevail, as a given face or torso is a sum of monochromatic patches. In three recent paintings of Scully, all titled *Madonna*, there is a surprising return to significant figuration, where the subjects are based on “photographs taken of his family at the beach,” as noted on the press release of the gallery. Retaining his vibrant Matissean palette of red, orange, blue, green and pink, these large-scale paintings are executed in oil and oil pastel on aluminum. Despite the sumptuous coloring of this *Madonna* series, these paintings evoke the ethos of *The Artist and His Mother* (1926-circa 1946) by Arshile Gorky at the Whitney Museum of American Art or the one at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., two paintings based on a photograph of the artist with his mother. While the photographs of Gorky and Scully are distant from each other by place and time, these works of both artists cannot but elicit autobiographical references to catastrophic famines, mass starvations and deaths during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Ireland and Armenia. Though both Scully and Gorky would practice painting through the leading currents of their times, only to originate untrodden paths, the *Madonna* series here and *The Artist and His Mother* paintings of Gorky demonstrate the power of recognizable imagery as indispensable means of representing personal and cultural histories. As these paintings of both artists are derived from photographs, they call forth the concept of the *punctum* of Roland Barthes, that visual detail of a photograph that gives rise to a compelling psychological response within the viewer: “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me),” reflects Barthes.<sup>2</sup>

Dated 2019, the diptych entitled *Boy Land* of Scully notably juxtaposes an extension of his recent Landline series with a figurative painting representing his son from an overhead view, as if this image were an extension of the *Madonna* series, paintings within which a given representation of hat, hair or hand may come across as one possible *punctum* of the original photograph—that subjective voice that punctuates the *studium* of Barthes. This bipartite painting of Scully, each containing a pair of insets, operates as a formalist and autobiographical archaeology of the artist’s oeuvre, along with references to seminal trajectories that have shaped painting over the past century or so. It frames—both structurally and pictorially—the past, present and likely upcoming parameters of the artist’s paintwork. Titled *Sean Scully: Pan*, this exhibition presents works that absorbingly embody the physicality of a given medium, only to numinously disembody that physicality within the realm of the beholder’s perception. **WM**

## Notes

1. Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1972), p. 233. Cited in Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects of Abstraction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 212.
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 27.



### RAPHY SARKISSIAN

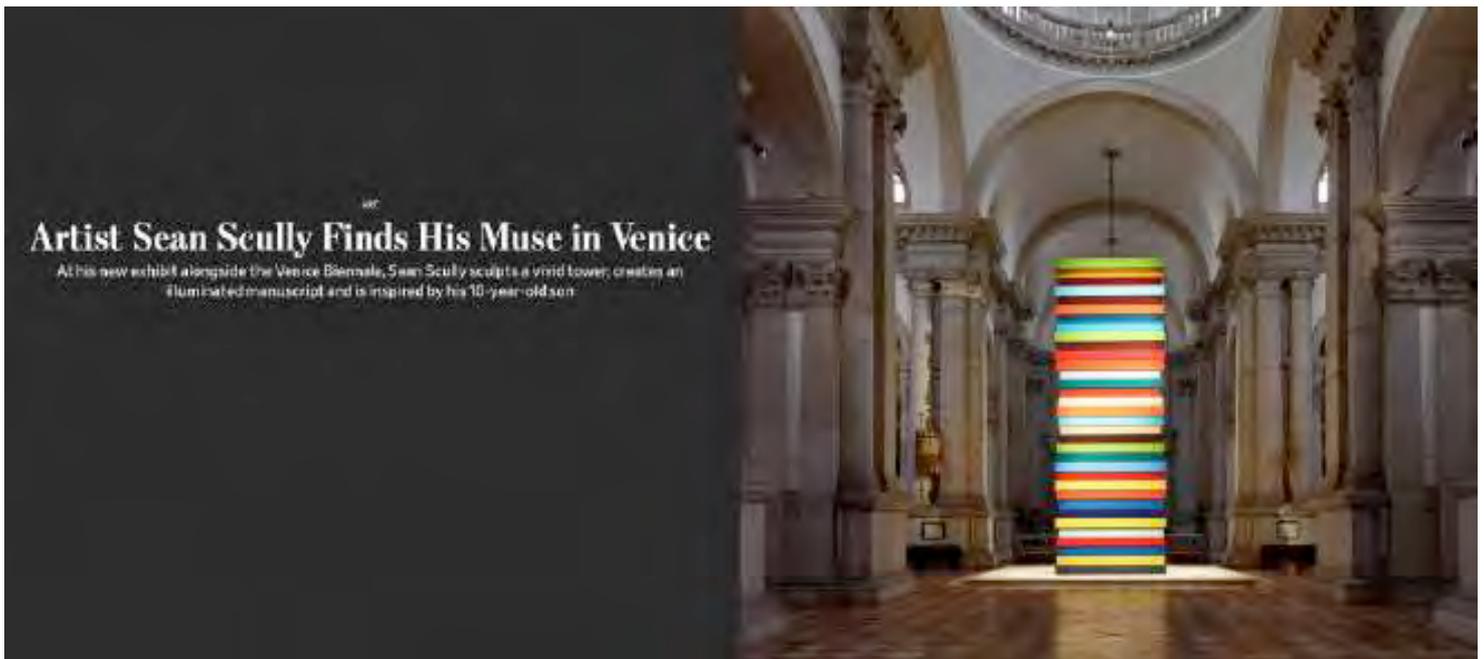
Raphy Sarkissian is an artist, writer, curator and art historian currently teaching theory and praxis at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He received his MA from New York University and an MFA from SVA. Sarkissian lives and works in New York and can be followed on Instagram @raphy\_sarkissian.

[view all articles from this author](#)

# LISSON GALLERY

*The Wall Street Journal*  
11 May 2019

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



### Artist Sean Scully Finds His Muse in Venice

At his new exhibit alongside the Venice Biennale, Sean Scully sculpts a vivid tower, creates an illuminated manuscript and is inspired by his 10-year-old son

*By John Hooper*

May 11, 2019 7:01 a.m. ET

#### *Venice*

“I’ve found my muse,” Sean Scully says, while strolling through an exhibition of his art in Venice.

The solo show, titled “Human,” opened May 8, just before this year’s [Venice Biennale](#), an [art extravaganza](#) that sprawls across the city between May 11 and Nov. 24.

Mr. Scully’s exhibit, which isn’t formally part of the Biennale, contains more than 40 recent works. Several sprang from an unusual collaboration between the New York-based artist and a community of Benedictine monks living on San Giorgio, an island in the Venetian lagoon. The show is in the island’s basilica, San Giorgio Maggiore.

Many would say the 73-year-old [Mr. Scully](#) found his muse half a century ago when he embraced abstraction. And his trademark bands of color open the show here.



"I never know why I'm doing something while I'm doing it," Mr. Scully says of his work. PHOTO: SEAN SCULLY/FELIX FRIEDMANN

As they enter, visitors confront Mr. Scully's "Opulent Ascension," a multi-colored, horizontally striped tower. It soars more than 30 feet below the dome which, like the rest of the church, is the work of the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. Mr. Scully's tower is made of frames covered with felt in rich greens and ochers, blues and reds. None of the colors are identical and the frames are slightly different sizes, the felt material conveying plush luxury.

---

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

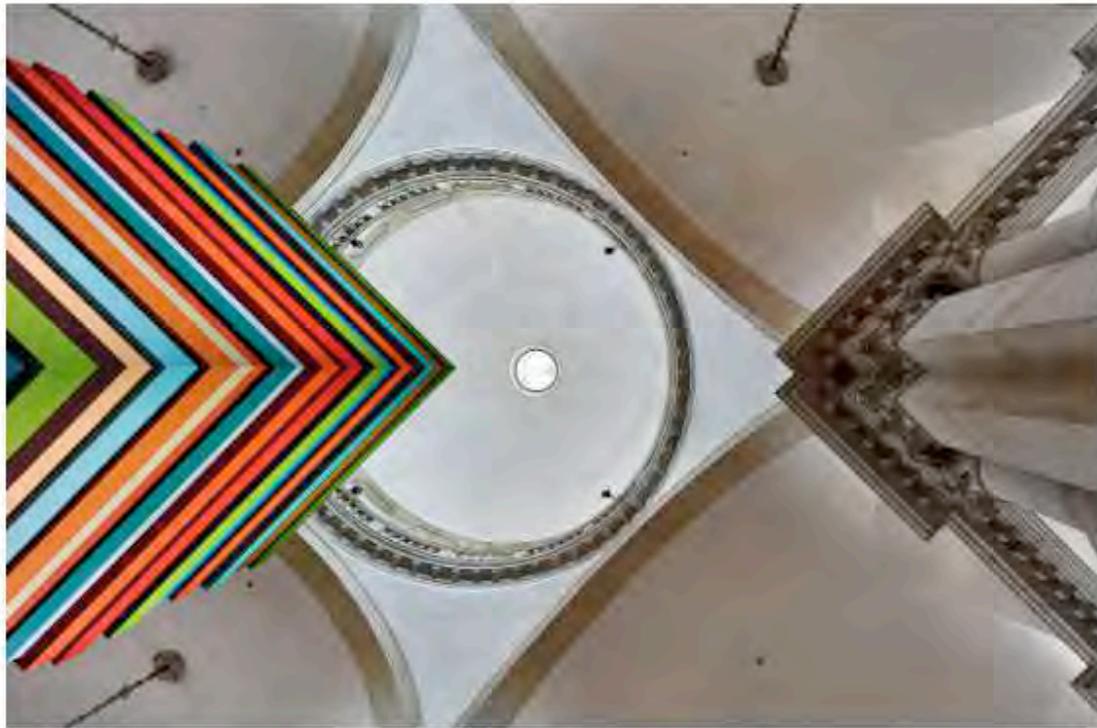
---

*What are some of your favorite places in Venice—old or new? Join the conversation below.*

"I wanted to make something that was not threatening and the felt has achieved that," Mr. Scully says.

The first of several surprises comes when visitors discover they can walk into the tower from the back. The second comes when they

look up. If light is flooding in the windows of Palladio's dome, the sunbeams cast a four-pointed star on the inner walls of the sculpture.



Mr. Scully's 'Opulent Ascension,' left, rises more than 30 feet high beneath the basilica's dome, designed by Palladio. PHOTO: SEAN SCULLY/KEWENIG, BERLIN/STEFAN JOSEF MUELLER

Mr. Scully's show is the most recent effort in a campaign to bring artists to work and exhibit on San Giorgio. "He ate with the monks. He lived with the monks," says Carmelo Grasso, the director of the nonprofit that launched and oversees the project. The venture aims to give new life to the basilica. Though it contains paintings by another late Renaissance master, Tintoretto, and is a short boat ride from St. Mark's Square, Palladio's creation is more often admired from afar than visited.

The exhibit contains Mr. Scully's paintings, sculpture, drawings as well as pages from his sketchbooks, some of which include writing. He spent several weeks with the monks to prepare for "Human."



Visitors can see Mr. Scully's 'Illuminated Manuscript' in the part of the church where the monks gather to chant. PHOTO: SEAN

When the show closes Oct. 13, Mr. Scully will leave behind for his hosts a chandelier, two stained glass windows and a contemporary version of an illuminated manuscript, decorated with drawings and watercolors. The book is "full of all my abstract nonsense," the artist jokes. During exhibition hours it rests on a lectern at the front of the choir where the monks gather to chant.

Mr. Scully was unable to part with all the pages he had adorned. And that is where the muse slips back in along with the third—and biggest—surprise: Some of the sketches by this dedicated abstractionist are figurative.

The muse is Mr. Scully's 10-year-old son, Oisín (pronounced O-sheen). "Because I'm so nuts about my son. I wanted to paint pictures of a

The place Mr. Scully found was a beach on the island of Eleuthera in the Bahamas. Watching Oisín play with his mother on the sand inspired three vividly colored oils he calls “Madonna Triptych.” It also gave rise to a tender depiction in pencil and watercolor of his son on the beach, looking down with his face obscured by a large hat.



Mr. Scully's son inspired the artist's three vivid works in oil he titled 'Madonna Triptych.' PHOTO: SEAN SCULLY

“I used to be a very intense portraitist, so it was easy for me to make these” says Mr. Scully, gesturing at the figurative sketches on display. “I’m not one of these people who started out with a computer.”

He adds that his foray into figurative work is finite. “I’m not flipping,” he insists. But, later, a doubt creeps in. He speculates that his artistic re-engagement with the physical world may reflect a concern for the environment.

Mr. Scully allows that his creative impulses run ahead of his capacity to make sense of them. “I never know why I’m doing something while I’m doing it,” he says.

*The Spectator*  
20 April 2019

**THE SPECTATOR**

EXHIBITIONS

## A beautiful exhibition of a magnificent painter: Sean Scully at the National Gallery reviewed

*Plus: a welcome show of another painter who has still not quite received his due, Leon Kossoff*

**Martin Gayford**



*'Landline Star', 2017, Sean Scully*

Sean Scully once told me about his early days as a plasterer's mate. At the age of 17 he was helping a craftsman who would often accidentally drop a good deal of plaster on his youthful assistant's head, especially after a midday break in the pub.

**Sea Star: Sean Scully at the National Gallery**

National Gallery, until 11 August

**Leon Kossoff: A London Life**

Piano Nobile, until 22 May

**Martin Gayford**

20 April 2019  
9:00 AM

Scully spent his own lunchtimes differently. He would roar on his scooter to the Tate Gallery, and spend the time staring at a single picture: 'The Chair' by Vincent van Gogh.

That picture is one of two reference points in *Sea Star*, his beautiful exhibition at the National Gallery. Scully pays homage to it in two groups of three paintings, entitled 'Arles Abend Vincent' and 'Arles Abend Deep'. Neither looks much like a chair; the panels resemble, if anything, sections of a wall (if not a plastered one). Scully has, in fact, taken a series of photographs of dry stone walls on the island of Aran. The walls are like a puzzle — some stones vertical, some horizontal, wider or narrower.

The 'Arles Abend' paintings are similar, except that they are built out of rectangles of loosely brushed, sumptuously rich colour. That's something perhaps he learned from those lunch breaks in front of Van Gogh. The physical presence of a paint-stroke is something that can't be replaced, he told me, containing as it does 'the thinking, the feeling and the making, all compressed into a single action: a kind of low-relief sculpture of what happened'.

The wide brush marks give visible energy to Scully's works — sweeping this way and that, here more agitated, there calmer. This movement interacts with the colour-chord of each picture — ochres, dark crimsons and olive greens in the case of the 'Arles Abend' pictures.

Encountering a room of Scullys you might think: 'Oh, a lot of stripes and squares'. But if you look at one for a while it takes you over. Like the teenage painter spending his lunch hours with Van Gogh, you could stand and look for ages.

More recently Scully has fallen for a late Turner — 'The Evening Star' (about 1830) — which is hung in the exhibition (Van Gogh's 'Chair' is upstairs in the main galleries). This is, at first glance, an arrangement of horizontal bands of colour which resolve into beach, ocean, cloud and a sky just changing from day to night.

Scully's pictures don't translate into landscape that directly. He remains on the non-figurative side of the border between abstraction and representation — but quite close to the frontier. His magnificent 'Land-line Star' (2017) remains a sequence of stripes, stacked above one another — blue, black, dark red plus one an indescribable whiteish, pinky, blue-tinged zone that seems to ripple and crackle. But still it is a bit like looking at a moving river or the waves of the sea.

Scully moved from plastering to painting in the early 1970s just as painting — especially abstract painting — was going out of style. He has consequently spent a creative lifetime not quite in fashion, which

may be why it's only now in his seventies that it's becoming apparent what a terrific artist he is.

Being out of step with what art history was supposed to be doing has been the fate of many important painters. It befell Leon Kossoff who, a generation older than Scully, emerged only to disappear from view while abstraction ruled in the 1960s. Despite a Tate retrospective in the 1990s, Kossoff has still not quite received his due.

He is a truly great painter, but one whose work has not been seen enough in recent years. For that reason the current exhibition at Piano Nobile (96/129 Portland Road, W11) is especially welcome. Kossoff occupies a territory just on the figurative side of that frontier with abstraction. Each of his picture starts with what he has called 'exciting visual encounters' — either with one of his small circle of familiar models or a bit of London townscape, frequently in the environs of Willesden where he has long lived.

The places Kossoff selects would not strike everyone as exciting. But he makes you feel they are. A charcoal and pastel drawing of the railway lines at 'Willesden Junction' (1962) has the exhilaration and spatial expansion of Turner's alpine scenes.

His oils are painted on boards, which has an effect on the way they look. Scully favours aluminium or linen, on which the pigment flows smoothly. In contrast Kossoff's paint is slashed and scooped across the wood, building up in gnarled masses with a splatter of flying drips. 'Christchurch, Spitalfields' (1989) takes off like a rocket, a red brick school building trembling like a vision beneath a lowering sky. It is a great pleasure to see such paintings by natural light in the London townhouses which Piano Nobile occupies: the perfect environment for Kossoff. This show, like the Scully, is highly recommended.

Evening Standard  
16 April 2019

EveningStandard.

📷 SEA STAR: SEAN SCULLY AT NATIONAL GALLERY, IN PICTURES



REVIEW

## Sea Star — Sean Scully review: Colour is the winner in this elegant wrestle with Turner's legacy

Reviewed by **BEN LUKE**

Tuesday 16 April 2019 08:45



Like Click to follow  
GO London

Our rating: ★★★★★

National Gallery

Charing Cross

WC2N 5DN

[nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk)

The increasing fashion for showing contemporary artists alongside Old Masters often results in awkward collisions, but this [show](#) gets it right.

One painting by a master, [JMW Turner's Evening Star](#), is here. Chosen by Scully, it's alone, hung deliberately and sensibly at a distance from his [paintings](#), pastels and prints.

The Turner is one of those remarkable unfinished works he left at his death, essentially two horizontal bands representing the sky, with the planet Venus barely visible, and the sea, with a boy and his dog playing in the shallows. Almost all the painterly incident occurs where the bands meet: Venus's reflection, hints of a fading sunset.

This is what the Turner has most in common with Scully: so much happens where colours abut. Also common to both artists' work is a profound sense of atmosphere. But Scully could liberate paint from its representational function so that within a taut structure – blocks and bands of colour – it's almost all atmosphere and emotion.

His specific response to Turner is *Landline Star*, a painting with seven horizontal bands of colour, hinting at horizons but denying illusion, bringing us back to the world of paint.

In three rooms we see Scully pushing and pulling surface and depth in dense pastels, exquisitely watery aquatint and spitbite prints, and vast paintings, where he continues to develop his language.

And while Scully's paintings do evoke land, sea and sky, they're as likely to reference the medieval *Book of Durrow*, Moroccan textiles and Van Gogh's colour and mark-making. We see a painter wrestling not just with Turner's legacy, but with the history of his medium. And, thankfully, without the forced juxtapositions that can ruin this kind of show.

*Until Aug 11 (020 7747 2885, [nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk))*

*The Guardian*  
03 April 2019

# The Guardian

Sean Scully

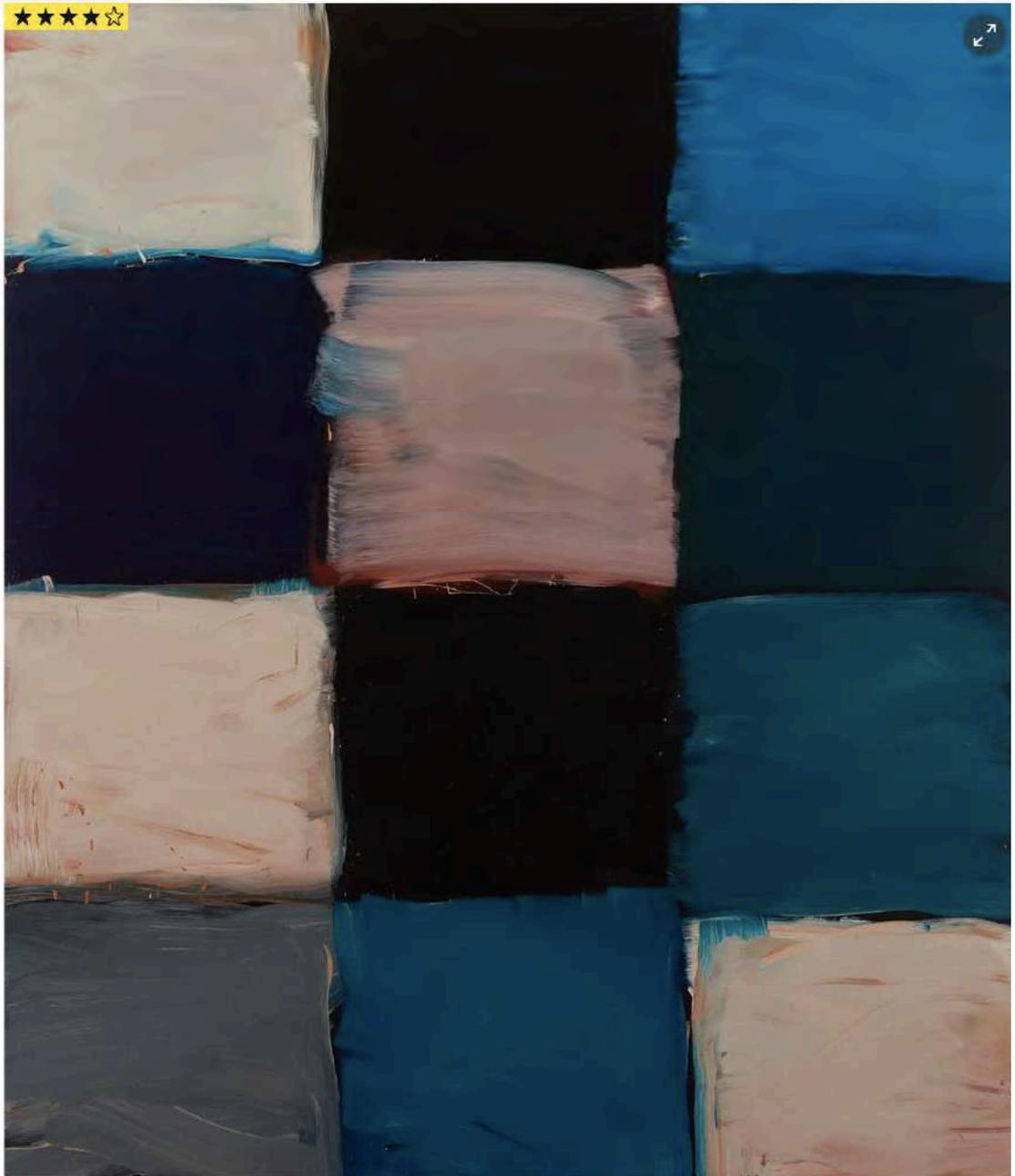
## 'Turner gets his cobwebs blown away' - Sea Star: Sean Scully review



**Jonathan Jones**  
Fri 12 Apr 2019 10:17 EDT



66 93



▲ Sex and death in squares ... Robe Magdalena, 2017, by Sean Scully. Photograph: Courtesy the artist

## National Gallery, London

Sean Scully's work has been placed alongside a much-misunderstood seascape by Turner. The result is a fascinating exhibition full of insight, power and glorious melting colour

**S**ometimes it takes a painter to see a painter. At the heart of Sean Scully's exhibition in the National Gallery is an eye-opening meeting between him and JMW Turner on a beach where sky, sea and land are melting into an abstract layering of light.

Turner was born in London in 1775 and by the time of his death in 1851 he was seen by baffled Victorians as an abstracted madman throwing mustard and curry powder at his canvases. Scully was born in Dublin in 1945 and has never doubted his vocation as an abstract artist. You are more likely to see him on *Celebrity Bake Off* than painting a recognisable face or tree - and that's not likely at all for an artist who consciously wears the mantle of great modern painters such as Mark Rothko and Ellsworth Kelly.

Scully has chosen one painting from the National Gallery collection, Turner's beachscape *The Evening Star*, painted in about 1830, to hang with his own stripes and grids of wet-looking colour. In Turner's picture, the planet Venus twinkles in a sky that is a dust of blue and yellow particles made milky by mist, over a bank of smoky dying clouds, a blackening sea and a crabflesh beach. You can study it up close, then walk backwards like I did, keeping it in your sight, until you are viewing it between two paintings by Scully composed of bands of dark colour layered over each other in a way that echoes the horizontal sublimity of Turner's canvas. Blues and purples create a mood of evening rumination that matches Turner's mysterious twilight. Scully shows that in its dissolution of reality into an atmosphere of indefinable chromatic suggestiveness, Turner's *Evening Star* is an abstract masterpiece.

Sign up to the Art Weekly email

→ [Read more](#)



▲ Mysterious twilight ... The Evening Star, circa 1830, by JMW Turner. Photograph: The National Gallery, London



Professional art historians are oddly terrified of celebrating Turner's precocity as an abstract artist a lifetime before Kandinsky or Mondrian. When he died, his studio was full of canvases in which fiery melting colour refuses to resolve into objects. They're just unfinished studies, insist sceptics. The National Gallery, too, warns us on its website not to get too carried away by *The Evening Star* but see it as "a study of the effects of light and atmosphere, rather than a finished work".

Scully blows away such cavilling cobwebs. He sees a fellow abstractionist in Turner. He is not the first abstract artist to feel the affinity: one of the reasons Rothko's *Seagram* paintings are in Tate Modern is that he wanted his work to be seen near Turner's. Yet this exhibition is a two-way mirror. If it reveals the abstract in Turner, it also shows how Scully responds to nature. Light is nature, colour is nature. There's an earthy rawness to Scully's colours that insists on a fierce emotional encounter between him and the world. However severe the formal discipline he accepts - each of the pastels and paintings here are a minimalist arrangement of coloured rectangles - you always sense his passion bursting, literally, out of the box.

Take his 2017 work *Robe Magdalena*. It is an almost (but crucially, not quite) square-shaped sheet of aluminium, on which he has painted interlocking blocks of colour including a bright turquoise-blue, two sombre blues, pale pinks, blacks and greys. It resembles paintings that Kelly made in the 1950s by arranging coloured wooden rectangles. But instead of emphasising minimalist geometry, Scully messes it up, smearing paint in bursts of intense feeling that linger on in each rough stain of juicy brushwork. Then you notice a black cross has materialised among those sensual pinks. This is a painting about sex and death. Abstraction is not cold - not when Scully does it.

Exhibitions by contemporary artists at the National Gallery make most sense when those artists intelligently engage with its great collection of European (including British) painting. This feels like a return to the more careful shows it used to put on, inviting established, mature modern artists to respond to its treasures. It's obvious in each pink smear that Scully has thought about the mystery of painting all his life. That makes his encounter with Turner a worthwhile walk on the beach.

● At the National Gallery, London, from 13 April to 11 August.

*The Telegraph*  
30 March 2019

# The Telegraph

## Artist Sean Scully on trying to beat Matisse and why he can't stand Warhol: 'I hate his guts!'



Save 12



Sean Scully is the subject of a new BBC Two documentary. CREDIT: BBC

Follow

By Chris Harvey

30 MARCH 2019 - 7.00AM

**Irish artist Sean Scully's views are as colourful as his million-dollar paintings, discovers Chris Harvey**

"I hate his f----- guts," says Sean Scully. The great abstract painter is talking about pop artist Andy Warhol. Both men lived in New York in the Seventies and Eighties, yet their paths rarely crossed. Scully sometimes saw Warhol at the famous Odeon restaurant in Tribeca, where Jean-Michel Basquiat and Robert Mapplethorpe also hung out, but they never talked. So why? "Because he wanted to film Edie Sedgwick OD-ing," Scully says. "I would save her and love her, and he would film her. He's the f----- devil incarnate."

He's referring to Lupe, the film Warhol made with Sedgwick in 1965. While shooting it, Warhol reportedly said, "I wonder if Edie will commit suicide. I hope she lets me know so I can film it." Sedgwick died in 1971 from a cocktail of barbiturates and alcohol.

We're in a room at the National Gallery in London, where an exhibition of Scully's work, *Sea Star*, will open next month. He's 73, a big man with a voice that sounds like Michael Gambon doing Sid Vicious. Sometimes he'll soften it to weave a tale – he's a natural storyteller – or to say something only slightly wicked. Scully has a way with words that could punch holes in the aluminium sheets on which he paints so beautifully.

His luscious abstracts now sell for seven figures, yet the Irish-born artist is less well-known in the UK, where he grew up from the age of four, than he is in America or Germany or China. He rejects the idea that he is one of the wealthiest artists in the world (a perception that may have something to do with his art collection, estimated to be worth £400 million). But his story is a remarkable one: from poverty and homelessness as a child, through gang violence, four marriages, the loss of a son, and a Charles Saatchi-triggered dive in the middle of his career, from which he made his way back to global significance.



Robe Blue Durrow (2018) by Sean Scully CREDIT: SEAN SCULLY

Now, he's the subject of a superb documentary, *Unstoppable: Sean Scully and the Art of Everything*. It revisits everything from the tiny tram worker's cottage where he was born in the Inchicore area of Dublin, to his late battle with prescription painkillers. I wonder if he had issues with drugs back in the Eighties, when New York was awash with cocaine.

"No... I mean, I love cocaine," he says, "but I'm too driven... I have a very powerful work ethic."

There's lovely footage of Scully creating one of his ongoing *Landline* series, slapping the paint on in thick bands, stepping back to contemplate it before adding new layers to the still-wet surface, until the painting seems, impossibly, to quiver with delicacy and balance.

"I can do a painting in an afternoon," he says. "It's quite an ordinary thing. I go to work and sometimes I make a painting that's f----- kick-ass. There's no question about it."

When he began, no art school would take him. Soon, though, he was telling people: "I'm going to be as famous as Matisse." He's not, though, is he? "It's en route," he says, looking into my eyes for a long time. "That's happening... I don't see Matisse as a god. He's a fantastic artist. He's got two legs and two eyeballs. Me too."

Scully was inspired to paint by Van Gogh's Chair (1888), which looked so simple that anyone could do it. "I was a working-class kid working in a factory in Notting Hill - 50 hours a week, £4.70 a week. I couldn't approach things like Titian or Reubens, but with Vincent, he's so unbelievably honest, he wasn't trying to hide how he did it."

When did he realise that, in fact, no one could paint like Van Gogh? "I love Vincent, I really, really love him, because he suffered so much, he couldn't find a girlfriend," he says. "I can't not find a girlfriend, I've always loved women and they've always loved me, and that's how it is. I always have this great empathy for Vincent because I know what pain that would bring, and of course to paint like Vincent, you have to not be able to find a girlfriend - and who wants that? Not me."



A panel from the Madonna Triptych (2018) which is on show in Venice in May credit: SEAN SCULLY

The roguish and the emotional sit side by side in Scully. His Irish paternal grandfather deserted in 1916 to join the Easter Uprising, but was caught, and hanged himself in jail before he could be shot. Scully's maternal grandmother was a well-to-do Scot who married a Durham coalminer – “for sex,” he adds. She was disinherited and “turned into a very sour woman”.

His parents met in Sheerness and left for Ireland the next day because his father didn't want to fight in the Second World War. They were homeless and penniless when they had him. His father later had to serve eight months in jail for desertion before they could move back to England. Scully describes him as a competitive bully, and his mother as an arch manipulator, who groomed him “like Mozart's father” to believe he was special. Once, as a tot, he went from seat to seat on a double decker, telling every single passenger that he was beautiful. It's not hard to believe it.

In London, Scully was taken out of convent school because the nuns disapproved of his father, a barber, working on Sundays. He found himself at a state school that he remembers as a sea of grey faces and cauliflower ears, which scared him. He once had his nose broken in four places in a gang fight.

On a vocational art course at Croydon College, he discovered German Expressionism, and he was away. He produced lovely early figurative works, but when he got to Newcastle University in 1968, he had embraced abstraction. Bryan Ferry had just left: “He used to do lovely little striped paintings that looked as if they were painted by a girl.” Scully went to Morocco and saw stripes everywhere. It changed his painting forever.

By the time he got a scholarship to Harvard in the early Seventies, he was on his second marriage. His first, to Jill Mycroft, now dead, was a shotgun wedding; she was pregnant with their son, Paul. He left her soon after. His second wife, Rosemary Henderson, appears in *Unstoppable*, describing how Scully disappeared to New York after Harvard, leaving a letter on the table. Watching her talk about it, he says, “really broke me up”.

After that he wed Texan artist Catherine Lee, and the couple were together for many years before a messy divorce. Since 2006, he has been married to the Swiss painter Liliane Tomasko, two decades his junior, with whom he has a nine-year-old son, Oisín.

Scully came to fatherhood young, at 20, and very late, at 64. “My love for Oisín is a form of insanity. I love him so much,” he says. His first child, Paul, died in a car crash at 18. Scully hadn’t seen him for a long time. “My guilt is as deep as the ocean and it doesn’t matter what I do, I will never get out of jail,” he says.



Scully at work in his studio © BBC / JEAN YVES ESCOFFIER

"I'd had a very, very hard life, and for about three years, I was the most celebrated abstract painter in the world, then Paul died. It was like I crawled out of this pit and went straight down into another one." Scully made paintings that "only a hurt person could make", like *Durango* (1990), panels of stripes in grey and black, or *Paul* (1984), which is in the Tate.

At the end of the Eighties, when the YBAs' conceptual art was in vogue, Charles Saatchi sold off all 11 Scully paintings that he owned. It gave the market the impression that the collector was dumping his "mistakes". Saatchi did the same with the work of artists such as Julian Schnabel and Sigmar Polke, whose reputations, like Scully's, rallied. Others' didn't.

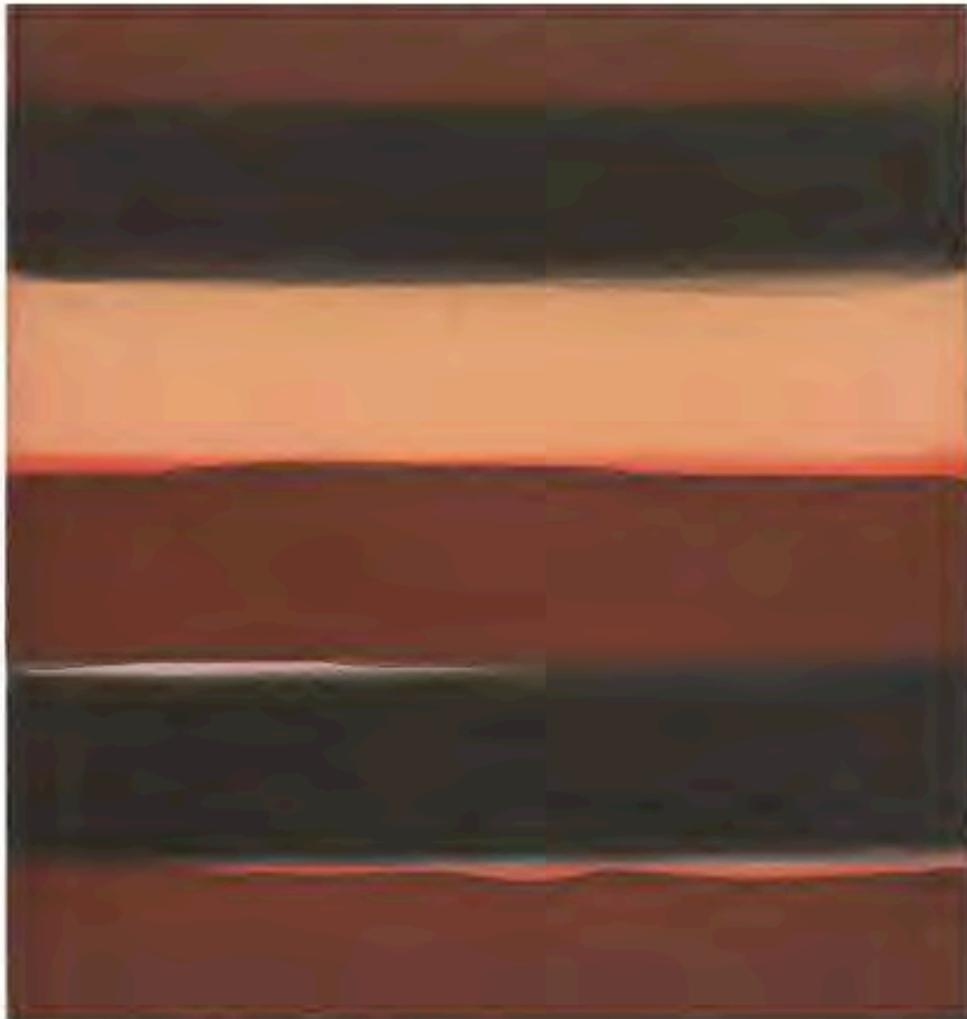
Will the Nineties be fondly remembered? "No... I certainly think that Damien Hirst has made some seminal pieces. He's an interesting character because he tried then to make paintings and fell flat on his face, because he can never let go of his cleverness. I think when you make paintings, you can't have too much artifice. I'm very vulnerable when I paint. And afterwards I feel unravelled."

In the film, Scully appears with Ai Weiwei, whom he taught in New York. "He's an asshole. That guy will cross any line. Lying in a site where a young boy drowned as an artwork? It's disgusting." [He's referring to the Chinese artist's 2016 performance on the Greek island of Lesbos, where the death of three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi had shocked the world.] "He's doing it for self-promotion."

In the film, Ai Weiwei claims Scully abused him. Scully retorts: "C'mon, man. I taught him about Western conceptual art from André Breton to Hans Haacke, the whole thing. I mean, it's my subject. I know it... all those devices that he's been using... He learned all that stuff from me." Scully's recent work includes the *Ghost* series, in which an American flag has had the stars "evicted by a gun". He painted the first when 12-year-old Tamir Rice was shot by police in 2014 after being seen with an air pistol in Cleveland, Ohio.

"When I saw that, I started weeping in my studio, this poor little boy who was not right in the head walking around with a toy gun. My son does the same..."

He watched the footage of Rice being shot at point-blank range, “and [the officer] says, ‘I’d do it again’. I’d like to throw him off a cliff. For somebody who’s lost a son, I know what that is.”



Orange (2018) by Sean Scully CREDIT: SEAN SCULLY

America’s gun culture was one reason Scully wanted to spend more time in London, where he has a place in Hampstead. I wonder how he feels about the knife crime epidemic here.

“It’s very disturbing and very surprising, because I think of London as the acme of tolerance.” He admits that, as a teenager, “we used to carry flick-knives with 6in blades... so it seems to be a return to that.”

That he ended up becoming an artist he finds “inexplicable”.

“I don’t really take credit for it. My poor brother was destroyed by our upbringing. There’s only one way you could have got through it. You had to be somebody like me.”

*Hyperallergic*  
08 March 2019

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

### Sean Scully's Figurative Leap

"Someone recently asked me how I navigate the space between my abstract and figurative paintings, which I often paint side by side. I said I jump."

David Carrier 5 days ago



Sean Scully, "Eleuthera" (2017), oil on aluminum, 85 x 75 inches (all images © Sean Scully, all images courtesy the artist)

When I became an art critic in 1981 one of the first artists I met and wrote about was Sean Scully. At that time I was teaching philosophy in Pittsburgh and he, having recently moved to New York, was as yet without a dealer. We are almost the same age, and to some extent we grew up together. When we first met, he had just made the transition

from doing narrow, dark, late-1970s minimalist abstractions to the much broader intensely colored striped works, which in the 1980s brought him international fame.

At that time I knew Scully's earlier figurative works from reproduction, but hadn't seen them in the flesh. (More recently they have been shown.) At the start of his career in London, before he became an abstract artist, Scully loved, as he told me a few days ago, "German Expressionism, André Derain (the greatest Fauve painter)" and, also, some American figurative artists — "the Bay Area painters, like Joan Brown, David Park, and Elmer Bischoff."

But he didn't pursue that visual concern. "They were all taking liberties with figuration and realism, and it's hard on their heirs to continue to treat the same path over and over." Abstraction, he has said, "was always waiting for one to defect. However, it's a great jolt when you do."



Sean Scully, "Eleuthera" (2017), oil on aluminum, 85 x 75 inches

Given this history, I was more than a little surprised when I recently learned that in June, 2019, he will be mounting a show of the 2016 *Eleuthera* series of 23 large-format paintings depicting his son Oisín, who then was six, at the Albertina Museum, Vienna. (Eleuthera is an island beach resort in the Bahamas. And Oisín is named after a legendary Irish warrior.) The color, he has said, "is open like Expressionism. But I paint them on metal with a big brush and I don't paint too many details." The colors and scale are like those of his middle-sized abstractions.

Often when a mid-20th century modernist would make the transition from figurative to abstract painting, it was viewed as partaking in the forward thrust of art history. If abstraction was the wave of the future, as it was called then, it followed that going from abstract art to figuration would be a historical regression. Think, if you will, of all the controversy aroused when Willem de Kooning or Richard Diebenkorn returned to figuration. Or look at Jackson Pollock's post-drip, quasi-figurative "Portrait and a Dream" (1953), an embodiment of the artist's difficult situation, both formally and personally. For Scully, however, the recent taking up of figuration was motivated, initially at least, entirely by happy changes in his personal life. He put it this way during our conversation:

As Bill Murray says in *Lost in Translation*, children will change your life in ways you cannot imagine. My son has undone my conceit. When you become a willing devoted servant, a few other things change as well. And you don't need to worry about over-intellectualizing it. I wanted to paint my son. I was taking photos. But photos are not paintings. Paintings embody an image in a monumental surface, in colors that can only be invented.



Sean Scully, "Eleuthera" (2017), oil on aluminum, 85 x 75 inches

Fatherhood had unexpected surprises.

I thought when he was born that I could park my career the way that John Lennon did, to bring up Sean. And I was ready for that. But somehow everything went backwards, and I started producing more than before.

Scully also continues, I should add, to make his abstractions.

Certainly I found these new figurative works startling — as unexpected as the massive post-minimalist sculptures, which he has displayed recently, but that development is another story for another occasion. These new paintings, Scully has suggested, are very much influenced by his “[personal] history, coming from Ireland, growing up in London, yearning for America,” which has given his work “a character that’s unusual”:

If I want to do something, I’m really not so inclined to ask for permission first. Or to do a few and then ask my friends if they’re okay. I made 23 for my son’s birthday party, which took place in my enormous (American) painting room [...]. I didn’t really care what anybody else thought. Someone recently asked me how I navigate the space between my abstract and figurative paintings, which I often paint side by side. I said I jump.



Sean Scully, “Eleuthera” (2017), oil on aluminum, 85 x 75 inches

How, then, should we understand these works? To cite one Anglo-Irish reference, their structure resembles the stage sets in the paintings of Francis Bacon. Scully says:

I didn’t realize until I’d painted about five that I was setting my son in a protective circle. However, that was invented by Oisín [...]. He dug, as children do, a moat around himself on the beach, that we his parents used to fill up with water from the ocean. Although in one painting the circle looks like an enormous umbilical cord that originates in his hands and circles him. It’s obvious to me, though, that it takes an abstract painter to paint with such brutality. With such a sculptural simplifying attitude.

For Scully, though, the motivation for making these images is very straightforward.

I think I wanted to paint pictures of my son in a way that represented him and all boys of his age, in an eternal situation, by the sea. I don't really care if other people think I can do it or not. I didn't ask other people if I could or should come to New York either. I'm aware though, if you take enormous risks it can go wrong. But if you don't it will go wrong anyway.

In some ways, return to making figurative art was not difficult:

I was surprised how I could still draw, without hesitation, on a big scale while holding an iPhone photo in my left hand. I thought that it was like riding a bike. You never forget how to do it.



Sean Scully, "Elenthera" (2017), oil on aluminum, 85 x 75 inches

When I first saw these new paintings, I thought that perhaps they were inspired by the aesthetic theorizing of our great mutual friend, the late philosopher Arthur Danto. Danto claimed that ours was a post-historical era, in which everything was possible. Scully didn't exactly reject that idea, but he didn't embrace it either.

My idea is to work how I want. [...] And staying with what is safe is not attractive, because I never entered art in the first place to make money. If you're obsessed with something and you want to keep doing it because you love it, or it reveals something you have to see or show, that's enough reason to keep doing it. I'm not making changes to show that everything is possible.

When I pressed a little further, he amplified this point.

I follow my instinct to create. I'm a creator. I only think about whether something has to be made, and if it does, I make it. My sculptures are my paintings 3D; my paintings of my son are my son 2D.

How will the art world judge these works? That will be interesting to see.

Scully added:

A dealer once told me that if I didn't give him paintings for the collectors who kept asking, they would buy something else. I said, in reply, that was wonderful. It's very important not to prostitute yourself, unless you like that, of course.

*This profile builds upon discussions held in late February 2019, upon my experience of these figurative paintings earlier this year and, of course, upon our many conversations over the past 38 years.*

# LISSON GALLERY

Hartford Courant  
28 February, 2019

## Hartford Courant

### Abstract 'Landline' series looks to the horizon at Wadsworth Atheneum

By JUDAH SHARF



Sean Scully's 2018 oil on aluminum artwork "Landline Far Blue Lake." (Photographed by Susan Bean / HANDOUT)

Sean Scully is fascinated by the horizon.: "It's eternal. Look out at the sea. It's an endless movement back and forth and in and out, controlled in a way by the moon," Scully says.

An exhibit at Wadsworth Atheneum gives full play to Scully's horizontal preoccupation. "Sean Scully: Landline" fills three galleries on the third floor of the museum with large-scale oil-on-aluminum horizon paintings, smaller watercolors and two "stack" sculptures made of aluminum and automotive paint. A third Scully stack sculpture is installed on the lawn in front of the Hartford museum.

Scully came to his "Landline" series from a previous series, "Wall of Light," which featured horizontal and vertical rectangular bars bunched into grids. Then he became intrigued with the horizons.

"Maybe it's an immigrant vision because an immigrant is always looking at the horizon line. Because you're looking at something you can't see but can only imagine. And for us humans, it also represents eternity," he says.

So Scully started taking the vertical elements out of his artworks.

"That changes everything in the painting," he says. "They're a fusion of serial art repetition and making an obvious reference to the landscape."

"Landline" is a collection of horizontally striped paintings, created with heavy brushstrokes. Some works have a color "theme," all blue or all green. Others are more varied, with the commonality among the paintings that no two colors are exactly alike, as they are created with layers and layers of colors.

Abstract art creates a neutral platform for people to agree. A Jew, a Catholic, an atheist and a Muslim can all stand in front of the painting without it pressing any emergency buttons.

— SEAM SCULLY

"They're pure, confused colors. All the colors are made on the painting," Scully says. "All the colors are affected by how they got onto the painting. They're wedded to their journey onto the canvas."

This quality gives them a connection to the sea: "The movement of the sea is never the same. It can never be the same. And that is the beautiful thing about painting, that it can never be the same."



Artist Seam Scully poses in front of his work "Landline Blue Blue" (Luke MacGregor/ARTISTS)

Although most of the horizon paintings are large in scale, an intriguing element is a row of nine small-scale pink-toned horizon paintings, of oil on copper. Scully was inspired by Miles Davis, who took just two days to record the most acclaimed jazz album of all time "Kind of Blue."

"That shows greatness cannot be shackled to effort or time invested. In a way it's

divine in some way, inspirational, God-given. At the end of days of painting [other paintings], when my labors came to an end, I was in a neutral zone and I made these paintings. Not a lot of effort went into them. .... They're a meditation on the end of the day, when the light goes down in the countryside, before the nighttime comes."

An exception to the horizon works is Scully's "Human Too" series, which comprises four paintings that he considers a single work of art. Each is painted in a different pattern, with a square embedded in the center from one of the other paintings.

"I call it 'Human' because it's reflective of the way we've always been. The panels are taken out of context and moved around. They're in the wrong place and they have to get on with it. It's about immigration."

Scully's ceiling-high stack sculptures are a "strong antidote" to his paintings in that they are conceptual; he designs them and chooses the colors but he does not make them.

"They're hollow on the inside, almost like empty picture frames. They're holding space you can't see. They have air in them."

Looking out the door of one of the galleries, the Sol LeWitt mural in the lobby can be seen. That's a coincidence. Scully says LeWitt is the artist he is exhibited alongside most frequently, and his repetitious, line-based imagery is often compared to LeWitt's.



Sean Scully's stack sculpture "30," installed outside the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. (Sean Scully / HANDOUT)

Scully disagrees that their works are similar.

"We are the opposite. He's all machine, all concept. He took the body out of painting. I'm putting it back in," he says. But that doesn't mean he disdains the Hartford-born conceptual artist.

"I like LeWitt but somebody had to do something about all those minimalists, without painting people flying through the air with seven eyeballs. I decided it had to be me. Mine is a very aggressive repudiation of all that refinement."

Scully, 73, was born in Dublin and raised in London. Growing up "in reduced circumstances," with his father in prison for a time for deserting the British Army, Scully started working at age 15 as a typesetter. "The letters were like little

sculptures made of metal," he says.

He studied art at Croydon College of Art and Newcastle University. After getting a graduate degree at Harvard, he emigrated to New York.

Scully now divides his time between Tappan, N.Y., and a summer studio in Bavaria. Scully's work is entirely abstract except when he paints pictures of his 9-year-old son, Oisín.



Sean Scully's 2017 oil on aluminum artwork "Landing Bird Throat." (Photographed by Robert Beale / HANDOUT)

"I made an exception because of love," he says.

Scully feels more productive in the country than in the city, and he feels more comfortable creating his abstract work in the United States and Germany than in England.

"I think that to bring an abstract painting into the world of your own personal reality, it takes a different kind of imagination than to appreciate other kinds of visual art. In England, I don't believe they can do that," he said. "[The English] are a rational people. Americans are not rational people. America is a very emotional and religious place. In America and Germany, abstraction gets a free pass.

"I associate abstract art with the freedom of America. In America, a lot of different people have to come together. Abstract art creates a neutral platform for people to agree. A Jew, a Catholic, an atheist and a Muslim can all stand in front of the painting without it pressing any emergency buttons."

When Scully's exhibit leaves in May, one painting will be left behind. He is giving it to the museum.

**SEAN SCULLY: LANDLINE** is at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St. in Hartford, until May 19. A talk with Scully and contemporary art curator Patricia Hickson will be March 11 at 6 p.m., preceded by a reception at 5 p.m. [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org).



Susan Dunne

CONTACT   

Susan Dunne is a staff writer with a focus on arts and entertainment news. Her beat ranges from art exhibits, film festivals, books, releases, residents appearing on TV or any other topic of local interest. Dunne has a journalism degree from California State University at Fullerton. Dunne came to The Courant in 1994, starting as copy editor.

## Sean Scully Now Represented in North America by Lisson Gallery

BY *Annie Armstrong* POSTED 02/04/19 2:34 PM

[Share](#) 11
 [Tweet](#) 44
 [Pin](#) 2
 [Share](#) 58

The artist [Sean Scully](#) is now represented in North America by Lisson Gallery, which will stage a doubleheader of his work at both of its locations in New York's Chelsea neighborhood, from April 30 through June 8. These shows will present new paintings, sculpture and works on paper at the gallery's 24th Street space, alongside a focus on recent figurative works by the artist, who has built his multi-decade career on abstractions, at their Tenth Avenue space.

Scully is represented in Europe by Blain | Southern in London; Ingleby in Edinburgh, Scotland; Kerlin Gallery in Dublin, Ireland; and Kewenig Galerie in Berlin. Lisson said that the artist is no longer represented in New York by Cheim & Read, which last year shuttered its Chelsea gallery, in order to [focus on private sales](#) out of an Upper East Side location. (A rep for Cheim & Read did not immediately reply to a request for comment.)

Scully told *ARTnews*, "The Lisson Gallery is one of the very few galleries in the world who have managed to maintain their vision, their philosophy, and their integrity over decades, while expanding their base. It's a true artist's gallery, I know many of the artists they represent, and I look forward to our exhibition."

Lisson, which also has two spaces in London, features on its roster Stanley Whitney, Anish Kapoor, Robert Mangold, Carmen Herrera, and many more.



Sean Scully, *Madonna*, 2018.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST/LISSON GALLERY

LISSON GALLERY

*The Spectator*  
October 2018

SPECTATOR  
**LIFE**



Sean Scully (Photo: Liliane Tomasko)

# Sean Scully: 'Fatherhood has given my art a new lease of life'

*The prolific artist on how doing the school run in his 70s has brought a fresh dynamism to his work*

At the Longside Gallery at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Sean Scully is showing a bunch of hacks and liggers around his latest exhibition. It's mostly paintings: thick stripes of intense colour splashed across sheets of aluminum, a motif that's made him famous – one of the most prolific and successful abstract painters in the world. But Sean isn't here to reprise his greatest hits. He's come to show us something new. Amid these paintings are several sculptures: huge stacks of wood and metal that mimic the moody abstracts on the walls. Someone asks him whether sculpture has given him a new lease of life. 'No,' says Sean, a big bear of a man with a shaven head and pale blue eyes that pin you to the wall. 'I think my lease of life comes from my son.'

Sean was 64 when his son was born, an age when most of us are beginning to slow down. 'I thought, "I'll just park my career and be a dad for a while," but I found that when I dropped him off at school I was free to make paintings.' His palette became brighter, his paintings became more diverse, and then he started making sculpture again, for the first time since he was at art school. He's 73 now, but he looks and acts a whole lot younger. There's something almost childlike about him: his lust for life, his appetite for art and his passionate opinions about any subject you care to name.

He certainly has the energy and productivity of an artist half his age. He currently has shows in London, Berlin and Washington, as well as here at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Next year, he has a one man show at London's National Gallery, a rare honour for a living artist. Not bad going for a bloke who grew up in an impoverished, fractious family, and only ended up at Croydon College of Art after running with a violent street gang, and after every art school in London had turned him down.



Sean Scully's *Crate of Air*, 2018, at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (© Sean Scully, courtesy the artist and YSP. Photo: Jonty Wilde)

He was born in Dublin in 1945. His family moved to London when he was four. His parents fought like cat and dog. Sean wet the bed until he was 20 but it wasn't all doom and gloom. The house was full of colourful characters – relatives, friends and neighbours – from useless boxers to transvestite comics. He left school at 16 and drifted for several years before finally going to art school. From then on he never looked back. 'Art, for me, has always had something to do with salvation,' he told me, last time we met, in London last year. 'Most of my friends – half of them, at least – from my childhood are dead, because they went to prison, they got into drugs – violence, of one kind or another.' Sean might have gone the same way, if he hadn't discovered art. 'I am inhabited with an unstoppable ambition. I don't know why, but I'm not discourageable. It just doesn't work on me.'

From Croydon he went to Newcastle University, where he took a first class degree, and then on to America, on a John Knox Fellowship. A residency at Harvard and a professorship at Princeton soon followed. In 1983, he became an American citizen. He lives and works in upstate New York, but he retains his London accent. He sounds a lot like Michael Caine. Like Caine in one of his gangster roles, he's impeccably polite, with an underlying hint of menace. If you met him in a pub you wouldn't mess with him. He looks like a retired bouncer, or a hitman in a Pinter play. If he hadn't become an artist, could he have become a villain? 'There's a racist in all of us, and a murderer in all of us, but then there's a sublime artist in all of us,' he says.

His relationship with America is ambiguous, to say the least. 'Great art generally doesn't come out of a beautiful culture,' he says. 'America, as a society, is shit. Twenty per cent of people in America live under the poverty line. It's so cruel and heartless and indecent.' Yet there's a certain relish in the way he castigates the Land of the Free. 'America is tearing itself apart. All the women hate the men, and half the men hate the other half of the men, and are now scared of the women – and everybody's got a gun!'

We drive through Yorkshire Sculpture Park, to look at Scully's monumental outdoor sculptures – two made of metal, two made of stone. They look like ancient monoliths, closer to archeology than modern art.



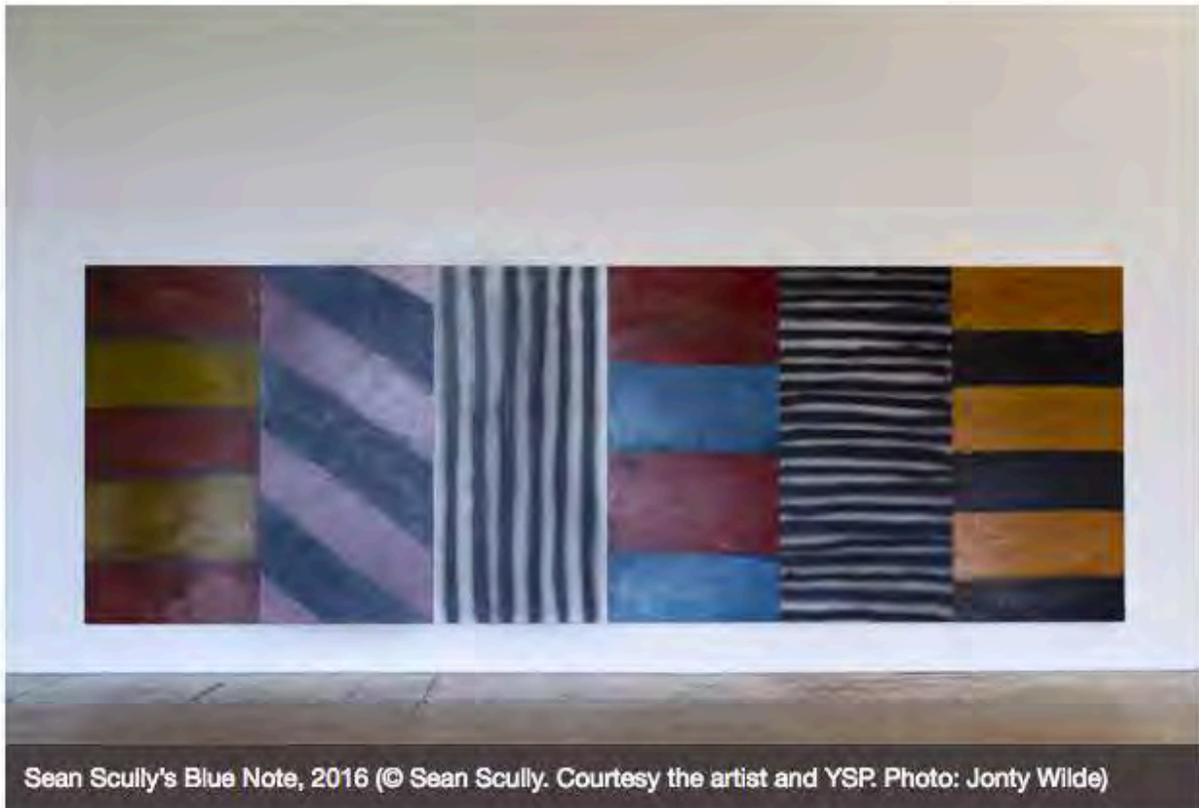
The artist at work (Photo: Liliane Tomasko)

After lunch, in the gallery café, we find a quiet corner and sit down together for a proper chat, one to one. I begin by asking him about his upbringing. It sounds like a childhood full of incident, I say, almost cinematic in its intensity. 'It was very eventful,' he concurs. You can say that again. His grandmother's husband hung himself, in Ireland, during the First World War. His father was illegitimate. 'My grandmother lost her husband, and then my dad was the issue of an affair that she had, with his best friend.' His dad went to prison for desertion from the British Army, during World War Two.

Against this traumatic backdrop, his paintings make a lot more sense. There's sadness in them, but also serenity. Maybe that's why they're so popular. 'They're an attempt at reparation. They're not a picture of me – they're an attempt to reach something better. They're where I want to be – I don't want to put pictures of me moaning about how I suffered into the world. That's boring, because everybody suffers, in different ways.' There's something supremely soothing about them, like looking out to sea.

Evening classes were his redemption. 'It saved me, in a way I never would have been saved in America.' It was going to night school that gave him the appetite for art school. Vincent Van Gogh was an early inspiration, and John Bratby, whose vivid kitchen sink paintings owe a good deal to Van Gogh. 'I loved them! I thought they were so honest, so accessible.' Accessible isn't the first word that springs to mind when you're confronted with one of Scully's paintings, but if you stop puzzling about what they might mean and simply let them wash over you, they become things of beauty. For me, they work better in domestic settings than they do in galleries. If you had a home that was big enough, wouldn't you want one on your wall?

Scully spends a lot of time in Germany and he speaks fondly about Britain, but home for him remains America, a country with which he has a love-hate relationship. He's no fan of Donald Trump, but he believes his power is finite. 'I think the Republicans are going to lose the Senate, and then he'll be a lame duck president – he won't be able to do anything.' For Scully, America's problems run a lot deeper than Trump, stretching right back to the genocide of its original inhabitants. 'That's like having something vile under the carpet that you're standing on, and pretending it's not there.' So what are the things that make him stay? 'The dynamism of it, the energy of it, the can-do quality of it, the generosity and openness of it – these are all qualities that are alive and kicking.' For Scully, like so many artists, America gives him something to kick against. In a perfect society would there be any art at all?



Sean Scully's Blue Note, 2016 (© Sean Scully. Courtesy the artist and YSP. Photo: Jonty Wilde)

And at the grand old age of 73, Scully's art is going from strength to strength. I used to find his paintings a bit samey, endless variations on the same old theme, but his latest work is more varied and more dynamic – the sculpture most of all. 'Most people, when they're 70 they decline. I've sort of gone the other way. Why, I don't know, but I think it's maybe my son.' It's what he said before, when he was showing us around the gallery, but what he didn't say before was that this isn't the first time he's been a father. When Sean was 20 he had another son, called Paul. Paul died in a car crash in 1983 aged 18. A picture by Sean, called Paul, hangs in London's Tate Gallery.

'There's a huge sense of tragedy in me,' he says, but his spirit is indefatigable. 'Unlike Rothko, who I have been compared to, I'm not passive. He was a sedentary person. If you are inhabited by sorrow in some way, which he was, I think then you have to do something about it, and I've done something about it by making my work more aggressive.' It's this aggression which has sustained him, and which ultimately keeps him alive.

Rothko committed suicide. 'He was just doing the same thing all the time,' says Scully. 'He painted himself into a corner.' Will Scully ever paint himself into a corner? 'No,' he says, and I believe him. Like he said at the start of our interview and again at the end, it's all about his son. He's been given a second chance at fatherhood, and you can tell from his paintings, and his sculptures, that this time he's determined not to let it slip away.

*Sean Scully: Inside Outside* is at Yorkshire Sculpture Park until January 6 2019. *Sean Scully: Uninsideout* is at Blain Southern, London W1, to November 17. *Sean Scully: Landline* is at Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, to January 6 2019. *Matisse/Scully* is at Kewenig, Berlin, until 27 October

LISSON GALLERY

*The Brooklyn Rail*  
5 March, 2018

**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

**INCONVERSATION**

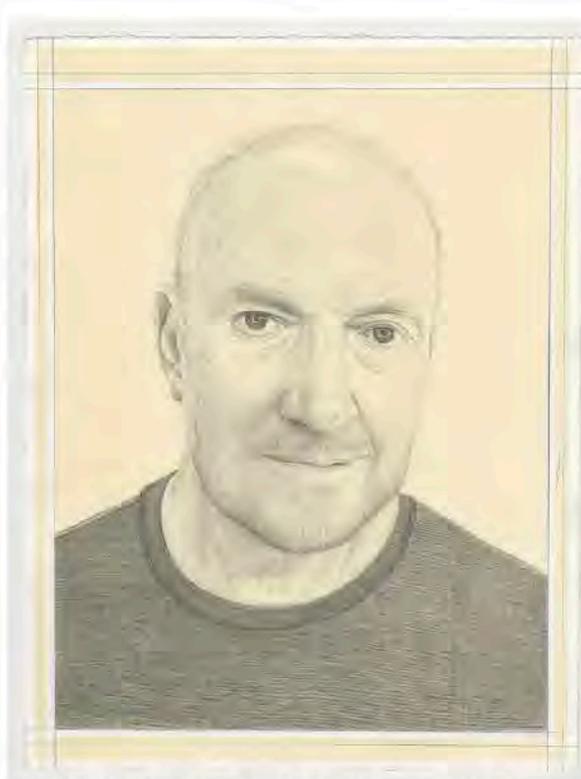
**SEAN SCULLY**  
with David Carrier



Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Desert Night*, 1999. Oil on linen, 108 × 132 inches. The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, museum purchase.

Sometimes the lives of artists and art writers are linked together in mutually fruitful and revealing ways. When I started out writing about visual art, thirty-seven years ago, Sean Scully played an important role in my life. After great youthful success in London, knowing that America was the home of ambitious abstract painting, he moved to New York City. And then, after a few difficult, frustrating years in America he submitted his enormous manifesto painting *Backs and Fronts* (1981) to *Critical Perspectives: Curators and Artists*, an exhibition organized at PS1 by Joseph Masheck. I went out to Queens, saw that show, immediately located Scully in the telephone directory, and scheduled a studio visit. At that time, I was teaching philosophy in a provincial university. Soon enough, then, Scully found a New York dealer. As to myself, I started publishing art criticism. In that decade, I learnt a great deal from him, and so after writing one catalogue essay and various reviews, in 2004, I was able to publish the second monograph on him.

There is a very basic distinction, I discovered, between growing up with an artist and meeting them only when they are well established. Had I never met Scully early on, I would have become a different writer. As it is, to some extent we developed a common working vocabulary, in collaboration, at times, with Arthur Danto, who was my philosophy teacher. Ours proved to be a richly rewarding relationship. And since I have happily followed and occasionally reviewed Scully's exhibitions and publications, his coming exhibition, *Wall of Light*, opening February 28, 2018 at Mnuchin Gallery, seemed the right moment to do this interview.



Portrait of Sean Scully, pencil on paper, by Phong Bui

**David Carrier (Rail):** Sean, since your Mnuchin show is about to open, I thought that we might start by discussing the origin of this series of paintings called “Wall of Light” and how they differ from your prior work. I would say your 1980s works are about conflict, about what happens when opposed forces jam together. And then the “Wall of Light” works, by contrast, reveal a calm utopian world—a harmonious place from the end of history.

**David Carrier (Rail):** Sean, since your Mnuchin show is about to open, I thought that we might start by discussing the origin of this series of paintings called “Wall of Light” and how they differ from your prior work. I would say your 1980s works are about conflict, about what happens when opposed forces jam together. And then the “Wall of Light” works, by contrast, reveal a calm utopian world—a harmonious place from the end of history.

**Sean Scully:** The beginning of the “Wall of Light” paintings came when I was sitting on a beach in Mexico in Zihuatanejo. I’d been visiting the ruins and I was in a moment of repose, so I made a little watercolor that was a memory portrait of my impression of what I’d been doing. After seeing how the light at different times of the day had affected the sacred temples that I was visiting, I wrote “Wall of Light” under it. However, since I was involved in my ’80s collision paintings, the subject of which was discord—such as the way the city was slapped together, and the way people and ideas competed for survival—the “Wall of Light” paintings had to wait their turn. After all, I couldn’t really paint Utopia whilst painting pictures with titles like Clash.

**Rail:** Would you accept the idea that there’s this difference between your two bodies of work?



Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Red Yellow*, oil on canvas, (2012). Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery, New York.

**Scully:** Yes, it's pretty obvious that the "Wall of Light" paintings, and the '80s paintings are completely different. Most of the divisions in my '80s paintings are made sculpturally; whereas in the "Wall of Light" paintings they are painted into place. Plus, the title *Wall of Light*, is clear in its aspiration: to make a wall that is not a brutal divider.

**Rail:** Can you say what inspired you to make abstract walls?

**Scully:** I wanted to make walls that were positive, since many of them are not.

**Rail:** I've always thought that your titles were important. How do they function in the "Wall of Light"?

**Scully:** I want, and wanted to, rescue abstraction from remoteness. So I made my abstract paintings lurch towards association. I have been giving them, strong associational, metaphorical titles for a long time now. *Wall of Light Desert Night* (1999) was painted from memory after a trip I made to the desert outside Las Vegas.

**Rail:** Here, then, we might get to a larger question, which seems to me a central concern for you. How, without any recognizable subject, does abstract art acquire meaning?

**Scully:** Walls in most cases are negative, although it's true to say that without walls you can't have buildings, or indeed subways. However, I wanted to make an antidote to the way the world is brutally divided. There is an exhibition that I am participating in in Caen, France, very soon, that deals with the whole subject of the wall in art. I think it will be very interesting. It's true of course to say that without a wall I don't have anywhere to hang my painting. Which is a painting of a wall. So it's true to say, they've helped us to live, however they've also helped us to loathe each other.

The world has essentially been made by war. So it's not a pretty place. Right now we have a dope running this country who wants more of this, and he is not alone in creating isolation and fear. Trade and art has always been a way to cross these borders. It's an antidote. And abstraction, in particular, has a metaphorical, insinuating power that is difficult to edit or control. In my "Wall of Light" paintings I am making a wall that is full of shifting relationships, that appear and disappear.

**Rail:** Recently I have seen in the commercial art world the fantastic interest in artists from everywhere, which is a very new development. In the catalogue for his famous 1964 show at the Fogg, at Harvard, Michael Fried announced that the leading living painters were three white men, all New Yorkers. When I interviewed Okwui Enwezor for *Brooklyn Rail*, we talked with a sense of wonder about that cultural confidence—it's gone. Has this change affected you?

**Scully:** The world has changed dramatically. As it should, and as it needs to. The lines of communication in the art world, and other worlds, is beyond the control of a few locked-down, hardened, major-city positions. Sure they are important, but the direction of the art world is out of their control. Paris, London, and New York no longer call the shots as they did, even twenty years ago. The internet has, of course, made the world, less geographically physically fixed into place. I was actually in the audience at Harvard in 1972 when Michael Fried said that Jules Olitski was the greatest painter in the world. It's not possible now for a New York insider to nominate a New York insider as world champion. However, it still ought to be a possibility, among other possibilities, because it might be true. If other things can be true, so can that.

**Rail:** You've often written about the importance of being an immigrant going from Ireland to Great Britain, and then Great Britain to America. Does knowing this influence how people look at your art? Do you think that people respond now more readily to this complex personal history?

**Scully:** I'm not formed in one place, which has caused me difficulties in the past. However, the world has since re-organized itself around me; my immigrant history has become positive. I have a global access that seems somehow affected by my personal story, the way my art has developed, and the global reach it now has. I have an exhibition on now in Moscow that has been seen by a huge number of people. Maybe the way the Russians look at my work is different from the Chinese or the Mexicans. But that doesn't matter to me I only want them to be able to use it, and to psychologically cross borders.

**Rail:** In your essay on Morandi, you contrast his provincial situation in Italy to the ambitious world of American-style Abstract Expressionism. Now that America is no longer so triumphant, how is our contemporary art changed?



Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Orange Red*, oil on canvas, (2000). Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery.

**Scully:** Well, I wrote on Morandi, and how his work slowly ascended through the rigors of the art world. If things change around you, you are seen differently. It's as simple as that. The transavantgarde artists who were his contemporaries in the fifties and sixties, like [Gino] Severini—who is an interesting artist—are no longer as famous as they once were. I don't agree though that America is no longer triumphant. America is still a great place. And economically, China's growth is spectacular, but they come from a debased position, and when their people get our freedom, they won't any longer be willing to travel massive distances to work for next to nothing. Then they will have our problems.

**Rail:** Something else has changed in this period—the rise of our grand mega-dealers. You, it seems, have avoided showing with them. Why? What kind of setting do you prefer for your art?

**Scully:** I have avoided the mega-dealers basically because I don't trust them, or the idea. I have more interesting and mutually helpful dialogues with my galleries than I ever could have with a department store that is pretending to be a gallery.

**Rail:** In the 1980s, abstraction was in a curious position. Of course there were major figures—but no longer was it the wave of the future, as Rothko had believed. How do you feel about its situation now?

**Scully:** I was included in the famous survey in MOMA in 1984. There were about six abstract-ish painters. [Elizabeth] Murray, [Katherine] Porter, [Blinky] Palermo, [Brice] Marden, [Thornton] Willis, and me. The rest was flying sofas, and four-eyed people. However, Julian Schnabel and Susan Rothenberg made some truly impressive paintings. I loved it because even though a lot of the paintings from the '80s haven't stood the test of time, some have. And the energy level was wonderful. But this is the cruelty of the star system. A pop-artist friend of mine once told me, "In 1960 there were 112 pop artists and in 1970, there were 12." I personally wouldn't mind if there were none. But I'm also okay with twelve. Abstract painting has made a significant comeback, and there are some great abstract painters around.

**Rail:** Here is a naïve question: how does an abstract painter keep going? I mean, a figurative artist finds new subjects. And so successive paintings are different. Obviously abstraction requires a different dynamic. How would you describe yours?

**Scully:** To be honest, I don't know the answer to that question. I always loved what I was doing, and I thought it was a privilege. I came out of extreme poverty. When I first came to New York, I mistook discouragement for encouragement. Since nobody actually shot me, I thought I was welcome. So it was a beautiful misunderstanding. Really, it's always a question of how you take things.



Courtesy the artist.

**Rail:** When we first met, thirty-five years ago, you were a resolute city-dweller. “A few hours in the country were more than enough,” you once said. But recently you moved both your residence and studio to outside of the city. How has that change influenced your work?

**Scully:** That's true, but then I didn't have my son. My first son died shortly after we met. Then I went quietly into crisis. Love is bigger than anything put in its way. We moved to Tappan for our son, so he could grow up with nature. And of course, everything benefitted. I think my work has been greatly affected by this, and indeed color has made a dramatic entrance into my studio, uniting my early work with my current work.

**Rail:** I know that you were very close to Arthur Danto, who wrote repeatedly about your art. Has anyone taken his role in your intellectual life?

**Scully:** Nobody can replace Arthur Danto. Nor will they.

**Rail:** Your last show at Cheim & Read introduced your sculpture to New York. (I know that previously you've shown sculpture elsewhere.) When did you start making sculpture—and what is the relationship of these works to your paintings?

**Scully:** I have also written about my sculpture, and how it relates to my teenage years in London when I was working a bailing machine, and loading huge vans with flattened cardboard boxes: transforming an empty negative space into a crowded negative space. When I made a huge stone block, down in Aix-en-Provence, I simply made a three-dimensional version of one of my paintings, where space is crowded out. The idea of stacking is obsessively interesting to me, and of course it occurs in my paintings.

**Rail:** You've written very vividly about your political life in London in the 1960s. What, if anything, survives now of the spirit of those times?

**Scully:** You might argue that we did not succeed in the '60s. However, there was tremendous social movement as a result of it. Apartheid is gone in South Africa, and nuclear proliferation slowed down. I am in favor of mutual nuclear disarmament. Since the development of this kind of weaponry, it is collective insanity. So, just because a movement is not a complete success,

it cannot be judged a failure, since any degree of progress, however small or large, is worth fighting for. I personally think that artists should rule the world, since most politicians of all stripes are as dumb as bricks, while artists invent solutions that are humanistic.



Sean Scully, *Air, recinto*, marble and cantera (2018).  
Courtesy the artist

**Rail:** Can we talk a little about your practical concerns with political art?

**Scully:** My work, generally speaking, is not overtly political. I believe that once art shackles itself to a clear identifiable political agenda, it can no longer be great art, which seeks transformation. However, lately I made some clear political art, since I felt cornered into it: due to the folly of our last election. These paintings are called *Ghost*. Since that's what the ideals of a great nation will become, if it doesn't make a U-turn. Whether they are, or will become, great art, I have no idea.

**Rail:** Recently you've had large exhibitions in China—shows that you've gone there to organize. You may remember—when I taught there, some years ago now—I gave a lecture on your art. What was your personal experience of China? How was your art understood, and was it changed by this experience?

**Scully:** I didn't go to China for them to change my art, I went there to change their art. And to accelerate the process of freedom. I must say, I was surprised by how liberal they were in relation to my freedom to speak my mind.

**Rail:** If an ambitious, young artist asked you for advice, what would you say?

**Scully:** Well, first I think it's a stupid question. My answer is always the same. Think only of what you are contributing, not of what you are getting out. The world will love you, that's for sure, but you have to love it first.

---

#### CONTRIBUTOR

##### David Carrier

DAVID CARRIER is co-author with Joachim Pissarro of *Wild Art* (Phaidon, 2013). His next books, with Joachim Pissarro, are *Aesthetics of the Margins / The Margins of Aesthetics* and *Aesthetic Theory, Abstract Art and Lawrence Carroll*.



artasiapacific



Portrait of Sean Scully. Courtesy Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou

OCT 12 2016

CHINA

## INTERVIEW WITH SEAN SCULLY

BY ARTHUR SOLWAY

After Sean Scully's hugely successful and first-ever retrospective in China titled *"Follow the Heart: the Art of Sean Scully 1964–2014, London, New York"* that opened in late 2014 at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum, a second edition of Scully's touring retrospective, *"Resistance and Persistence: Paintings 1967–2015 London and New York"* opened this past April at the Art Museum of Nanjing University of the Arts. *"Resistance and Persistence"* traveled to the Guangdong Museum of Art in Guangzhou, and opens next in early January 2017 at the Hubei Museum of Art in Wuhan.

For many contemporary Chinese scholars and curators, Scully's exhibition is considered as groundbreaking as Robert Rauschenberg's *1987 snow in China*. Curated by Philip Dodd, the former director of London's Institute of Contemporary Art, Scully's exhibition brings together over 40 major works from the painter's long and influential career. "China may change how the West sees abstraction," Dodd remarked, adding that the title of the show reflects something personal about the artist, in how "Scully often resists himself when he's achieved something, and how he tends to resist that achievement."

The artist spoke with *ArtAsiaPacific* in Guangzhou before his opening at the Guangdong Museum of Art to talk about this major second-coming to China, what it means for him, and what he might take from the experience.

***What is it about your work do you think specifically appeals to the people in China? Have you given much thought to this?***

I originally thought it was the repetitive, Zen-like character of my works, but Philip Dodd, the curator of the exhibition, told me it was because of its profundity. I think the Chinese people are extraordinarily uncynical, and if you come from a culture of cynicism or irony, which is what London is—the world capital of irony—and then you go to a city of wise-asses, which is New York, then this [China] is a wonderful place to be. It's like being reborn.

***You have had a long interest in Eastern culture, is this correct?***

Yes, but not as a tourist.



SEAN SCULLY, *Pale Fire*, 1988, oil on linen, 243.8 × 372.1 cm. Courtesy Sean Scully Studio.

***What do you mean? How would you describe that?***

You could describe me as someone with two black belts in different styles of Karate and someone that's not a tourist. It's one thing to pick up a book, like the American painter Mark Tobey, who called himself an Eurasian artist or Pacific-Asian artist. Or how, for example, when a lady came to redesign my kitchen in New York and said, "So you want a Mexican kind of look." I have a condescending attitude toward that. I know that the Chinese don't really appreciate those types of artists.

***So we're talking about some notion of inauthenticity perhaps?***

You can't just pick up a book and then sort of appropriate the work lightly.

***Ding Yi, an abstract artist I respect quite a lot, has said some interesting things about your work. He spoke of both the eccentricity of the work but also of its unironic nature.***

Yes, but we aren't talking about me in that context. Ding Yi is a friend of mine, and I'm not a fake Zen practitioner; I'm a real Zen practitioner. The real deal.

***But I am also thinking about Brice Marden—who has had a long interest in China, particularly Chinese poetry—or Kenneth Rexroth's translations of Tu Fu, or the Cold Mountain poems of Han Shan. How would you describe your dialogue with history? Who are you talking to through your work? Are you having a dialogue or conversation with specific artists like Rothko or Mondrian?***

Not when I'm making my work. I'm not thinking about anyone else and am making my work quite empty minded. I'm not having some kind of conversation with a specific artist—ever. I have eaten art history, and I've digested it, you see, so it's all mixed up. I see it [history] all at once, which is of course what I call a Zen overview, and I'm not taking things on in that way. I am inhabited by these influences from things I've seen in the world, cities I've been in, but I'm not trying to calibrate the way my work is situated.



Installation view of SEAN SCULLY's "Resistance and Persistence: Paintings 1957–2015 London and New York" at Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou. Courtesy GMAA.

***What are your views on the type of art that makes no social commentary, or art that might even take an anti-social position? Again, I'm thinking about artists like Marden or Robert Ryman, in how their work can be read as deeply subjective.***

My work is extremely social and I am very politically connected, which is to say, I care tremendously about events taking place in the world. But I am making something that is preverbal, or let's say nonverbal. What I'm essentially concerned with is humanizing the language that we use in the contemporary world, which is an abstract, repetitive, binary language, and trying to bring that into the history of culture and into the social unconsciousness. But I want to make my work out of same stuff that the world is made with. In other words, the materials that buildings are made out of—and I'm talking about the psychology of it—and the iPhone, the computer, the road systems, the airway lines, the subway systems. All the ordering systems we use in our daily life are in my work.

***When you talk about the substance of the world from a psychological point of view, can you speak a bit about the "Doric" paintings that you started in 2008, which are inspired by Greece and architecture?***

What I did *without* being in Greece and what I did in my paintings, which premiered at the [Benaki Museum](#) in Athens in 2012, were both very deliberate. I wanted to celebrate what Greece had given us, to humanity, and tried to make an architectural metaphor, in which I tried to include, in a sense, the history of romantic painting. For the *Doric* paintings I tried to show something that was based on order and classicism. They are of temple portion. The installation at the Benaki Museum looked like a temple. I tried to honor what Greece has done for us and how they turned back religious fascism. So it's a very pro-Western statement and is pretty overt.

***What are you going to take from China and bring to your work?***

That's a very good question. What I'm going to take from here is a huge amount of inspiration from the people. They're more like me than the Japanese people because I'm not that refined; I'm kind of a rough guy, and I really didn't fit into the Karate matrix. I was always busting at the seams. From this experience I've also taken away the importance of art in the 21st century and what a great humanizing ambassador it is.

***With this perspective on the function of art, what then is your opinion about the role of the artist in today's society or global community?***

Similar to Barnett Newman's views, I think bridging art with society is the most important thing you can do. It's much more important than politics, because politics is a Band-Aid. The body is the culture—our body as a metaphor—and is what politics gets stuck on to. But it eventually falls off and another kind of organizing body comes along. But as Toni Morrison says, culture is the attitudes of people, the feelings, the customs and the consciousness—that is all made by artists and art. It is every bit as powerful as the rules and regulations. For me, contributing to shaping these characteristics of society is the most inspiring thing you can do.

*Sean Scully's "Resistance and Persistence: Paintings 1967–2015 London and New York" was on view at the Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, from September 6 to October 9, 2016.*



**SEAN SCULLY, *Wall of Light Aries*, 2012, oil on linen, 160 x160 cm. Private collection. Courtesy Sean Scully Studio**

*Financial Times*  
31 July, 2015

FINANCIAL TIMES

## Sean Scully's hymn to high art in Spain

An ancient, mountaintop church near Barcelona has been transformed by the painter into a place of pilgrimage for devotees of art as well as religion



Santa Cecilia

Claire Wrathall JULY 31, 2015



Close to the summit of Montserrat, the serrated mountain that rises 1,200m an hour's drive north-west of Barcelona, on a northern slope overlooking the majestic Marganell valley, stands a handsome Romanesque basilica of honey-coloured sandstone, dedicated to Santa Cecilia. It's been there more than 1,000 years (it was consecrated in AD957), won fame in Catalonia as a stronghold against the Napoleonic invasion in 1812, and again against the nationalists in the Spanish civil war, after which it became home to two communities of Benedictine nuns. Yet though walkers in the 3,600ha *parc natural*, as this area of brutal beauty is designated, might happen upon it, it did not welcome visitors. Rather they were directed to the huge 17th-century Benedictine abbey, 3km down the mountain, the site — perhaps unexpectedly — of a fine art museum containing works by Caravaggio, El Greco, Tiepolo, Chagall, Braque, Le Corbusier, Rouault, Miró, Dalí, Picasso, Tàpies and latterly the great Irish-born artist Sean Scully, who has had a studio in Barcelona since 1994 and whose name, in the words of the late philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto, "belongs [on] the shortest of the short list of major painters of our time".

“One day,” says Scully, who knew the mountain well because he used to hike along its many footpaths, “I was invited in to see the library and I met one of the monks, Padre Laplana, who is very interested in contemporary art. We got talking, and he told me they were restoring Santa Cecilia and asked me if I wanted to do some paintings for it”.

At the end of June, on the artist’s 70th birthday, the church, which had lain empty and disused since 2000, was reinaugurated by the abbot and stands finally to become a place of pilgrimage, not least for art lovers. For though churches have always commissioned contemporary art — even Renaissance artists were contemporary once — and continue to do so, not since the Rothko Chapel opened in Houston in 1971, and before that the Matisse chapel in Vence in 1951, has a single artist of this magnitude been given carte blanche to decorate an entire church. “They said I could do whatever I liked with it,” he says. In light of the age and monumental beauty of the building he had to work with, the result, I’d contend, is yet more captivating, more atmospheric, than its forebears.

Over the past five years Scully has made six substantial paintings for it, each instantly recognisable from his trademark horizontal and vertical stripes and stacks. “They’re about things that fit and don’t fit,” he says, “blocks pushing up against each other as if they’re coming together or competing for space and coming apart so they all have a sort of energy about them.”



One work is a substantial three-by-six metres, consisting of 14 panels of painted aluminium mounted on rusted Corten steel that had to be welded together in situ. “So it’ll have to stay there for another thousand years,” he quips. Indeed all but one of the works have been painted on metal. “The brush moves a lot faster than it does on paper or canvas,” he says. “Copper is the slipperiest. The surface is very responsive to every movement you make; it’s like ice-skating as opposed to walking.”

If the paintings are, for the most part, dark and sombre, there are also three small colourful frescoes, a medium he had never worked in, “to bring a little playfulness and joy to the chapel”, and eight small stained-glass windows to filter the light. Behind the altar hangs a great curved panel, or retrochoir, of sheets of coloured glass, another material he had not worked with before. The altar itself, two rough-hewn slabs of stone, supports a cross of stacked blocks of ultramarine glass, flanked by a pair of almost constructivist wrought-iron candlesticks, again designed by Scully, as are a pair of matching torchères.

Aside from the altar cross, and two smaller glass crosses that hang either side of the apse, there is no overt Christian iconography in what he has created for the basilica, though the cobalt glass of the retrochoir alludes to the blue the Virgin Mary tends to wear in Renaissance paintings, and the 14 panels of what Scully calls the huge “kick-ass painting” refers to the 14 Stations of the Cross. One painting, “Cecilia”, also includes a panel of exposed aluminium painted to evoke a stave on a sheet of manuscript paper, a reference to the church’s dedicatee, the patron saint of music. But there is, says Scully, who may have been raised a Catholic but espouses no religion now, “a very profound aspect of the spiritual in what I do. That’s where abstraction dominates, I think. It expresses what cannot be described anecdotally.”



Some of Sean Scully's artworks inside the church

Even before the opening of Santa Cecilia, Montserrat was a rewarding place to come, not just for the craggy, almost lunar beauty of its landscape. The mountain is a place of miracles and legends. Some believe an icon of a Black Madonna, made by St Luke, was brought here by St Peter 50 years after Christ’s birth. And it has been claimed that Montserrat was the model for Montsalvat, the domain of the castle of the Holy Grail in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, a theory given credence by the 13 deserted and varyingly ruined hermitages that dot the landscape. These are less remote now than they once were because, conveniently for tourists, there are signposted footpaths to help find them.

Despite all the visitors who flock here — Scully tells me proudly there are plans for every school in Barcelona to bring its pupils to see the reopened Santa Cecília — it retains the feeling of a sanctuary, calm and cool against the savage summer sun and the winds that can rage up here. With its immense walls, barrel-vaulted ceilings and ravaged stone floor (above which wooden walkways have been installed so visitors have a level surface on which to walk), the architecture is austere, ancient, permanent.

If art is now a religion, then this is a perfect place to practise it and very much worth a pilgrimage.

More divine displays: European cathedrals with 21st-century art

Gerhard Richter's paintings may change hands for tens of millions of pounds, but that did not stop him accepting a commission to design the glass for the 20m-high gothic window at the end of the south transept of **Cologne's** medieval cathedral ([koelner-dom.de](http://koelner-dom.de)). This involved 11,500 squares of mouth-blown antique glass in 72 colours.

A few years before its installation in 2008, the late Sigmar Polke had designed a stained-glass window for Romanesque Grossmünster ([grossmuenster.ch](http://grossmuenster.ch)) in **Zurich**, an even older cathedral, founded by Charlemagne at the beginning of the 12th century.

Then last year in **London**, St Paul's Cathedral ([stpauls.co.uk](http://stpauls.co.uk)) unveiled Bill Viola's four-channel video installation, "Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water)", a seven-minute loop with no sound depicting martyrdoms involving the four elements. In the South Quire Aisle, it's on long-term loan from Tate and stands to be joined by a second Viola work later this year.

In **Venice**, meanwhile, San Giorgio Maggiore is, for the current Biennale, home to two installations from Catalan artist Jaume Plensa. One is a giant transparent hand made from a steel mesh composed of letters from eight alphabets, making the sign of benediction.

Perhaps the most extraordinary intervention by an artist in a consecrated space is the six-metre pink neon sign by Tracey Emin that hangs above the west door of the Anglican cathedral in **Liverpool** ([liverpoolcathedral.org.uk](http://liverpoolcathedral.org.uk)), which reads: "I felt you and I knew you loved me."

## Details

Santa Cecília de Montserrat is open from 10am to 6.30pm daily, except Tuesdays. The only place to stay nearby is the three-star Hotel Abat Cisneros, next to the monastery (about £80 a night), but Montserrat is an easy day trip from Barcelona, especially if you have a car. Otherwise there are trains from Plaça d'Espanya to Montserrat Aeri, from which a cable car takes you to within a short walk of the monastery. For details visit [montserratvisita.com](http://montserratvisita.com). Claire Wrathall was a guest of the new Cotton House Hotel in Barcelona

*Photographs: Dani Rovira/Museu de Montserrat; Raül Maigí*

LISSON GALLERY

*Art Review*  
March 2015

# ArtReview ArtReview Asia

Follow the Heart: The Art of Sean Scully, 1964–2014, London, New York

23 November – 25 January 2015, Shanghai Himalayas Museum

By **Mark Rappolt**



*China Piled Up, 2014, Corten steel. © the artist*

Given that more than 100 of Scully's artworks are gathered together in property developer Dai Zhikang's privately funded museum, there is no other way of describing this exhibition than as 'major'. If that seems like a quick descent into PR-speak, then it should give you a taste of how this show (curated by Philip Dodd) is framed. It is littered with wall texts that attempt to 'connect' the artist's work to a Chinese audience. We learn that Scully read Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975) during the 1980s, has a black belt in karate and that his black-and-white works resonate (somehow) with Chinese ink painting. We even get a celebrity endorsement in the form of Bono's (in his guise as a collector) thoughts on Scully's work. No mention, of course, of Ai Weiwei, whom Scully taught at Parsons School of Design in New York during the 1980s. All of which proposes the question of to what extent you can ignore the most obvious context of this show (which is housed in a gallery surrounded by a five-star hotel, a shopping mall and, on my November visit, a soon-to-be-opened Germanstyle Christmas market): that of a celebrated artist trying to conquer an Asian market.

Curiously then, given Scully's reputation as one of Europe and America's foremost abstract painters, the centrepiece of the exhibition is not a painting, but a sculpture, *China Piled Up* (2014). It is inspired, apparently, by China's status as the steel capital of the world. You'll not be surprised to learn that it comprises a series of boxlike steel frames that offer a geometry not unlike that of the wooden shipping crates in which Scully's paintings travel. They present the viewer with a maze of different, alternate perspectives and passageways through the whole. It seems an open structure, despite its obvious cagelike form. A double-sided or ironic take on China? It's certainly the kind of wit of which the rest of what's on show suggests Scully – who can come across as an austere and strict abstractionist – is capable.

The exhibition itself is arranged broadly chronologically (allowing it to be further animated by the artist's biography), moving from early Fauvism-inspired figurative works, through to experiments with geometric units of colour during the 1970s, more bricklike units culminating in the *Wall of Light* paintings started during the late 1990s, and more recent series, among them the artist's *Doric* works. The paintings in the latter series (such as *Doric Proteus*, 2013), which came into being around the time Greece was sliding towards financial ruin, comprise ordered grids of weirdly colourful greys, whites and blacks that evoke the same sort of tension between freedom and constraint as the exhibition's central sculpture.

In the end, however, it's one of the smaller rooms, featuring a packed display of photographs – of shacks, peeling walls, doors and doorways – and works on paper that is the most fascinating. Clearly grounding Scully's compositions, with their focus on geometry, light and texture, in lands (Morocco, Mexico, the Dominican Republic) and human landscapes. Even if certain aspects of the presentation (not Scully's work itself) seem like an overcooked marketing exercise (of course every exhibition is to some degree an exercise in marketing or positioning), the work on show here is strong enough to rise above that and tell its own, surprisingly human, story.

*This article was first published in the March 2015 issue.*

*The Guardian*  
January 2015



**Sean Scully**

## Sean Scully: 'My therapist sent me away'

Brought up by warring parents, Sean Scully wet the bed until he was 20 and went 'insane' when his son died. Throughout it all, he kept painting. He talks about pet rabbits, living in the land of guns - and why he thinks Ai Weiwei has it easy



**Mark Lawson**  
Wed 7 Jan 2015 08.00 GMT

[f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [1,326](#) [39](#)

A social media-style profile card for Mark Lawson. It includes a circular profile picture of a man with glasses, his name "Mark Lawson", the date and time "Wed 7 Jan 2015 08.00 GMT", and social sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Email. Below these are icons for a share function and a comment bubble, with the numbers "1,326" and "39" respectively.

▲ 'I'm not in control' ... Sean Scully. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

**W**ith their grids of stripes and squares, the paintings of Sean Scully resemble playing boards for games not yet invented, or the flags of imaginary countries. But, though these abstract compositions are not conventional landscapes, his sense of shape and light is influenced by the three places he knows best: Ireland, his birthplace in 1945 and the homeland of his parents; north London, where he grew up and went to art school; and New York, where today he mainly lives and works, now a US citizen.

So which of this trinity of influences figures most in his dreams and ideas? “I’m Irish in the mythic, romantic sense but, in the living sense, I’m a Londoner. My wife [the artist Liliane Tomasko] is Swiss and, at home in America, we like to sing *Maybe It’s Because I’m a Londoner* and take the piss out of it.”

On the day we meet, he is briefly visiting the [Timothy Taylor gallery](#) in London, his UK representative, on a stopover between New York and Shanghai, where he has just become the first western artist to have a major retrospective. [Follow the Heart](#) covers five decades of his work, and will transfer to Beijing in March.

But he has been spending increasing amounts of time in London recently - summer trips and visits to the funerals of elderly relatives - and is increasingly tempted to remigrate from the US: “My son is five and he is my most important project, and I don’t want to bring him up in the land of guns.”

He fantasises about buying the house in Highbury, close to the old Arsenal stadium, where he grew up. The first art he remembers seeing was at the local Catholic church, the series of devotional paintings known as the “stations of the cross”, which show the scenes leading to Christ’s crucifixion: “They were very geometric, like Russian paintings.”

Catholicism also influenced his artistic development in another way: “As a child, the most important people in my life were my pet rabbit and Mary, mother of Jesus. Plaster of Paris was pretty cheap, and so I’d make sculptures of Mary and the rabbit and play games with them. They’d get married and have tea parties and so on.”



▲ 'I don't know how a painting is going to come out' ... Kind of Red (2013) by Sean Scully  
Photograph: Christoph Knoch/Arla Borel



The Scullys had left Dublin for London when he was four and, though Ireland remained present in the accents and anecdotes of relatives, it was a long time before he went back. He was unable to go on a secondary school trip there because he suffered what is medically known as nocturnal enuresis until the age of 20: “And if you’d been brought up by my parents, you’d have wet the bed as well.” Throughout adolescence he wore, in a now discredited Pavlovian experiment, a sort of urinary-chastity belt at night that triggered a ringing bell when it became wet, waking up the wearer.

So what was it about his parents that brought on this condition? “Constant extreme anxiety. It was like living in a warzone. My father was a genius footballer, a natural two-footed centre-forward who had played for Arsenal juniors, but he was sent out to work aged 14 and so lived out his life in a frustrated, rageful way. And my mother was a fucking force of nature, man. So, between them, it was always warring and discord and the constant threat of violence in the air. She would provoke my father until he couldn’t take it any more ... ”

So he hit her? “He had. And he hit me a few times. But he also saved me a few times from gangs and so on - because we grew up very rough. Although they probably have cappuccino there now.”

Growing up poor in north London, did he have much exposure to art? “Not art, but showbiz. My mother used to sing Unchained Melody, which is a profoundly melancholic song. And my art is very melancholy. We used to go to places like Margate in the summer and there’d be talent contests and my mother would enter and win every time.”

It was only in his 30s, when a touring exhibition of his went to Ireland, that he spent time in his birthplace as an adult: “That was when Ireland went ‘whooooooooosh’ in me.” He adopts an Irish accent to personify the island: “Get over here, Sean, you’re an Irishman and that’s the end of it.”

Two Irish writers - James Joyce and Samuel Beckett - are usually mentioned in connection with Scully’s work, and have been reflected in it: one of the pictures he’s currently working on features Lucky, the slave from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. But, for me, the artist’s work has also always invoked the poems of Seamus Heaney. The square is the dominant configuration in Scully’s abstracts, and the same shape - representing neat agricultural fields and the dimensions of a four-line stanza - recurs throughout Heaney’s verse, overlapping, in a sequence called *Squarings*, with a type of throw used in a children’s game of marbles.



▲ 'I've always wanted my art to be global rather than local. I want to make paintings that people everywhere can relate to' ... Sean Scully. Photograph: Martin Godwin/Guardian



Scully's wide smile lights up: "Yes, I remember that word from my childhood. Seamus and I were good friends. He asked to use one of my pictures on a book of his, *Opened Ground*. And then, out of that, I did a series called *Cut Ground*. I'm constantly referring to land, cutting into land. And a lot of Seamus' poetry is about cutting. It's a very Irish thing: cutting into soil that has accumulated over thousands of years."

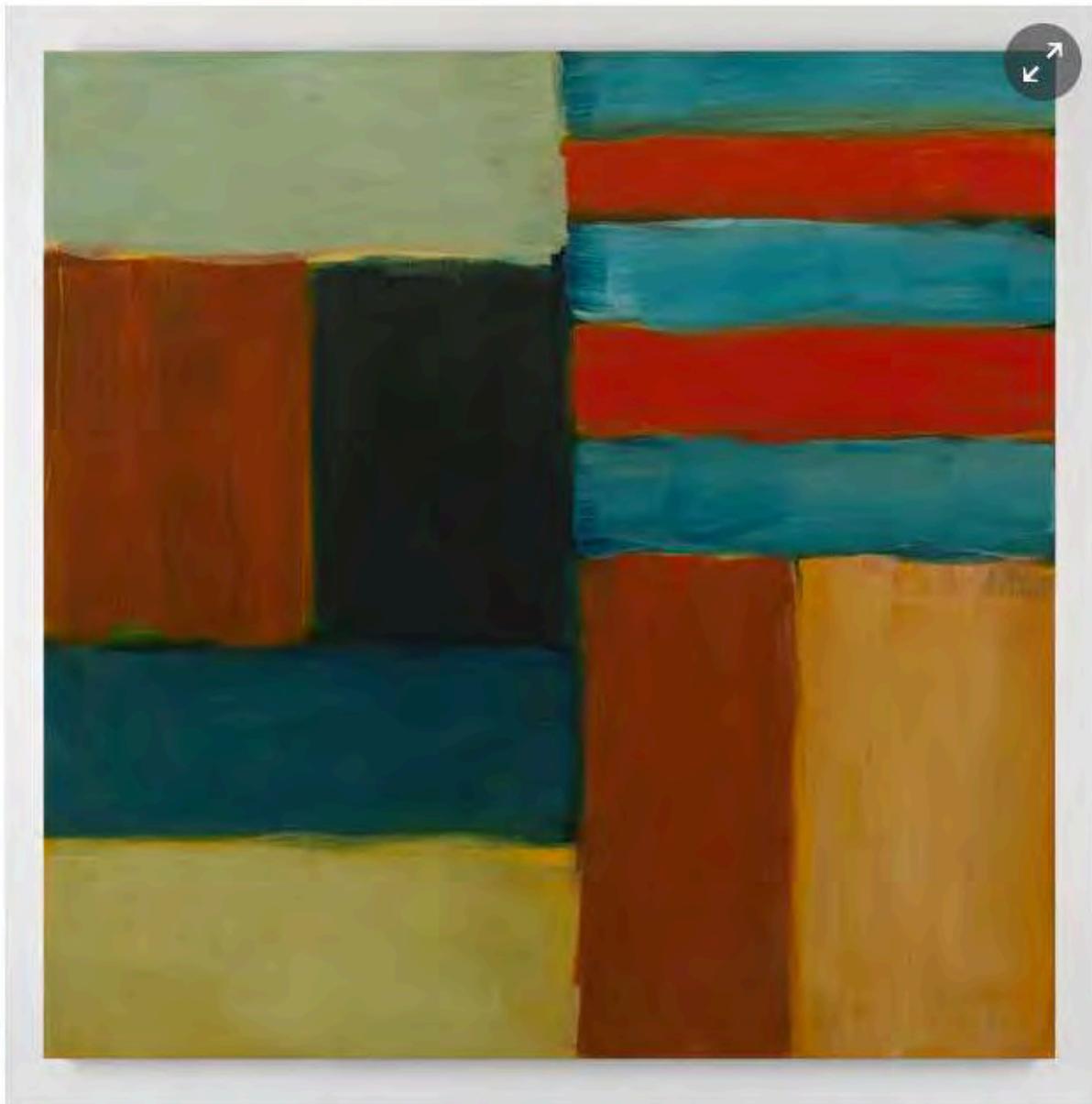
Scully points to one of his paintings, which is hanging on the wall of the office we've borrowed at the gallery. "Actually, that's one of the *Cut Ground* series over there. It's called *Battered Ground*."

So what does he think when he suddenly sees one of his pictures like that? Does he remember painting it? "Oh, yes, absolutely. I painted that in Dulwich, in 1990 or so, because I'd bought that house in 1989. I thought, whatever happened, I'd always have that house, but I had to sell it and give it to my ex-wife."

He may have a vivid memory of his completed works, but there's little clarity in advance: "I'm not in control of it: I don't know how a painting is going to come out. For decades, I never used green in a picture, and suddenly I'm using it all the time. But I'm really not conscious of making those decisions."

Twice shortlisted for the Turner prize, he used to dream of a big show at Tate Modern, but insists that the Chinese show means more: "I've always wanted my art to be global rather than local. I want to make paintings that people everywhere can relate to." And perhaps an abstract artist is more likely to achieve that ambition than a figurative one, because colours and shapes are a shared international language? "Absolutely. That is one reason that it appeals to me."





▲ 'I want to live to 95 - to be there for my son - and I hope I'm still staggering out of the chair to paint' ... Blue Red, from the Cut Ground series (2011) by Sean Scully. Photograph: Timothy Taylor Gallery



Scully is an admirer of the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). Malevich's work was suppressed and destroyed by the Russian Communist authorities because abstraction was seen as a decadent inferior to the favoured artistic mode of socialist realism. But, conversely, there is a suspicion that the growing popularity of abstraction in China is due to the fact that the genre is very hard to censor. "It's uncensorable," Scully agrees. "However, that said, from what I see when I go to China, the censorship is minimal."

I suggest that Ai Weiwei, who remains under heavy surveillance and travel restrictions, might not agree. "Ah, I knew you were going to say Ai Weiwei. He was a student of mine [in New York]; I know him very well. He's manipulating all that to stimulate his market in the west; he's playing a game against China, and the west loves him for that."

But he did get beaten up by the police, didn't he? "He got whacked on the head, yes. But I got banged on the head once in jolly old London, in Trafalgar Square, protesting against apartheid. I'm not saying China's liberal, like we are, but I'll tell you something: it's on its way."

Scully has suffered painful times, including, in 1983, the death of a son from a previous marriage ("basically, I went insane but didn't deal with it because I wanted to keep painting") and, last year, near-fatal complications from medication for a back injury.

Nothing, though, has ever kept him from his studio for long. "I went to see a therapist for a while and, in the end, he told me to go away. He said: 'Although there's a lot wrong with you, you like yourself the way you are. And he was right. I've made 1,400 paintings by hand. You'd have to be a madman to do that. But it's what I want to do. I want to live to 95 - to be there for my son - and I hope I'm still staggering out of the chair to paint. I'm not one of these people who is privileged with doubt. I look at my paintings sometimes and I think they're fucking wonderful. I love them."

# LISSON GALLERY

artnet News  
31 August, 2014

artnet® news

## artnet Asks: Sean Scully

The painter's work is showing at the Ludwig Museum, Koblenz.

artnet News, August 31, 2014

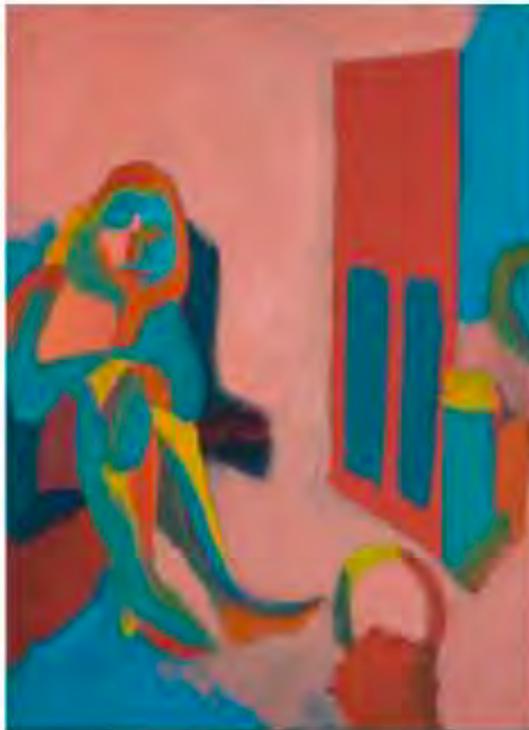


Sean Scully Photo: Courtesy Museum Ludwig

**Sean Scully's** striped and checkered abstractions are a familiar sight to most in the art world. But, the Irish painter wasn't always a foe of form. In his early practice, figurative works were inspired by expressionist works like those of the Brücke artists and other European modernists. For the first time, the Ludwig Museum in Koblenz, Germany has brought together some of Scully's early figurative canvases alongside his iconic abstract works for a seminal show that is open through November 16 and will subsequently travel to the Kunsthalle Rostock and other institutions.

**The show at the Museum Ludwig gives a rare look into your figurative practice alongside the well-known abstract works. What spurred your departure from figurative painting?**

I left figuration for the freedom of abstraction! To be able to think openly and reuse structures that could be repeated to open up new meanings by making small changes.



Sean Scully, *Untitled (Seated Figure)* (1967)  
Photo: Courtesy Ludwig Museum Koblenz

**What do you think they illuminate particularly about your later work?**

My subsequent abstraction is clearly carrying the memory of the body, plus my colors and the way I paint shows an interest in the inspiration of the things in the real world.

**You've said in the past that your vaguely checkered compositions are reflective of the Irish society you grew up in. Could you explain that further?**

In Ireland one sees a very powerful sense of repeated geometry. This is in the music, in Neolithic art such as standing stones, and street art such as the way houses and structures are painted with bold simple color divisions.



Sean Scully, *Horizontal Soul* (2014)  
Photo: Courtesy Ludwig Museum Koblenz

**German expressionism seems like a logical touch-point for your work in the context of this show, but what movement/artists have most greatly influenced your practice?**

German expressionism is powerful in my work. However, what I did recently was to take the humanism of expressionism and push it through the grid of minimalism, thus creating a new abstraction.

**When did you know you wanted to be an artist?**

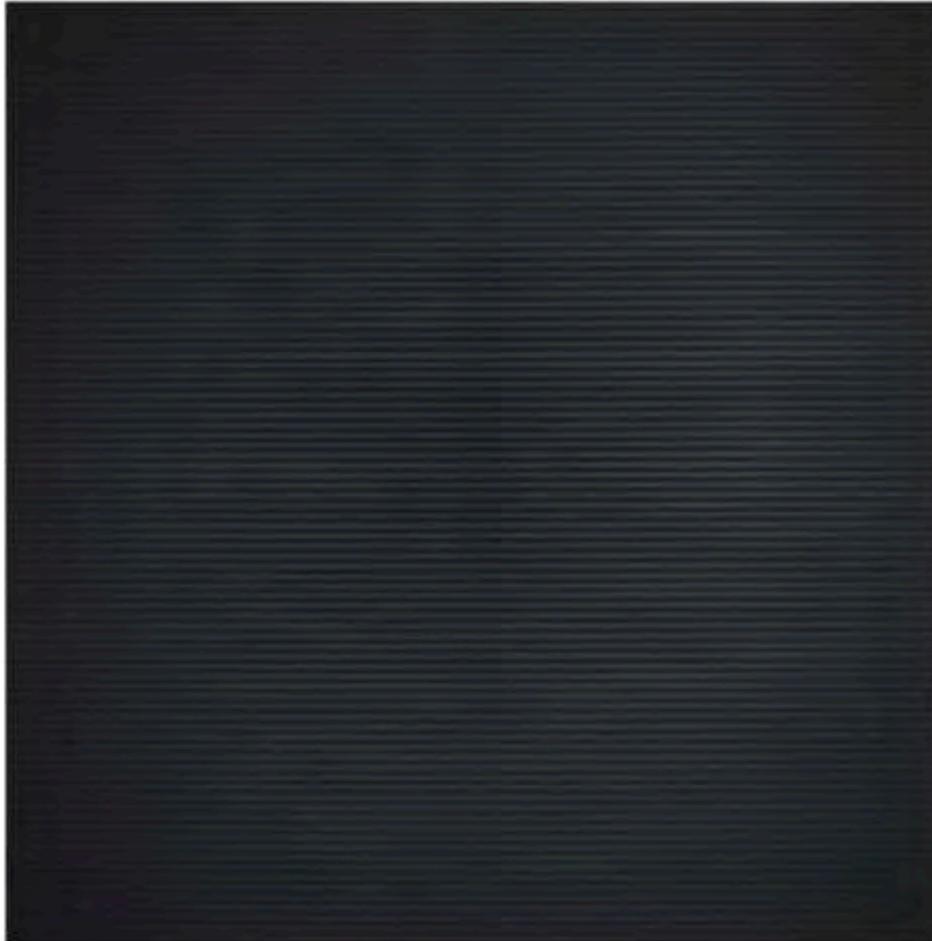
When I was 4.

**If you could own any work of modern or contemporary art, what would it be?**

A room of Cy Twombly paintings.

**What are you working on currently?**

I am working on a big retrospective in China. This will include a huge metal sculpture. I am also working on *landline paintings* that are made up of horizontal bands.



Sean Scully, *Horizontal Black* (1980)  
Photo: Courtesy Ludwig Museum Koblenz