LISSON GALLERY

The Brooklyn Rail
1 November 2023

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

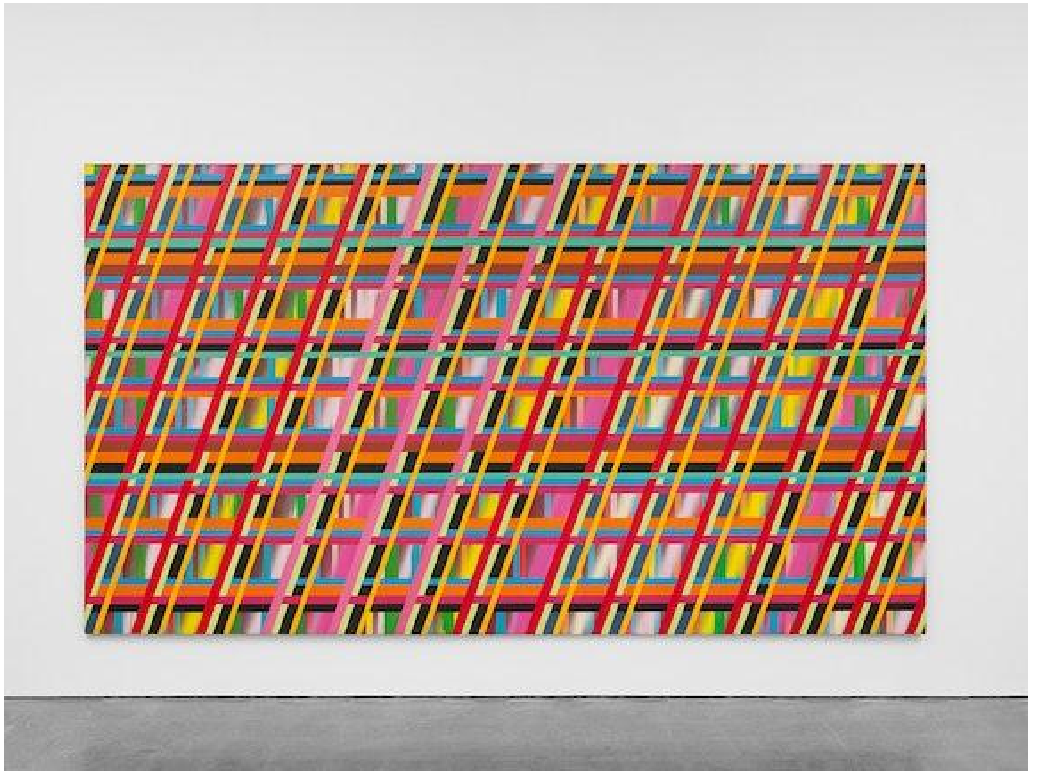
Sean Scully: *LA Deep*

By Terry R. Myers

Installation view: *Sean Scully: LA Deep*, Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

ON VIEW
Lisson Gallery
Sean Scully: LA Deep
September 23 – November 4, 2023
Los Angeles

One positive outcome from the distraction of art fairs has been that more artists and their dealers are working together to make gallery solo exhibitions that juxtapose new work with early work. When done with sensitivity and a good eye, these presentations often become far greater than the sum of their parts, an achievement rarely achieved in stalls that bring to mind a county fair. And when an exhibition provides the bonus of rebuilding a historical connection to its actual location, as does this focused yet sweeping exhibition of ten works by Sean Scully (nine paintings and one sculpture installed outdoors), its use-value rises.



Sean Scully, *Blaze*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 85 x 152 3/4 x 1 3/8 inches. © Sean Scully, Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Sean Scully's paintings have, on several occasions, been exhibited in Los Angeles before. What makes this Lisson exhibition unique is that, in the case of three included paintings (one from 1971, two from 1974), it provides a kind of homecoming, given that they were first shown in 1975 at a gallery with a fantastic name, La Tortue in Santa Monica (just after Scully's arrival in the United States in Los Angeles; he would move to New York soon after the opening of the Santa Monica exhibition.) These paintings, now roughly fifty years old, are part of what Scully called the "Supergrid" series that he began while a student in the UK during the 1960s. The three canvases take full advantage of the formal visual language of their time, as well as the practical advantages of acrylic paint: fast drying and accommodating of the tape used to make a clean, straight edge. The earliest painting, *Blaze* (1971), is a highly

regulated riot of intersecting horizontal and diagonal bright stripes (they lean to the right, delivering to the painting an overall visual thrust) that exist on top of more painterly vertical and diagonal stripes. The painting's clear juxtaposition of front-and-just-behind demonstrates how much action can be generated in the narrowest of depths, as the lines that are behind are not only broken into rhythmic segments, they are also painted in a manner best called atmospheric. This effect is further developed in the two paintings from 1974 —*Final Grey 1/2* and *Second Order 1/2*—in which, with the advantage of the direct hindsight this exhibition gives us, it is clear the seeds of Scully's subsequent paintings were planted.

Before turning to the recent work, it's worthwhile to note, as Peter Frank does in his informed and informative essay in the exhibition's catalogue, that these early paintings of Scully's fit perfectly well with the ways in which numerous Los Angeles painters were dealing with the grid in the wake of such things as the Finish Fetish and/or Light and Space artists: "The rhythmic, colorful, yet allover, compositionally neutral paintings Scully presented to LA found themselves at home." One can hope that one of these works will stay here in a museum.

Installation view: *Sean Scully: LA Deep*, Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

At the press preview, Scully mentioned that someone remarked (and I'm paraphrasing) that he had just decided to turn the imagery of his work around to show what was behind in front and vice versa. It's a far-from-wrong observation, but what strikes me most about the time and the perception of the actual and imagined space between his work of the 1970s and now is the extent to which his work seems effortlessly to blur the lines between many of the claimed absolutes usually held in opposition. Yes, it is not inaccurate to call Scully's latest paintings abstract given the geometry of their structures and the organization of their components. It is far less common to consider formalism alongside the painterly, a combination that Scully uses to give his work qualities that, while still abstract, convey the representational complexities embedded in nature and our (human) connections to them. (It should be noted that Scully recently has been making paintings that are portraits.) To my eye, a large work like *Wall Landline Triptych* (2022) not only has his well-grounded structural feature of using part of a painting as a frame for another painting inset flush into its surface (figure/ground, like the horizon, is with us to stay) but also asserts the never-ending value of relationships that reinforce their perpetual renegotiation, shifting, then doubling, or tripling, or beyond, reaching for the level of interconnectedness quantum physicists are exploring today. To that end, one painting, *Dark In* (2023), shown in a room with the two paintings from 1974, wove the entire exhibition together, suggesting in the broad stripes and inset blocks of its countenance that whether or not things are front to back, or back and forth, separation remains ever impossible.

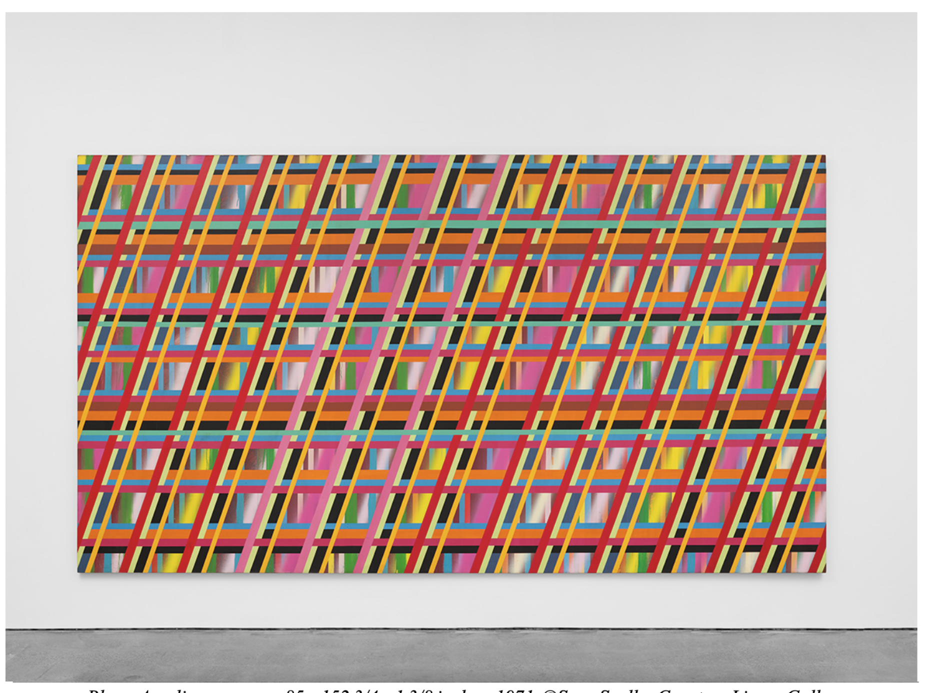
Contributor

Terry R. Myers

Terry R. Myers is a writer and independent curator based in Los Angeles, and an Editor-at-Large of the *Rail*.

White Hot Magazine
October 24 2023

Sean Scully: LA Deep Show at Lisson Gallery



Blaze, Acrylic on canvas, 85 x 152 3/4 x 1 3/8 inches, 1971, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

By LORIEN SUÁREZ-KANERVA October 24, 2023

"I undo the authority of the grid
I make the edges tremble
And the color unnameable
All that clarity and certainty
I subvert."

Sean Scully, *Grid*, October 9, 2023.

From September 23 to November 4, Lisson Gallery's *LA Deep* exhibition draws together five decades of Sean Scully's paintings. The exhibition comprises new artworks and some of his earlier 1970s paintings from his time in Los Angeles. LA-based art critic Peter Frank drew from Scully's early history in LA to relate the artist's nascent fondness for the city. "His first one-person show in the United States was March [1975] in California, at La Tortue, a prominent gallery in Los Angeles. He came out…to open the show and to lecture at universities throughout the state. The warm reception given his show…added to Scully's enthusiasm…as did his discovery of an active and sophisticated art scene." Sean Scully held an opening talk with artist Andy Moses at the gallery about their shared connection to Los Angeles.

Scully is a groundbreaking artist. As Arthur C. Danto observed, "Scully's historical importance lies in the way he has brought the great achievement of Abstract Expressionist painting into the contemporary moment." Art critic David Carrier likewise affirmed, Scully "moved from being a very skilled minimalist to occupying a powerful position very much all his own." Scully forged a distinctly original creative path for himself as a painter and for the future of painting itself.

In my conversations with Scully, he reflected on this solitary path. The experience was "existentially deep - I was alone."

When I painted 'Backs and Fronts,' it was a challenge. I was breaking the rules -- written by the most important critics. I did it without sense. Because when you placed it against another system, it didn't make sense. It is necessary to reinvent a way of seeing or accepting it. It was difficult for most. The edges were broken. The proportions didn't make sense mathematically. It was a matter of feeling. And the proportions of my body. And the colors were completely intuitive. And that's why I was breaking all the rules.

Backs and Fronts, Oil on Linen and canvas, twelve attached canvases, 96 x 240 inches, 1981, ©Sean Scully

Scully moved away from American Formalism of the 80s and its focus on a "purity of abstraction and perfection of geometry." He sought to humanize geometry.

I think of geometry as profound and timeless. And in a sense, the thing that binds us together. I have a deeply held belief about trying to make geometry speak to people instead of making them submit to it and the authority of perfection. Impurity makes life inventive, and purity leads to sterility, so my paintings look the way they look. They're romantic, moody, and emotive. Sometimes, there is a lot of melancholia in them, touching on my being Irish and born on the street.

Scully observed that human relationships and how to be are our central problems now. He perceives this tension in human relationships as inherent to being human. Sartre's "irrevocable three*"* serves as its reasoning– where, by its very nature, perception grips irreconcilable tensions upon identity and its definition of and for the self and the other and their relationships.

Stack Colors, Aluminum and automotive paint, 108 x 48 x 48 inches, 2018, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Outside by the entrance of the gallery stands Scully's *Stack Colors* sculpture. The treatment of its edges placed this way and that without apparent rhyme or reason draws from Scully's seminal 1981 *Backs and Fronts* painting. The intuitive arrangement of forms, where squares are layered "before, between, and behind," posits the question of their relationship to each other in space. It is an essential facet of Scully's work. The multicolored sediment-like strata operates like "landlines" building up a composite tower bridging earth and sky. The "landline" is a distinguishing harmonious element in Scully's work. It has a romantic quality assisted by the associations with the parallel arrangement of the horizon and its linkages to the land, sea, and sky.

Scully found an affinity with Samuel Beckett's writing: "ash grey sky mirrored earth mirrored sky," which Scully identified as a parallel composition to his landline paintings.

Upon entry into the gallery's main exhibition space, Scully's newest *Landline* paintings are arranged as a set of triptychs on the right and left side walls. The arrangement emphasizes the relationships and interconnections between his works.

(left) Wall Landline Dark Glade, 85 x 75 x 2 1/8 inches, Oil on aluminum, 2022, Wall Landline Red, 85 x 75 x 1 5/8 inches, Oil on aluminum, 2022, (right) Wall Landline Tappan, 85 x 75 x 2 1/8 inches, Oil on aluminum, 2022, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The *Landline* paintings can also be appreciated in light of Andy Moses' conversation with Scully about the authority of ruins – addressing how ancient monuments hold material weight through time with their stone structure. Within each work, an *inset* painting has center stage. Scully described the concept of the inset: "Here are basically two paintings: the painting of a hole and a painting of what fills that hole…Trying to put something into the painting that gives it a human figurative, figural aspect as a metaphor. In these paintings…I am dealing with the figure in the window." Scully refers to the figure in the window for his appreciation of Matisse's prevailing use of the motif in his paintings. In connection to the figurative associations Scully creates within his abstract work, art critic Dávid Fehér observed that "the window operates as a crossing point between mimesis and abstraction."

Dark In, Oil on aluminum, 85 x 75 x 2 1/8 inches, 2023, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The unorthodox structure of Beckett's writing appealed to Scully. The painter admired it as "so frontal and real life." Beckett captured conceptual sensibilities in a statement about his work in a 1959 letter. 'Holes in paper open and take me fathoms from anywhere*"*. So also, Scully's *insets* transport viewers.

Cityscapes and his travels to Morocco in 1969 inspired Scully's *Supergrid* paintings. The beauty of numerous multicolored dyed wool strips stretched and laid out as an arrangement appealed to him. Scully also wanted to bring together the energies of Jackson Pollock and Mondrian into his work. "Pollock represented for me a kind of desire and freedom [while] Mondrian represented conscious structure and morality." Scully recognized a fusion he could contribute from these irreconcilable facets. "I tend to try to work with -both of them- all the time."

Blaze as a painting beckons on a prominent wall. Employing fast-drying acrylic paint, tape, paintbrush, roller, and a spray gun, Scully created a zig-zagging array of juxtaposed -appearing and reappearing stripes and bands. Scully observed of his *Supergrid* paintings: "by overlaying systems which are measured differently. They are vertical and horizontal, and layered and layered, until I got to the point where I didn't think I could put anything else on without losing all the moves I had made." This endless symmetry presents neither a beginning nor an end.

Guadalupe, Oil on aluminum, 85 x 150 x 2 1/8 inches, 2022, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Opposite to *Blaze*, stalwart *Guadalupe's* squares define spaces stripped down to an essential nakedness. Their blockish power, upon closer observation, recedes, revealing inklings into the process, and instances of the artist's efforts appear as innate idiosyncrasies in the surface and the underlying layering and placement of his rich paint swaths and the layered brushwork contained in these squares. The squares are "folds" in the picture plane. For Scully, "folding metaphorically serves as an allusion to endless regeneration. Artistic culture to me is like a huge rug that is constantly folded and unfolded by us. Every time it is refolded, it grows new secrets, new wonders."

Second Order ½, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches 1974, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

His *Wall of Light* paintings (represented with *Guadalupe* in the exhibition) were inspired by an image of a streaming wall of light that he saw at Chichen Itza. Scully described how the light changed the walls from orange to blue to black, pink in the morning. Fehér describes the effect that the sunlight had on the surface of the stone wall "as simultaneously solid and volatile…the stone walls seem to dissolve in the sunlight, while the sunlight appears to be embodied in the stone wall…but are unified into a harmonious synthesis." Hidden behind the solid-colored blocks but revealed as their salient electrified edges, an underlying, vivid underpainting appears in the background, acting as a "Wall of Light."

Scully's *Wall of Light* brings to mind French philosopher Simone Weil's reflections in *Gravity and Grace*. "Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightning flashes. Instances when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition…It is through such instances that he is capable of the supernatural." Inspiration apprehended in the moment and revealed by nature appear as liminal windows that open an engagement with the transcendent and can draw forth an expressive form of catharsis.

In the 80s, Scully returned to painting in oil. His artwork was "painted very directly, very physically… It takes a long time until everything comes together to make a style, to make a way of putting down paint." Through each stroke placed, textural traces of Sean Scully's process grant the viewer fissures into the moments of its conception.

Scully's most recent works were painted on metal. The decision to use it as a surface was based on his work in the 80s with aquatints and etchings. There's a novel quality that Scully described as "a dull but vibrant light."

This pressing, caressing action that I make on these big paintings with the motion of my body, gradually changes the colors and their character, to produce a surface unique to painting, and colors that I have not seen before in abstraction.

Wall Landline Triptych, Oil on aluminum, 85 x 269 1/4 x 2 1/8 inches (each,) 2022, ©Sean Scully; Courtesy Lisson Gallery

The character revealed appears in direct alignment with distinct instants, alive with the artist's intent and engagement with the medium and the materiality of each artwork.

The painting, the putting down of the paint, is physical and made in layers so that the underpainting subverts what is on top. But what is on top is only the end of a process and the final layer; underneath that final layer is a body that gives a feeling of the history of the handprint of my life, my vision, and my work…The tracks in between the stripes set up a vibration that is a counterpoint to the certainty of the form.

For Scully, the act of painting reveals "structured feelings." Danto described, the need for "wide brushes and great physical strength to move the nearly viscous pigment and to keep it within boundaries." Travail is evident in the gestural character of his painting. Scully stated that "I am working, wet on wet, in an emotionally charged state. So I am not looking for clarity. I am looking at emotion". His paintings mirror Scully's engagement with an undiluted expressive process sustained by a commanding force.

In our conversation, Scully reflected on his upbringing and how his conception of space was affected by his childhood experiences.

We got an upgrade in Dublin when I needed a birth certificate. We lived with the gypsies, the travelers. When those people are born, they don't get birth certificates. So, to get a birth certificate, we were fortunate enough to be given a room. The room I have visited since is two meters by two meters down in the cellar with one window. This experience had a psychological impact. *I've never allowed space into my paintings, or I fill it all up. They are very claustrophobic.*

Poignant motifs appear recurrently through his references to windows, doorways, walls, and grids in his paintings.

Color reflects emotion, memory, and experiences of the natural world. Richly chromatic, *Dark In* holds an earthier sensibility as a painting. *Though I am aware that often I fight for color in my work, to assert my connection to the natural world, I actually have no theory about color whatsoever. Afterwards I can always interpret them as active, sad, resolved, awkward, etc., though not when I'm painting them.*

Scully appreciates colors he has drawn from his travels.

There are three types of colors in Mexico. It's very delicate, pale, yellow, grey, and rose in the morning. At night, it is very blue, but a deep blue. And there's another color sense that's crazy - of celebrations, costumes, party dresses and ceremonies, and the houses, too. The house is red, but even in the middle or next to the door, if the red is worn, they will use another color immediately next to it that doesn't make sense. I love this. It's similar to paintings, especially from the early 80s.

Thoreau's prayer “not to be in haste to detect the universal law, [but rather] let me see more clearly a particular instance” has echoes distilled through Scully's artwork and reflections. Scully's earnest expression takes up recurring and thoroughly humanized motifs of window, the door, folding, layering, and walls. As Scully observed, “I am using the language of the universal to make something personal. And somehow, I believe this approach has more authentic universality and human expression in it.” Appearing as abstract geometric forms, his paintings speak to universally shared human understandings. Patient attentiveness to moments spent in nature, travels, and city life are transmuted with meaning as metaphors brought to life in his work. Half a century “laying down the paint” has built up a seminal testament to Scully's resilient courage, his intellectual refinement and a brutal streetwise creative grasp of life. **WM**

Forbes
15 October 2023

Forbes

Culture Crush: Art Happenings In London And Beyond This Month

Last chance viewings of Sean Scully at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, U.K.: In the Norfolk countryside sits Houghton Hall, and it's currently home to celebrated artist Sean Scully and his major exhibition, *Smaller Than The Sky*. The show, which consists of huge sculptures, including stacks made of sandstone, wood, glass and marble, as well as paintings and works on paper, has been running since April and ends on 29 October, so catch it while you can.

Sean Scully at Houghton Hall PETE HUGGINS

Hyperallergic
11 October 2023

HYPERALLERGIC

Sean Scully Goes Down a Rabbit Hole

By introducing his motifs into a children's story, and avoiding any sense of self-importance, Scully reveals another side of himself.

John Yau October 11, 2023

Sean & Oisin Scully, "Jack the Wolf" (2015), watercolor, ink and pencil on paper, 22 1/4 x 14 7/8 inches (© Sean Scully, photography Brian Buckley)

As parents know, a child's favorite story often gets told again and again, the narrator making little changes to keep the young listener alert. That dance of repetition and variation within a rhythmically incremental narrative is one of the foundational structures of children's stories. Artist Sean Scully quickly figured this out when, in 2014, he began telling his five-year-old son, Oisin, an improvised story. Played out over months, that bedtime ritual became increasingly elaborate. This serves as the background to the exhibition *Sean Scully: Jack the Wolf* at Cheim & Read. Jack the Wolf lives near a town famed for its chocolate. One day he meets Rebecca Rabbit. Out of that Scully and his son spin a captivating tale.

Along with the 42 works for the children's book *Jack the Wolf* (Callaway Books, 2023), the exhibition includes three paintings on different surfaces (linen, copper, and aluminum) and one sculpture, "Felt Stack 1" (2020), made of felt and colored aluminum slabs. But for me the heart of the show was the set of drawings done by Scully and Oisin in watercolor, ink, marker, and pencil, dated between 2014 and '23. At a certain point, it did not matter who did what, which added to their charm. Not having read the story until after I saw the show, I was also struck by the good-natured and quirky humor. Jack stretches on his couch and reads a newspaper called *Howl* while Rebecca peruses the pages of *Hop*. On the wall above Jack's couch are portraits of his mom and dad. It is details like these that keep the story lively and, in places, unexpected. It is evident from the story that Scully took the challenge of making it new quite seriously, which I suspected even before I read it.

What makes the drawings work is the humor intertwined with a fantastical story about a chocolate-craving wolf with a big heart, a rational rabbit, and townspeople who are mad at their children for stealing dessert. There are worse things than a children's book that takes itself too seriously, but perhaps not to a child who wants to be entertained before falling asleep. For those who know Scully's work and read the story, there is at least one bonus: In one of the drawings dated 2015 (all are titled "Jack the Wolf"), Jack opens the door of a house that looks an awful lot like one of Scully's paintings. By introducing his motifs into a children's story, and avoiding any sense of self-importance, Scully reveals another side of himself. It is a side of artists of we see too little in a world that keeps placing them on pedestals, where some think they belong.

Sean Scully, "Pieta 2" (2022), oil on linen, 42 x 48 inches (© Sean Scully, photography Alex Yudzon)

Sean & Oisin Scully, works from the *Jack the Wolf* series (© Sean Scully, photography Alex Yudzon)

Sean & Oisin Scully, "Jack the Wolf" (2023), watercolor and pencil on paper, 30 1/4 x 22 1/2 inches (© Sean Scully, photography Brian Buckley)

Sean Scully, "Jack the Wolf" (2018), pastel on paper, 18 1/8 x 24 inches (© Sean Scully, photography Brian Buckley)

Sean & Oisin Scully, works from the *Jack the Wolf* series (© Sean Scully, photography Alex Yudzon)

Sean & Oisin Scully, "Jack the Wolf" (2015), watercolor, ink, and crayon on paper, 30 x 22 1/8 inches (© Sean Scully, photography Brian Buckley)

Sean Scully: Jack the Wolf *continues at Cheim & Read (547 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 4. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

Forbes
1 October 2023

Forbes

Sean Scully Makes LA Deep

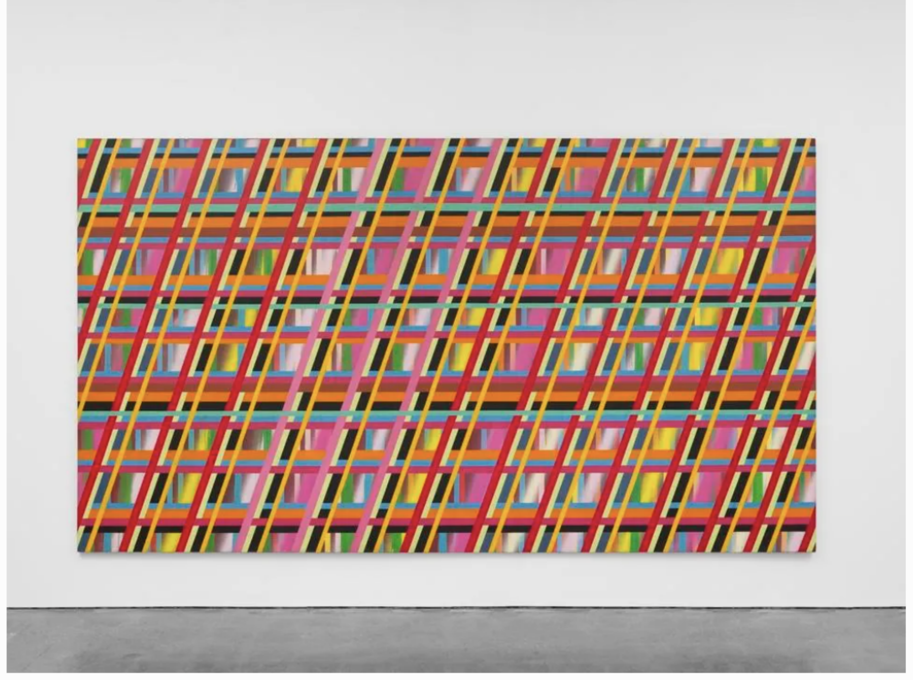
Tom Teicholz Contributor

"I could have called this show 'In My Life," Sean Scully said at the press preview to "LA Deep" his new show at the Lisson Gallery in Los Angeles.

TAPPAN, NY - SEPTEMBER 13: Artist Sean Scully at his studio on September 13, 2016 in Tappan, New ... [+] SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Scully recounted how having been born in Ireland, he attended university in Newcastle in England where he made his first paintings, which he described as "a combination of heat and the industrial revolution." After a summer spent in Morrocco, Scully returned to Newcastle to make a series of brightly colored paintings, which launched his career and took him to London.

His paintings caught the eye of a wealthy American, who, Scully said, "had made so much money he had to find a way to lose it." And so, decided to open a gallery which showed his work. Scully showed in Santa Monica in 1974 and in New York to which he moved the following year. In the space of a few years his life had changed completely.



Sean Scully, Blaze, 1971 © SEAN SCULLY, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

Those first paintings, called Supergrid paintings, three of which from the era are on display in the current show, are a series of brightly colored overlapping horizontal and vertical thin stripes, hewing to very strict hard-edge lines. Looking at *Blaze* (1971), on exhibition, you see, a bravado composition of dizzying mastery that seems to almost exist in three dimensions.

Scully explained the obsessiveness it took to make those works. "I started my life as a typesetter in a print factory." Scully said," That makes it possible to make paintings like this because I was very disciplined and the discipline in my work has remained but over the years it's been married to romanticism." Which, he said, "is an unusual combination."

In New York, Scully fell in with the minimalists. Their influence and being in New York affected his work. "When I went to New York, I changed my work because I was aware that I was an immigrant," Scully said.

Scully talked about what it was like to in New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the era of when New York as a city was facing financial difficulty – and Scully said that "the vanity of New York was that everyone was surprised and shocked." At the same there were a generation of German artists such as Georg Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhad Richter, Joseph Beuys, A. R. Penck coming into prominence, to whom the art world shifted their attention.

Scully described the impact on the New York artist community as being like "being hit three punches and knocked out and up in hospital." It shook the New York art world, Scully said. "And it caused an enormous crisis for me." Scully felt he needed a way to break from minimalism.

"I was thinking about how one could rescue abstraction from this. I turned to my history as a figurative painter as having come from Europe, and I began to paint like a European... And when I did that the metaphors started coming into my mind and the forms began to expand. And the stripes turned into bodies, or tree trunks, or horizons, or blocks, or windows. The metaphors began to enrich the work. I started telling stories and giving paintings [names] like "by night," "by day," "long night" By changing how I painted had a massive effect... and then you got this real weird mixture of constructivism and romanticism. And of course, I could do it because I [had] lived it."

Scully's approach resulted in paintings that build up layers of color and in which the brushwork became less rigid, the stripes or color fields larger, the gestural more pronounced. He had found his own language.

"I always like to joke, you know, I was born in the wrong place at the wrong time because I was born in Ireland after the war, and we were homeless... we lived on the street. But then when I was in New York in 1980, ... I was in the right place at the right time." Being in New York at that moment was the catalyst for finding his mature style. "I was in the perfect place."

Sean Scully: LA Deep, Exhibition view. 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles. September 23 – November ... [+] © SEAN SCULLY. COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

The new works on exhibit, from 2022 and 2023, are a recognition of Scully's 50-year artistic journey. Revisiting those early works, Scully challenged himself to bring the past into the present. Several of the new works do that as diptychs in which a square space has been carved out of the center of the new works and in which there is a grid of stripes, not as obsessively tight as the early work, painted looser, with more emotion, set in a series of larger stripes, as if to say, "This is where I came from, this is where I am now."

"I think there's a lot of nostalgia and deep emotion in my paintings." Scully said.

Sean Scully, Guadalupe, 10., 2022 Oil on aluminum 215.9 x 381 x 5.4 cm 85 x 150 x 2 1/8 in © SEAN SCULLY, COURTESY LISSON GALLERY

There is also a large new work, *Guadalupe*, in which the orange background peeks out from squares of color fields in Scully's now signature style which communicates a deep and strong sense of emotion and well-being. "It was always my project to try and bring painting back into the realm of feeling."

"I've always thought that painting has a great tendency to become sentimental if it's not disciplined." Scully said. "But if there's too much discipline, then the painting "doesn't have anything to say. It doesn't touch anybody."

For Scully, his 50-year artistic journey has been not as much about what you see in his work as what it makes you feel.

Scully said he likes to think about the metaphor of the prince and the sleeping beauty and how he awakens her with a kiss, with emotion – and that, in some way, he is the prince, and the canvas is the sleeping beauty. "LA Deep" Scully's show at the recently opened Lisson Gallery is a wake-up call about his artistic journey from the dazzle of his youthful works to the emotion of his current canvases.

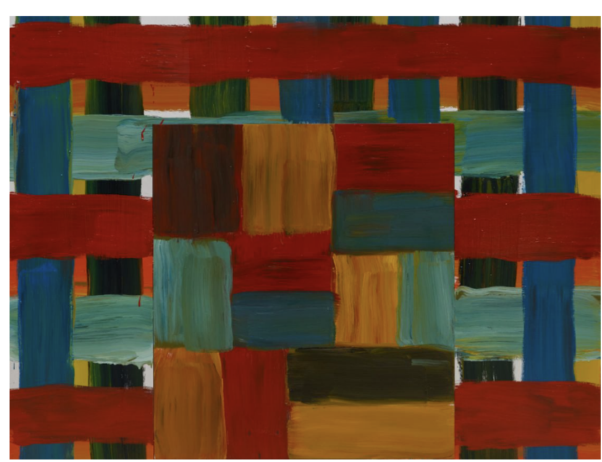
Curate LA
27 September 2023

CURATE LA

This Week's Must-See Art

September 21 - September 27

Sean Scully *LA Deep* at Lisson Gallery (Sep 22, 6-8pm)
Celebrating the development of his practice over five decades, this exhibition draws formal and conceptual resonances between Scully's earliest grid paintings, which were first shown in Santa Monica in 1975, all the way forward to equally innovative, large-scale works from 2023.



FAD magazine
22 September 2023

SEAN SCULLY RETURNS TO LOS ANGELES ALMOST 50 YEARS AFTER MAKING HIS US DEBUT THERE.

By Mark Westall • 22 September 2023
Share –

I called my painting Guadalupe, [because of] my affection for Mexico, not forgetting Cézanne and the coming grid, but also after Beckett and after the liquor-soaked, brown-black, dark-green shiny tiled floor of a bar somewhere up in a small Durango town, where at the back you can rent a room for twelve dollars.

– Sean Scully, 2022

Sean Scully returns to Los Angeles almost 50 years after making his US debut there, unveiling a selection of new and older works at Lisson's recently-launched LA space. Celebrating the development of his practice over five decades, this era-spanning exhibition draws formal and conceptual resonances between Scully's earliest grid paintings, which were first shown in Santa Monica in 1975, all the way forward to equally innovative, large-scale works from 2023.

Sean Scully : LA Deep , Exhibition view. 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles. 2 3 September – 4 Novem ber, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery Sean Scully returns to Los Angeles

Scully's so-called Supergrid series of works began while still a student in London and Newcastle in the UK during the 1960s, progressing towards a sophisticated language of overlapping, interwoven stripes painted between taped boundaries. Influenced by his tutor Ian Stephenson, whose dripped and dotted paintings featured in Michelangelo Antonioni's Swinging Sixties film Blow Up, Scully began working on his own complex, focus-pulling compositions that likewise refused to fully reveal themselves at first sight, allowing only glimpses into its structure and necessitating prolonged viewing times. In epic feats of labor and painterly engineering, Scully built up dozens of horizontal and vertical lines, only to intensify this grid with multiplying layers of crisscrossing diagonals, creating expansive panels that exceeded even his tall frame and bodily span.

Sean Scully: LA Deep, Exhibition view. 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles. 2 3 September – 4 November, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery- Sean Scully returns to Los Angeles

Perhaps the apotheosis of this period is Scully's monumental work, Blaze (1971), a dizzying matrix of neon pinks, sports-car reds and flame-licked yellows. Subtlety and variation in color treatment followed in the similarly dynamic and optically disorienting square field of Second Order ½ (1974), while the space between surface and ground is further disrupted by Final Grey ½ (1974), which still features the strips of tape clinging to the work and providing another porous and translucent framework.

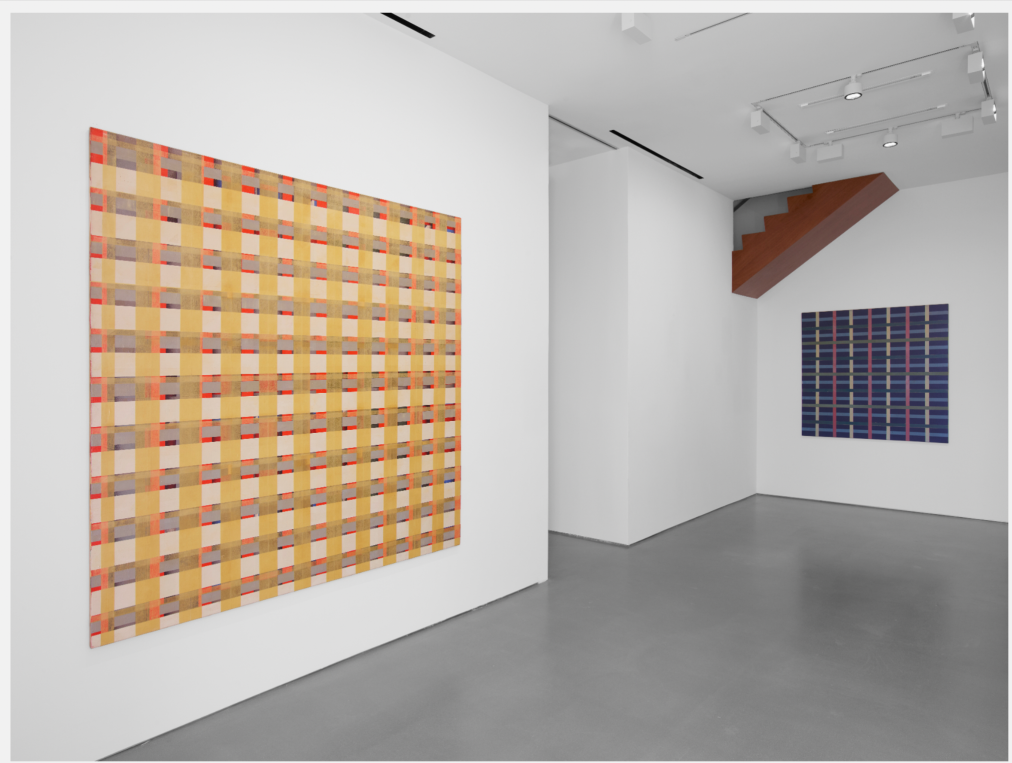
Sean Scully: LA Deep, Exhibition view. 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles. 2 3 September – 4 November, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

This knotty, woven texture reappears half a century later in the newest painting here, entitled Dark In (2023). The brushmarks have long ago loosened, widened and now incorporate many more than a single, bold color in each sweep, following more naturalistic and gestural shades and contours in comparison to the sleek, rectilinear lines of the 1970s.

Sean Scully: LA Deep, Exhibition view. 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles. 2 3 September – 4 November, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Here too the picture plane is broken up, though not by tape, but by an inserted aluminum panel of a newly rotated and concentrated lattice work. Among other newer paintings are two recent triptychs, including the centrally located Guadalupe (2022), which revisits the scale and ambition of Blaze, only now the eye is moved between chunky, rugged blocks of unfathomably deep moss-green and maroon hues, which sit on a buzzing, glowing, chessboard backdrop.

In the intervening years between these disparate bodies of gridded paintings, Scully himself moved to the US fulltime in 1975, settling in New York after a long cross-country road trip. He has returned many times since to show in California, with his own written recollections and photographs of these formative visits included in an accompanying catalogue to this exhibition, also featuring texts by art critics Peter Frank and Donald Kuspit.



Sean Scully: LA Deep, Exhibition view. 1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles. 2 3 September – 4 November, 2023. © Sean Scully. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Sean Scully, LA Deep, September 23rd–November 4th, 2023, Lisson Los Angeles Opening: 22nd September, 6–8pm

About the artist

Sean Scully is one of the most important painters of his generation, whose work is held in major museum collections around the world. While known primarily for his large-scale abstract paintings, comprised of vertical and horizontal bands, tessellating blocks and geometrical forms comprised of gradated and shifting colors, Scully also works in a variety of diverse media, including printmaking, sculpture, watercolor and pastel. Having developed a style over the past five decades that is uniquely his own, Scully has cemented his place in the history of painting, shifting the paradigm in abstraction by abandoning the reduced vocabulary of Minimalism in favor of a return to metaphor and spirituality in art.

His work synthesizes a thoroughly international collection of influences and personal perspectives – ranging from the legacy of American abstraction, with inspiration from the likes of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, and that of European tradition, with nods to Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian, as well as references to classical Greek architecture. While monumental in scale and gesture, Scully's work retains an undeniable delicacy and sincerity of emotion.

Sean Scully was born in Dublin in 1945 and raised in South London. Wanting to be an artist from an early age, Scully attended evening classes at the Central School of Art in London from 1962 to 1965, and enrolled full-time at Croydon College of Art, London from 1965 until 1968. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Newcastle University in 1972. He was awarded the Frank Knox Fellowship to Harvard University in 1972, where he visited the United States for the first time. In 1975, he moved to New York full-time. Today, he lives and works between New York and Bavaria. With a career that spans more than five decades, he has received numerous accolades and has been the subject of multiple touring exhibitions. In 2014, he became the first Western artist to have a career-length retrospective in China. Scully was named a member of the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2013 and has received honorary degrees from institutions such as the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston; the National University of Ireland, Dublin; Universitas Miguel Hernandez, Valencia; Burren College of Art, National University of Ireland; Newcastle University, UK, among others. A series of essays and conversations between Scully and the esteemed art critic Arthur Danto was published by Hatje Cantz in 2014, and a collection of Scully's own writing, selected speeches and interviews, Inner, was released in 2016.

LA Weekly
20 September 2023

LA WEEKLY

TIME FLIES: ARTS CALENDAR SEPTEMBER 21-27

Time flies when you're out there seeing all the art, and suddenly it's the end of September. That means the return of the original indie art fair, and another week of big gallery shows—including a new design venue and a new local outpost for another mega-gallery—across sculpture, photography, video, historical drawings, political paintings, celebratory public art, visionaries of color, and a whole other meaning of crypto. Plus spoken word, new fiction, fashion documentary, theater, meaning-rich horror, traditional dance from Ukraine, new dance by the creek, a cultural open house, and an online river archive.

Sean Scully at Lisson Gallery

Sean Scully: ***LA Deep*** **at Lisson Gallery.** Scully returns to Los Angeles almost 50 years after making his US debut here, unveiling a selection of new and older works at Lisson's recently-launched L.A. space. In epic feats of labor and painterly engineering, Scully builds up dozens of horizontal and vertical lines, and intensifies this grid with multiplying layers of crisscrossing diagonals, creating expansive panels. This era-spanning exhibition draws formal and conceptual resonances between Scully's earliest grid paintings, which were first shown in Santa Monica in 1975, all the way forward to equally innovative, large-scale works from 2023. *1037 N. Sycamore Ave., Hollywood; Opening night gallery talk with artist Andy Moses, Friday, September 22, 6pm; On view through November 4; free; lissongallery.com.*

LISSON GALLERY

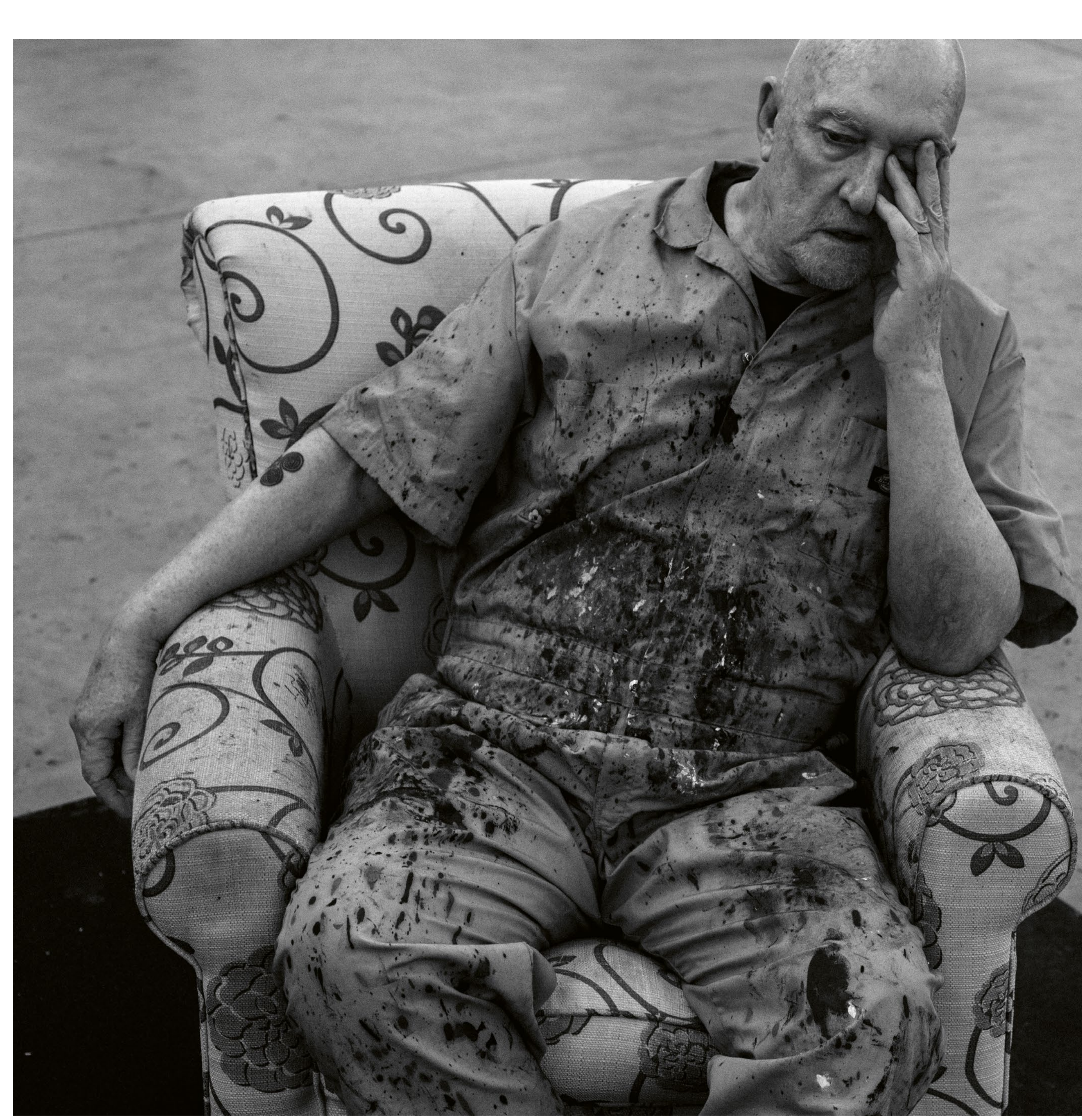
Shadowplay
June 2023

SHADOWPLAY

SHADOWPLAY

Sean
Scully

Photography by YAËL TEMMINCK



THE VAGABOND MASTER OF ABSTRACTION

New York, August 2022 Interview by **HILI PERLSON** Photography by **YAËL TEMMINCK**

"My face is no longer symmetrical," artist Sean Scully tells me halfway through our video call, possibly having studied his face in the little square on his screen. "That comes from emotions lived. I'm very emotional," the Irish-born U.S. painter admits. Scully, who is 77, is sitting in his spacious studio in Palisades, New York with his dog Charlie, a rescue from the Bahamas, as his company in the light-washed space. I've been treated to a video tour of the sprawling garden earlier, where fruit trees and wild raspberries grow in abundance, and the skies are a calming luxurious blue. It's hard to imagine why anyone would want to swap this for a bustling metropolis, but Scully, restless and on the move since early childhood, is preparing to relocate once again. He is moving with his wife and 13-year-old son back to London, the city in whose postwar slums he grew up from the age of four, amid the destruction of World War II. It's a busy year for Scully; in addition to the transatlantic move—so that his son can grow up without the looming threat of gun violence—he is also preparing for a major exhibition in Houghton, England; the unveiling of a permanent public sculpture in London's Hanover Square; and a museum show in Brest, France, slated for the fall. But that's not to say that busy is an exception. Scully's masterfully gestural abstractions of pulsating grid-like configurations have captivated the artworld since the beginning of his five-decade spanning career.

What brought you to Upstate New York in the first place, and how has the local landscape influenced your paintings?
I moved up here from New York City about ten years ago, I didn't want to raise my son in the city. But the thing about suburbia is that everything is a solid B. Intellectually, imaginatively, visually. And everyone is woke, while I'm not. But back to your question, there's a kind of argument about my work, whether it's urban or not. I have people who see landscape in my work, but others argue vehemently that it's urban.

What would you say it is?
I grew up extremely rough, you know. In Ireland, we lived with the travelers because we were homeless, and they took us in. Then we went to London and lived in slums after the war. Our playgrounds were all bomb sites, because 12% of London was bombed. Bomb sites made for very nice playgrounds! It was full of rubble, and you could climb over it. And one thing that I always remember about them was that in all the bomb sites there were zinc wood tanks—in those days, they used to have the water tank at the top of the house. And now, I make sculptures out of them. I looked for salvaged tanks, they're still around. I just made these kind of stacked, fitted sculptures that look just like my paintings. They look as if, you know, as if Mickey Mouse said, "Let's make a sculpture out of your paintings."

Does working on these sculptural pieces take you back to your childhood?
Oh yeah, I'm completely stuck in the past. All my artworks come from going to work in the print factory when I was 15, where I was an apprentice typesetter [Scully points at one of his abstract paintings with staggered multicolored shapes, resembling the letters set into a monotype system.] I also worked at a cardboard factory, stacking and sorting. It looks like my sculptures. I think I was preparing myself in some way even before I went to art school. It's one of those things you realize much later, looking back. We sometimes know what's right for us, but we don't know yet why. This kind of energy is very interesting to me, how we know things before we are conscious of them. I had a difficult relationship to my parents and when I went to art school, I could do so because I was independent, I had been working for all those years and paid taxes. I had been preparing.

You've experienced success as an artist very early on, almost straight out of school. How has that shaped your work throughout the years?
You know, Albert Einstein, who I admire very much and who taught at Princeton like I did, so I feel like we're colleagues, said the only people who never make mistakes are the people who do nothing. I think that encapsulates the experience of being a creative person very well. I made my big breakthrough in the 1980s, my first show out of London was in L.A. in the mid-70s. Around that time everyone in L.A. followed artist Lita Albuquerque, and there were a lot of painters around that I liked. What connected art in London with Los Angeles was the phenomenological nature of painting and sculpture, which was light based: Larry Bell, Joe Goode, and in London, of course, Bridget Riley and myself. It was a bigger connection than to New York.

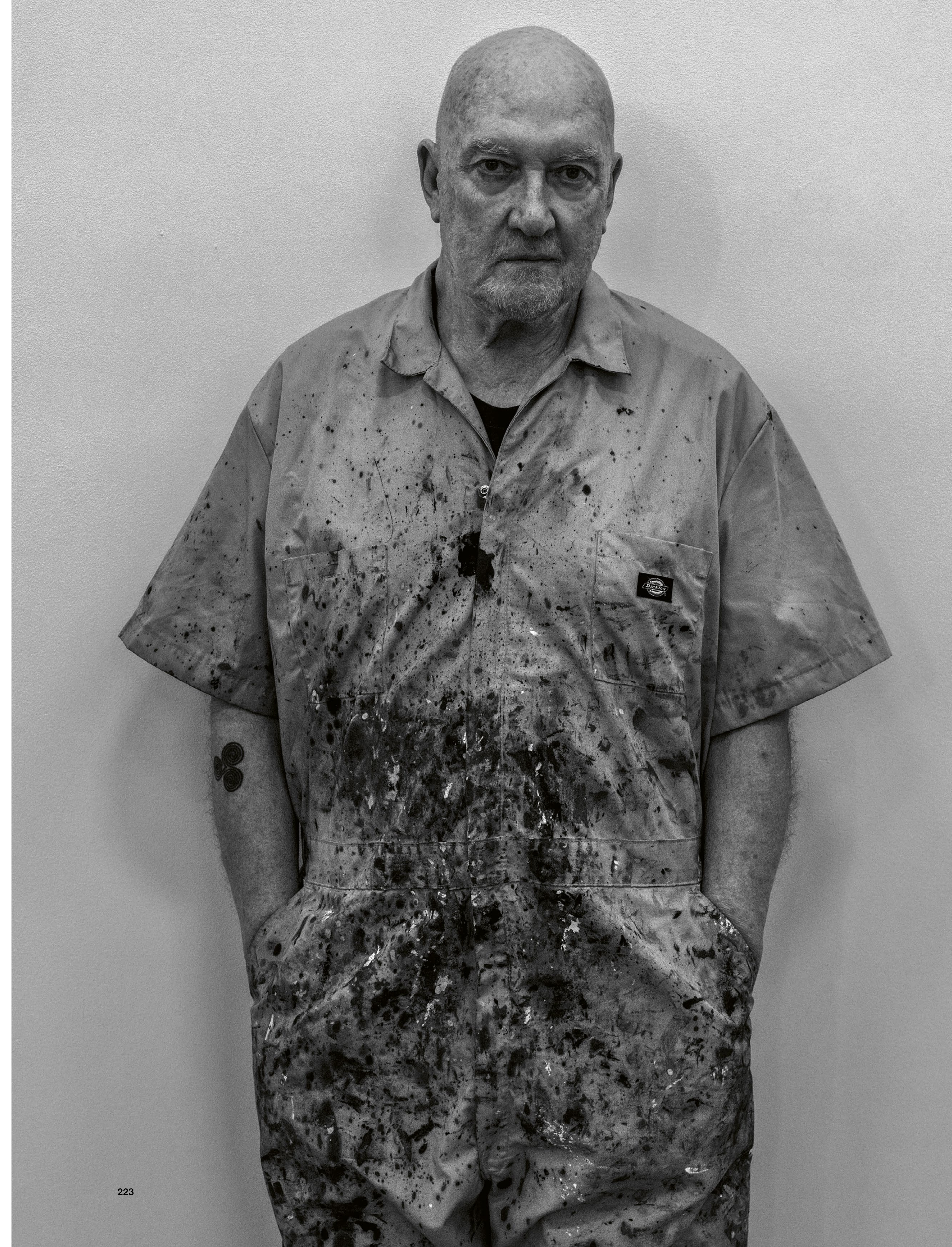
How would you explain that? It makes little sense to me, I can't think of two cities that are more different, culturally and otherwise.
I think that in New York art at the time there was a certain brutality that expunged light effects, which were seen as not fundamental to structure but rather connected in some way to pleasure and nature—and New York Minimalism expunged nature. We know for example that Agnes Martin left New York to deal with the light in New Mexico. And my work was very connected to L.A. Sometimes I say I should have moved there instead of to New York and then people always reply "But then you wouldn't have done what you did in 1982." That's when I made a series of breakthrough paintings where I banged things together and made inserts. What I did was to bring in the aggressive painting. I broke with opticality, to put it's simply.

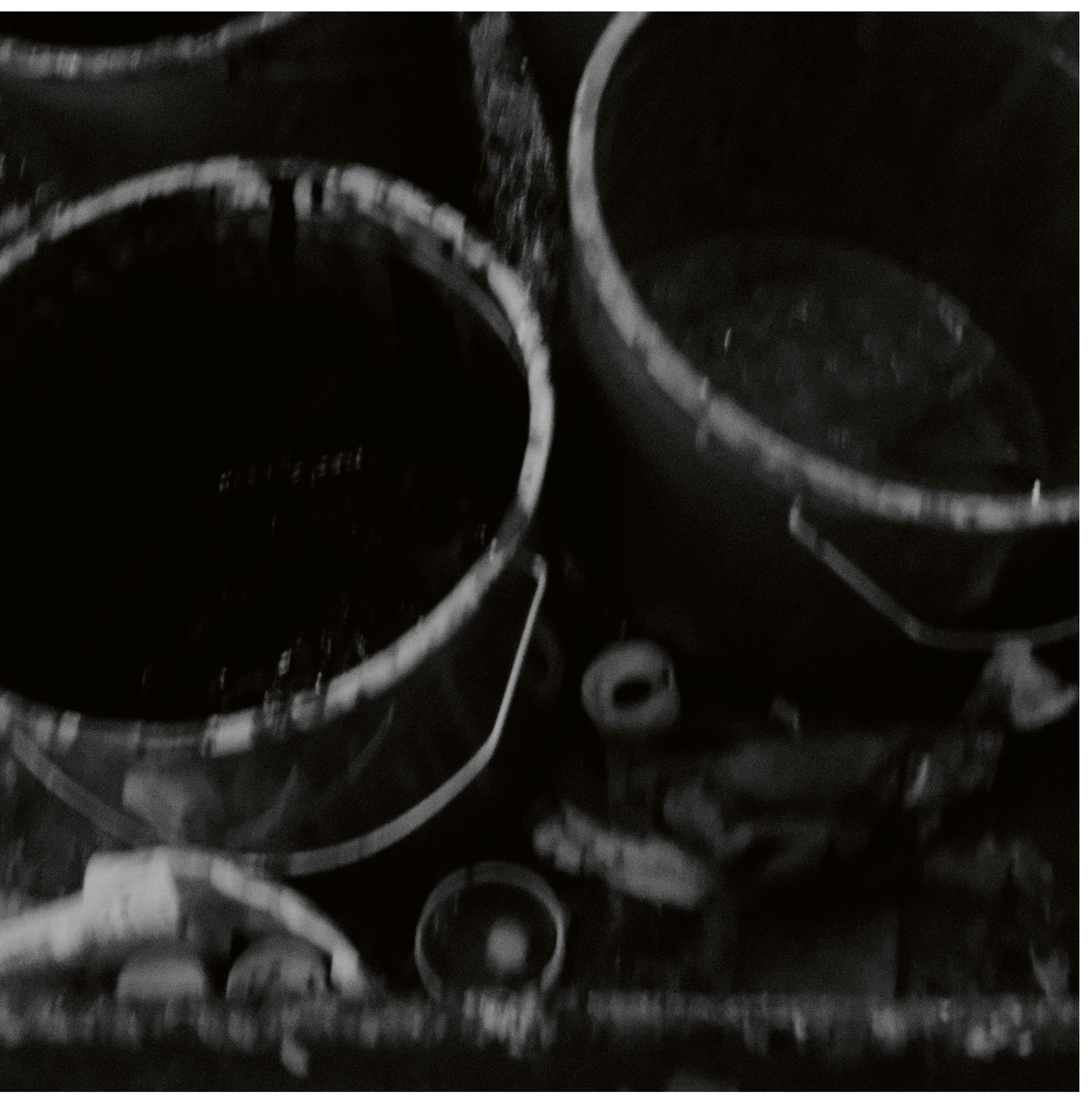
There's also another important location in your life: Germany, where you teach and have a home in Bavaria, and a studio in Berlin.
I think that the Germans reacted as they have to my work because it represents extreme structure and extreme emotion simultaneously. It is deeply dialectical. You know, Jürgen Habermas [the German philosopher and social theorist] wrote text on me. I'm the only artist, he has ever written on. My work is not impactful in the way that Andy Warhol's or Frank Stella's is. It has contradictions and difficulties, it has a double view. If I go to the Whitney Museum and there's an Andy Warhol retrospective on and the elevator door opens, I don't need to get out. I can see the whole exhibition from there.

How do you feel about returning to London after all these years?
Well, I wouldn't be able to have my kid at school here any longer. I can't. I just can't do it here because of the gun violence. So, I ended up with London, where I also have a studio, and which I find to be the most integrated and tolerant city in the world. And plus, the police don't carry guns.

You've made a series of paintings about gun violence in 2016, a visual manifesto of sorts titled *Ghost* which features American flags in which the stars have fallen out and been replaced by firearms. It's your most figurative work to date, and the only overtly political series I'm aware of.
I'm going to show these works in the museum in Brest this coming fall. You know, I showed these to a trustee of an American museum, it's in the South, real cowboy land, where you can get shot if you're not careful. And she said to me, I love these, but we could never show them in this museum. So is this the first time I did a work that is directly political in a way, and I immediately got censored. At least in parts of the U.S.

The exhibition Smaller Than The Sky by Sean Scully is on view at Houghton Hall, Norfolk until October 29, 2023.





WHITE
RAGS

LISSON GALLERY

Independent
9 May 2023

Sean Scully's timeless art: 'Emotion will always conquer the idea'

William Cook meets the artist who fuses genres while putting the heart and guts back into the work

In the leafy grounds of Houghton Hall, a magnificent stately home in Norfolk, the curator Sean Rainbird is guiding a gaggle of art critics around Sean Scully's latest show. Scully is arguably the world's leading living abstract artist. His artworks are instantly recognisable: bold geometric paintings (and sculptures) that look like they've been created by a grumpy giant.

His detractors say there's not a lot to them – they say anyone could do them, but when it comes to art there's only one question that really matters: would you want to hang one of his paintings on your living room wall? For most of us, this question is entirely hypothetical. To buy one of his bigger works, you'd probably need the best part of £1m. However, if I could afford one (and if I had a bigger living room) then yes, of course I would.

At first glance they don't look like much, but their apparent simplicity is deceptive. There's actually a lot of depth to them. "That's really the key to what makes him such an interesting abstract painter," says Rainbird. The more time you spend with them the more they grow on you. They're powerful and alluring. They slowly draw you in.

'Wall Landline High Atlas 2022' and 'Brown Miller's Stack 2023'
(Pete Huggins)

Sean Scully is incredibly prolific. A list of his recent exhibitions reads like an inventory of Europe's finest galleries: London's National Gallery; Waldfrieden Sculpture Park in Wuppertal; the Albertina in Vienna… From Barcelona to Budapest, from Washington DC to Mexico City, the list goes on and on.

My work isn't like Mondrian or Rothko. It's repetitive and rhythmic – it's like rock'n'roll

His groundbreaking show in China took the Asian art world by storm. That touring show was called Resistance and Persistence – a title that sums up his never-say-die attitude. His tireless productivity is remarkable. Lately, he started making sculpture again, for the first time since he was at art school. He has the stamina of an artist half his age. He's 77 now, nearly 78, and he's still going strong.

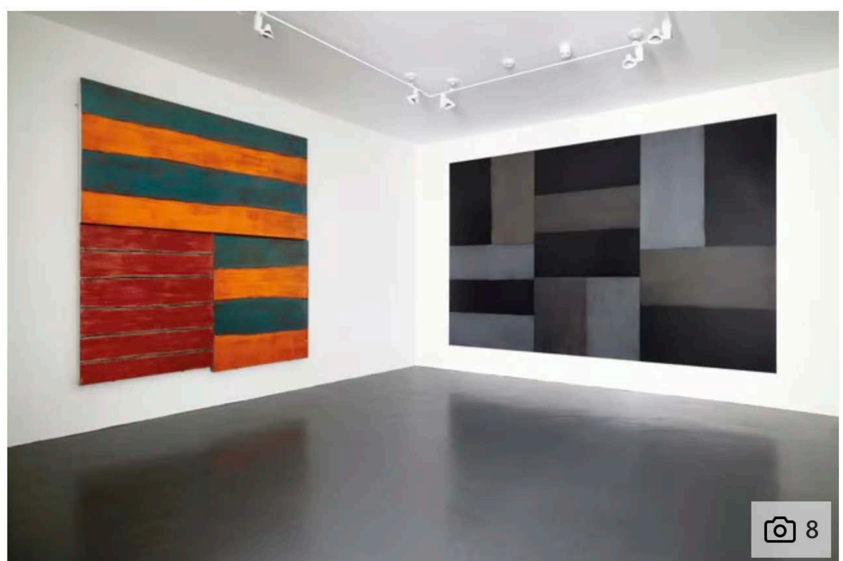
His return to sculpture has been the main development of his later years, and there are some spectacular examples here at Houghton Hall. A rusting metal monolith recalls the London bombsites he played on as a boy. It feels like such a natural progression from his paintings that the only surprise, to my mind, is that he didn't start making sculptures a lot sooner. A lot of his early pictures are almost sculptural, painted on planks and rafters salvaged from derelict buildings. His monumental sculptures mimic the broad stripes of those abstract paintings, reproduced in huge stacks of wood, steel and stone.

The reason he has such broad appeal is that his artworks are universal. You don't need to search for hidden meanings. They don't ask too much of you – that's the secret of their success. No matter where you come from, how much you know about art or how little, you can enjoy their subtle beauty. There's something strangely soothing about them, like staring out to sea.

'Venice Stack' is one of Scully's artworks on display in Houghton Hall
(Pete Huggins)

Sure, they're relatively rudimentary – often variations on a single theme. But you could say that of lots of other abstract artists, like Mondrian and Rothko – artists he's often likened to. These comparisons are invidious. Sure, there are some superficial similarities, but there are just as many differences.

"My work isn't like Mondrian or Rothko," he tells me over coffee in a quiet corner of Houghton Hall. "It's repetitive and rhythmic – it's like rock'n'roll." When you ask him about his influences, he mentions musicians as much as artists. He likens his multi-layered brushwork to Phil Spector's Wall of Sound.



Scully says he is influenced by musicians as much as artists
(Pete Huggins)

I reckon the reason he's still hard at it, in his late seventies, is because he's roamed so far and wide. He's lived and worked in Berlin and Munich, as well as New York, where he lives today. Every country he's visited has inspired him. He was profoundly influenced by his travels in Morocco and Mexico. "They're a little bit dangerous, they're a little bit weird and you have to stretch your mind to understand them. There's something elemental about them." The rich colours of both countries, the dusty reds and burnt ochres, bleed into his art.

He reminds me of a villain in a British gangster movie – impeccably polite but with an underlying hint of menace. If you met him in a pub, you wouldn't mess with him, I thought, the first time I met him. He looks like a retired bouncer. He still looks much the same today. Although he's lived in America for most of his life, he's retained his London accent. He sounds like Michael Caine in *Get Carter* or Bob Hoskins in *The Long Good Friday*.

‘Most of my friends from my childhood are dead. They went to prison, they got into drugs – violence, of one kind or another,’ says Scully
(Andrew Quinn)

“He’s a powerful presence,” says Rainbird. “He takes no prisoners.” I know exactly what he means. In *On the Line*, Kelly Grovier’s absorbing book of conversations with the artist, Grovier said he looked “like someone interrupted burying bodies under floorboards”. He has the bearlike gait of a fairground wrestler. His pale blue eyes pin you to the wall. Rainbird calls him “a no bullshit artist”. He’s remorselessly determined and utterly sincere.

He was born in 1945, in Dublin. The poverty of his early life sounds positively Dickensian. He called his childhood “a season in hell”. His first home was a one-room basement, seven feet square. His mother came from a mining family in Durham. His Irish father was a barber who went to prison for desertion from the British army. His parents brought him to London when he was four. They fought like cat and dog. “It was extraordinarily stressful,” he says. “There would be these explosive fights.”

Criminals are artists without the same degree of imagination

Imagination was the only refuge, a respite from the anxiety that his parents instilled in him. He wet the bed until he was 20, but there were brighter moments too. His childhood home in Highbury was enlivened by colourful, eccentric housemates: a transvestite comedian; a useless boxer who got knocked out every time he fought. He loved watching the Punch and Judy shows on Hampstead Heath. “Art for me has always had something to do with salvation,” he once told me. I sometimes wonder if his stripy paintings hark back to Punch’s stripy booth.

Art was a vague, persistent presence in his upbringing, an elusive portent of a different future. He was fascinated by the *Stations of the Cross* in his local Catholic Church. A reproduction of *Child with a Dove*, one of Picasso’s most tender, heartfelt paintings, hung on the wall of his school hall. He looked at it every day for four years, yet when he went to Trafalgar Square to feed the pigeons, he didn’t even know the National Gallery was there.

In his teens, he ran around with street gangs for a few years. Many of his friends were criminals. “Most of my friends, half of them, at least, from my childhood are dead,” he told me, the first time I met him. “They went to prison, they got into drugs – violence, of one kind or another.” He could have gone the same way. “Criminals are artists without the same degree of imagination,” he says.

At first glance Scully's artwork doesn't look like much but their apparent simplicity is deceptive *(Pete Huggins)*

Art gave him hope and steered him away from what might have become a life of crime. For a few years he worked as a typesetter, printmaker and graphic designer. He took evening classes in life drawing. He applied to a dozen art schools. They all rejected him, apart from Croydon School of Art. That was the turning point. That was when his life took off.

"When I got into art school, I could hardly believe it," he remembers, the memory of that moment still palpable nearly 60 years later. He never wanted to waste a single moment. He felt as if his life had been saved. He discovered the German Expressionists, whose intense paintings feel far closer to his expressionistic style than the minimalist artists of his own era (Germany has always been a particularly receptive market for his work). "I thought I was going to lose my mind – it was so exciting," he remembers. "It was the raw emotion. And there's some sort of sadness in them."

> ***My experience of America is that it's built on winners and losers, and if you put me in that situation it can only go one way***

That sadness and emotion fed into his own work. Finally, he had an outlet, a release from all that childhood trauma. He also found an inspirational teacher, a man called Barry Hirst. "Always use the biggest brush you can," Hirst told him. Scully heeded his advice. His wide, unwieldy brushstrokes have remained a defining feature throughout his long, lucrative career.

After Croydon, Scully never looked back. An upbringing that should have crushed him somehow gave him indefatigable self-belief. He went to Newcastle University, where he took a first-class degree in fine art. A fellowship at Harvard and a professorship at Princeton followed. At his first one-man show, at London's Rowan Gallery, in 1973, he sold every picture – an extraordinary achievement for a debut exhibition.

Why was he so successful? Essentially, because he fused two contrasting artistic genres, Minimalism and Expressionism. Minimal art had become increasingly constricted. Scully put the heart back into it. He gave it guts. "Emotion will always win out with me," he says. "Emotion will always conquer the idea." Maybe he only had one big idea, but a lot of the best artists only have one thing to say, and he said it perfectly. No survey of modern art is quite complete without him.

Scully fuses two contrasting genres in his work: Minimalism and Expressionism
(Pete Huggins)

Since that first show 50 years ago, his career has been a cavalcade of almost monotonous success. He moved to New York in 1975 and conquered the American art world, through force of personality and sheer willpower as much as talent. For a European artist, New York is the toughest nut to crack, but Scully relished the challenge. He was up for the fight.

He has a love-hate relationship with America, but its energy galvanised his art. “My experience of America is that it’s built on winners and losers, and if you put me in that situation it can only go one way. I’m not going to come off as a loser. It’s just not going to happen – I am quite fearless and you can’t intimidate me. It just can’t work. I won’t have it. All this has stood me in great stead.”

‘Brown Miller’s Stack’ (2023) in the grounds of Houghton Hall
(Pete Huggins)

Yet in 1983, the year he became a US citizen, he suffered a life-changing catastrophe. His 18-year-old son Paul, who was born in 1965 (when Scully was 19) died in a car crash. Scully heard the news in his studio, a paintbrush in his hand. “I just dropped it on the floor and walked out of the studio. I didn’t go back for three months – his mother died of a broken heart.” The colour drained out of his paintings. It took a long time to come back.

"You can never recover from it," he says, yet he found a sort of resolution in 2009, with the birth of his second son, Oisin – the product of his fourth marriage, to the artist Liliane Tomasko. Scully was 64 when Oisin was born, pretty old to become a dad, but he embraced this second shot at fatherhood. His palette became brighter, his pictures became more diverse and he started making sculpture again. At the opening of his one-man show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, five years ago, I heard a reporter ask him if sculpture had given him a new lease of life. "My lease of life comes from my son," he replied.

After we say goodbye, I take a final walk around the gardens. Right now, he's famous for his paintings, and his sculptures seem like a sideline, but in a hundred years I wonder whether it'll be these sculptures that he's remembered for. They look timeless and eternal, like relics from an earlier age. As I drive away from Houghton Hall, on the bus back to King's Lynn, I recall something he told me last time we met, about the inspiration for his enigmatic paintings. "They're an attempt at reparation," he said. "They're an attempt to reach something better. They're where I want to be."

Sean Scully at Houghton Hall – Smaller than the Sky runs until 29 October 2023 (houghtonhall.com)

AirMail
May 2023

An installation view of "Smaller Than The Sky" at Houghton Hall.

Sean Scully: Smaller Than The Sky

UNTIL OCTOBER 29
HOUGHTON HALL / KING'S LYNN / ART

"Nearly everything I have in my work is from memory," says Sean Scully. "From my Irish gran and from work, working in a factory, working the baling machine, loading trucks, setting type, printing. So I took all this experience and learnt to make it into art." But not with literal imagery. Scully has also said, "My job is to return abstraction to the people: in a sense, to popularize it without lowering the bar." He's famous for paintings that use dense colors and horizontal bars to tell stories. But he's also transmuted those geometric shapes into sculptures of steel, bronze, and aluminum. In a rare retrospective, Scully's sculptural creations are on view throughout the property. "My sculptures are very direct. They're not fussy or complicated," he says. "They're really just about form and color and the way they interact with space." —*E.C.*

Photo: Peter Huggins/© Sean Scully

The Brooklyn Rail
April 2023

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Sean Scully: *The Passenger*

By David Carrier

Installation view: *Sean Scully: The Passenger*, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Croatia, 2023. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb.

This presentation of sixty-four works by Sean Scully includes works on paper, photographs, one sculpture (*30 Also* (2018)), and a generous selection of paintings, many of them large. There is a good selection of his early student figurative pastels such as *Three Women Bearing Arms I* (1966-1967) from the 1960s; the 1970s grids like *Backcloth* (1970); the intersecting striped panels that made him famous in the 1980s—*Adoration* (1982) is one; and then the "Walls of Light," "Landlines," and the very recent "Madonna" series that mark his return to figuration. The show starts with *Cactus* (1964), a small painting which sets the cactus against a field of wide vertical stripes. The cactus, Scully has said, "mirrors perfectly the life of a painter. It can survive drought and it flowers when it is ready." And next to it is *Passenger Light Light* (1998), one of his majestic story-telling abstractions. The inserted field of stripes, which marks the presence of Scully's subject, "the passenger," breaks up the gorgeous background field of stripes.

We see here how Scully found his distinctive style, and how recently he has developed it in unexpected ways. And there are two of the most magnificently strange paintings he has (yet!) done: a painting on aluminum *What Makes Us Too* (2017), in which five windows are inserted in panels of wide and narrow stripes; and *Figure Abstract and Vice Versa* (2019), with a Madonna figure on the right, stripes on the left, and behind the figure on the right, and what look to be marvelous memories of the earliest figurative pictures inserted in three places. Here, then, we get a good presentation of Scully's entire development. I cannot imagine a better introduction to his art.

Installation view: *Sean Scully: The Passenger*, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Croatia, 2023. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb.

Recently Scully's work has been displayed in a large retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Often, however, the context of display can be important, a new display can provide the basis for rethinking interpretation. In Philadelphia, it was natural to relate the Scully paintings to the old master and modernist paintings in that important museum collection. Here, however, the setting was very different. Zagreb's Museum of Contemporary Art, a Kunsthalle with a collection devoted to recent art, including a great deal of Croatian art, is an enormous building with twelve-meter-high walls on the lower floors. It is a great site for Scully. Even his largest works have room to breathe. The contrast of *Cactus* and *Passenger Light Light* is a fantastic way of opening up the visual narrative. This is followed by his small, early figurative pastels, installed in a relatively narrow white tunnel. After the high-ceilinged gallery containing the grids, an escalator takes viewers took one floor to more recent paintings. In a very smart curatorial arrangement one is able to walk through the history of this great artist's career.

As revealing as this exhibition setting is the significance of the larger site, Croatia, a country that was, as Scully recently said, “once a part of a bigger union that has fractured or been disassembled.” In that way, he is suggesting that the country, which was founded only in 1991, is like his larger paintings which are taken apart when they are transported. And so his concern with the healing power of visual and political unity here was especially important and instructive. Scully has, he has said, an “unfair advantage over all my American contemporaries,” when it comes to expressing the troubled spiritual life of contemporary life: “none of them,” he has noted, “were as traumatized” as he was early on in emigrating from Ireland to London and again to New York.

Initially I wasn’t sure that I fully understood how Scully’s life history was relevant to this exhibition; I didn’t know what to make of this analogy between political and visual unity. Then I attended the production of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* in the National Theater. At the conclusion Sarastro sings of the triumph of the sun over darkness:

> The rays of the sun chase night away;
> the hypocrite’s surreptitious power is utterly destroyed!

And in a remarkably effective staging, which was possible in this relatively small opera house, the chorus completely surrounded the audience to sing to the concluding words:

> Hail to the initiates! You have penetrated the darkness!
> Thanks be to thee-, Osiris! Thanks to thee, Isis!
> Fortitude is victorious, and, in reward,
> crowns Beauty and Wisdom with its eternal diadem!

We wouldn’t let these performers leave—applause continued and continued in a way that is rare in my experience at the opera. And this performance was not merely the presentation of a very familiar musical museum piece, but a superlatively appropriate commentary on the political implications of Scully’s art. Out of conflict and strife, so his works show, it is possible to achieve harmony that respects real disagreements. That, of course, is a utopian ideal.

Installation view: *Sean Scully: The Passenger*, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Croatia, 2023. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb.

One significant power of Scully's art lies in its ability to inspire commentary by diverse critics. In that spirit, I wish to acknowledge that I learned much from a review of Scully's Philadelphia show by an art critic whose concerns are very different from mine. In Whitehot Magazine Donald Kuspit writes that Scully's paintings "are fraught with transcendental emotivity . . . they have a certain sullen grace that bespeaks muted suffering, a sort of tragic sense of life managed, contained, and controlled by his geometrical forms." This description of how Scully's art draws strength from his position as a gifted outsider helps explain why his exhibition in Zagreb was absolutely timely at this perilous political moment.

Artlyst
30th April 2023

Sean Scully A Humility Towards Nature – Interview Rev Jonathan Evens

30 April 2023

Sean Scully is a talker. That's what he tells me when joining me online after a conversation with Phong H. Bui, Publisher and Artistic Director of The Brooklyn Rail. In our conversation, Sean attributes his garrulousness to his Irish heritage, early childhood around vaudeville performers, and the difficulties and challenges of his early life prior to success as an artist. Unusual routes into the world of art have, he thinks, given him and Phong different perspectives from those which are normative in the US art world, where artists have tended to be monosyllabic and tongue-tied, enabling people like them to break the mould.

Sean is currently preparing to take over the grounds and historic interiors of Houghton Hall in Norfolk for an exhibition that will showcase the full range of his sculpture. At the same time, in the Hall and Contemporary Gallery, he will also show a significant group of paintings and works on paper, including iPhone drawings. He calls this tour de force 'Smaller Than The Sky'.

Several new works will be included in the exhibition, including stacks made of sandstone, wood, glass and marble. The sculptures range in scale from small maquettes to monumental open structures in steel, such as Crate of Air, and a new Wall of Light sculpture, constructed from locally sourced limestone. A key component of the exhibition is his book, Endangered Sky, a collaboration with the poet Kelly Grovier, focusing on the plight of bird life, memorialising those already extinct and those which are close to it, which will be launched at Houghton and be shown in vitrines as part of the exhibition.

Sean has previously compared art to grass, as it needs to be nurtured in order to grow. Given that his own practice has grown considerably in recent years with work in photography, printmaking, sculpture, and, now, iPhone drawings for Endangered Sky, I asked him in what ways he thinks his work has been nurtured recently to achieve that growth.

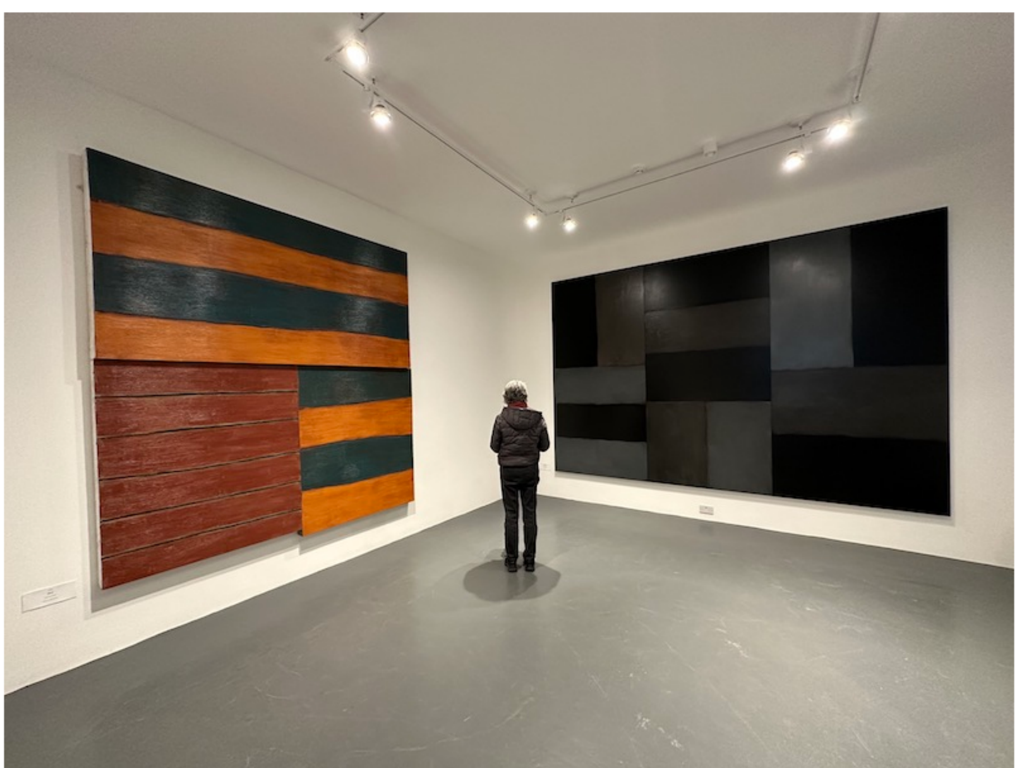
Sean Scully, Tower Light Cubed 2023, limestone ©Artlyst 2023

"Art is something that is made out of love and commitment," he responded, "and if those things are there, then it nurtures itself." He thinks exhibiting regularly makes his work better, as that is where works are seen together. He has found the move into sculpture easy because of his youth, where he didn't have an easy ride, experiencing poverty and trauma, but did have to "work like crazy" on repetitive tasks like staking shelves in supermarkets, operating baling machines, and typesetting in the Print industry. The repetition involved links to serialisation in art but also brought a proletarian ethic into his work, ensuring nothing was too fancy and grounding the work in actions like stacking or weaving.

One of his key early innovations was paintings within paintings. This innovation derives from illustrated manuscripts, such as the Book of Durrow, which have "beautiful paintings set into script." In the 1980s, abstraction needed to be "reactivated" and "opened up", and Sean achieved that with "pictures within pictures" "inspired by insets in type." He sees the moment in 1981 when he made Backs and Fronts as a moment of opportunity in which his early experiences of trauma and difficulty resourced him to see an opportunity in the then-current state of abstraction rather than a defeat from which there was no escape. His US peers had only known success, so when the juggernaut of abstraction, to which they had been adding, crashed, they faced ruin. By contrast, his previous experience of ruin enabled him to see a problem to be solved and an opportunity to revitalise something he loved.

His latest new development – his iPhone drawings – came when sitting outside among the palm trees in Eleuthera in the Bahamas – "the most beautiful place in the world" – and was inspired to start what became the Endangered Sky drawings. Then, he says, "when I sent them to Kelly, he immediately came back with a poem, saying that the drawings reminded him of birds and their plumage, in particular." From there, they developed the idea behind the book, that of giving voice to and highlighting the plight of dozens of vulnerable species of birds on the Red List of Threatened Species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Sean is very aware of the paradoxes involved in using a technological device like an iPhone for a project like Endangered Sky. Still, he thinks technology is "a giant ship that's very hard to turn around," meaning it's better to find ways to use it to "serve the interests of nature."

He sees this as being connected to his "strong sense of spirituality that is floating around the world", which means that instead of "doing horrible things to each other, humanity chooses to do kind things." With this project, the music of the birds in the sky influenced him, and he was also affected by encountering a bird that was blind and in a panic by the side of the road and finding he was too sentimental to do the kindest thing for it. He is a spiritually inclined person, with St Francis as his favourite saint, and finds God, as human beings have done from ancient times, in moments of connection and kindness. One such came when driving in a queue of traffic towards the George Washington Bridge with his son. They stopped to give a donation to a homeless man and were overtaken by an enormous bulldozer which then became a source of frustration for Sean. However, the bulldozer driver pulled over and waved them through, having seen their earlier act of generosity. It is in such exchanges that he finds the experience of God.



Sean Scully, Left: Heat 1984, oil on linen Right: Doric Night 2011, oil on aluminium ©Artlyst 2023

Collaboration, of the kind he has enjoyed with Kelly, is most powerful, he thinks when done "purely for the love of it, without trying to get something." He also sees this quality in the art critic Donald Kuspit, who says that "writing is its own reward" and, as a result, doesn't wait to be commissioned but places work once it is done. Sean views human beings elementally as "pack animals," meaning that it is "when we do things together that we are great." That may be great art but could also be warfare, so we either "move towards light or we achieve darkness." Fundamentally, however, he is not pessimistic and thinks "predictions about the end of the world are not true."

One of his responses to our current climate-related crisis is to plant trees extensively on all his properties. Latest studies suggest that the world is getting greener and so our plight may not be as bad as some of the worst predictions suggest. The metaphor of the tree can be combined with the kind of friendships that generate projects like Endangered Sky. Friendship is like a plant; it has to have roots and these determine growth. His friendship with Kelly grew from odd coincidences, including Kelly's use of a railway station in Wales where the café had a Scully print on display. Kelly's hours spent studying this print caused their friendship to be seeded and nurtured.

He commends The Overstory by Richard Powers for his exploration of how trees communicate with one another. The book demonstrates an "almost religious relationship with nature, as do I." Sean says that ancient religions involved nature worship, and we are now circling back. He says, "to the extent to which I can change anything I will," "as the world is worth fighting for." An incident in 1989, during his Whitechapel show, contributed to his becoming, over time, a vegetarian. He was stuck at a roundabout alongside an open-backed truck containing cages of live chickens and observed a motorbike rider gently stroking the head of a chicken. "Such a moment of kindness and connection knocked chicken off my menu."

Becoming more deeply connected to nature has only enhanced the sense of humility that is to be found in the title of his Houghton Hall exhibition – 'Smaller Than The Sky' – as "nature makes you humble and happy because you're part of something bigger." The key to a more paradisal relationship with nature is to remove the transactional or profit-based element, whether financial or salvific. The key, as with his friendship with Kelly Grovier and the writings of Donald Kuspit, is that we don't act or create in order to get something back.

Sean Scully at Houghton Hall – Smaller Than The Sky, 23 April – 29 October 2023.

LISSON GALLERY

The Guardian
21 April 2023

The Guardian

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WH Smith doubles profits as customers come for a paper and leave with sushi

Sarah Butler

Less than three years ago WH Smith, once known for its chocolate promotions, magazines and stationery, had lost almost two-thirds of its stock market value as the pandemic damaged its UK high street business.

But now the retailer is reaping dividends from a transformation that means its typical customer is more likely to be picking up high-end headphones, a smartphone charger or some sushi - and may well be American.

The group, which in August 2020 was having to cut 1,500 jobs amid criticism of its lack of investment in stores, has now more than doubled profits in a year thanks to a bounce-back in air and rail travel, expansion abroad and an embrace of electronics and premium food ranges.

Profits at its North American travel arm are soaring - with an expectation that it will overtake its British high street stores this year to become the group's second most profitable division, behind UK travel outlets.

The group's sales in airports, train stations and hospitals jumped 75% to almost £600m in the six months to 28 February, while those made outside its established markets in the UK and the US tripled to £102m during the same period. That helped it to achieve pre-tax profits of £45m, up from £18m a year before.

Airport stores had the biggest surge in sales despite traveller numbers being down 15% on pre-pandemic levels. Sales in train stations outside of strike days stayed flat, even though there were a fifth fewer passengers.

Sales at the group's high street division dropped 1% to £266m, however. The company said a rise in physical store sales had been offset by a big decline at its online outlets including Funky Pigeon, which had benefited during the pandemic lockdowns.

Carl Cowling, the group's chief executive, said it was persuading more shoppers to enter its doors and each visitor to pick up an extra item by widening its product ranges.

"Three years ago we just sold sandwiches, now we have Yo! Sushi and premium wraps from Crush. More people are coming into WH Smith as they are seeing more products that might surprise you that we sell," Cowling said.

"We have now got pain relief, deodorant and toothpaste. People come in for one product and are finding something else that they want."

WH Smith, which employs 14,000 people and has more than 1,700 stores worldwide, including more than 1,000 in the UK and 320 in North America, said it expected to open 120 new outlets in the year ahead, half of which would be in the US and Canada.

The group said its UK travel division also had "excellent growth prospects" as sales had risen above pre-pandemic levels in the half year and more people were expected to return to air travel, although train passenger numbers were expected to remain lower than before Covid-19.

The business is also expanding InMotion, the technology retailer it has built since buying Dixons' airports chain in 2021 and which sells more expensive kit including computers, cameras and mobile phones, as well as smaller items. It is already in Spain, Italy and Germany and will open in Sweden and Australia.

Cowling said: "Wherever we have got a WH Smith store we think there is an opportunity for a tech store."

The group is also testing out a souvenir shop - curi.o.city - at Gatwick that it hopes to expand outside the UK if it is successful.

Susannah Streeter, the head of money and markets at Hargreaves Lansdown, said: "WH Smith is benefiting from the snap back in travel, with its outlets across train and airport networks much busier as demand for trips and holidays has rebounded.

"The pandemic hit the retailer hard, as trade evaporated while people stayed at home, but now the shutters are well and truly up and it's back to brisk business."

Streeter said even the widespread rail strikes appeared not to have dented the bounceback, "with surging demand at airports, offsetting the impact of delayed train journeys".

She added: "The pent-up demand for travel is showing up in these figures, with passengers clearly reserving cash to treat themselves to books, magazines and snacks on their long-awaited leisure trips."

£45m
WH Smith's pre-tax profit for the six months to the end of February, up from £18m a year before

75%
Increase in the retailer's sales in airports, railway stations and hospitals, to almost £600m

Colour block Sean Scully (right) joins Lord Cholmondeley at yesterday's preview of the artist's Smaller Than the Sky at Houghton Hall in Norfolk, before its opening on Sunday. The exhibition, which includes the work Stack (above), a cubic monument made from Murano glass, runs until 29 October.

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL LECKIE/ PA WIRE

Memorial for Mantel hears of her plan for 'Austen mash-up'

Harriet Sherwood

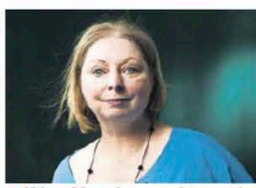
Hilary Mantel, the celebrated author of the Wolf Hall trilogy, was working on a "mash-up" of Jane Austen novels when she died suddenly, her literary agent told a packed memorial service at Southwark Cathedral yesterday.

"She was having the greatest fun dissecting a literary icon," said Bill Hamilton, her agent. A "fragment" of the unfinished novel, Provocation, was read by the actor Aurora Dawson-Hunte.

Mantel was working on the book when she had a stroke at her home in Devon last September. The author, a double Booker prize winner, was also preparing to move to Ireland. Her death at the age of 70 stunned the literary world and her legions of fans.

Yesterday's celebration of her life included tributes, readings, music, and film and photographs of the author. Mark Rylance, who played Thomas Cromwell in the television adaptation of the trilogy, read an extract from Wolf Hall, and Ben Miles who played the character in the Royal Shakespeare Company's stage adaptation, spoke movingly of Mantel's "immeasurable gifts".

The Very Revd Andrew Nunn, the dean of Southwark Cathedral, said the church was a "very appropriate place" to host the celebration of Mantel's life and work as it had been "caught up" in the "bloody business of the Reformation". He said Mantel was a "person of brilliance, insight and extraordinary talent," and it was his "joy and privilege" to welcome the author's family, friends and devoted readers to the occasion.



▲ *Hilary Mantel was working on the novel, Provocation, before she died*

In a tribute read on his behalf, Mantel's brother Brian told how she had used her skills as a "natural storyteller" to entertain him with historical tales when he was unwell as a child. Words were to Mantel as the piano was to Mozart or the paintbox to Picasso, he said.

Anne Preston, a friend of Mantel's for almost 60 years, described how the author introduced her to the works of Shakespeare at the age of 12. She "opened doors to new worlds" and had been "a consummate craftsman and a weaver of spells".

> *'Wolf Hall passages had such glitter and profundity they gave you the shivers'*
>
> **Bill Hamilton**
> *Mantel's agent*

The actor Lydia Leonard read an extract from an article in which Mantel described a Buckingham Palace reception where guests parted at the Queen's arrival and studied a Vermeer rather than meet the monarch's eye. "The self-possessed became gauche and the eloquent were struck dumb. And then the queen passed close to me and I stared at her. I am ashamed now to say it but I passed my eyes over her as a cannibal views his dinner, my gaze sharp enough to pick the meat off her bones," Mantel wrote.

Hamilton spoke of her "glittering intelligence" and "astonishing virtuosity". The Wolf Hall trilogy contained "passages of such glitter and profundity that they give you the shivers". Yet every day and every week "she tried to write better".

Contributors to the occasion spoke of her humour and kindness. "She was a mentor to many" and was "hugely supportive of fellow writers", said Charlie Redmayne, chief executive of her publisher, HarperCollins.

Miles said Mantel began every email and conversation over a decade of friendship with "are you okay?" He said: "Those three small words are a testament of an unending kindness. It was never a general inquiry but a precise question. There was intensity ... to her concern for your wellbeing."

Mantel's widow, Gerald McEwen, and her family asked those attending the memorial service to make donations to Scene and Heard, a charity that uses theatre to benefit children. Mantel was its patron.

The Guardian will publish an exclusive extract from Mantel's unfinished novel in the Saturday Magazine.

LISSON GALLERY

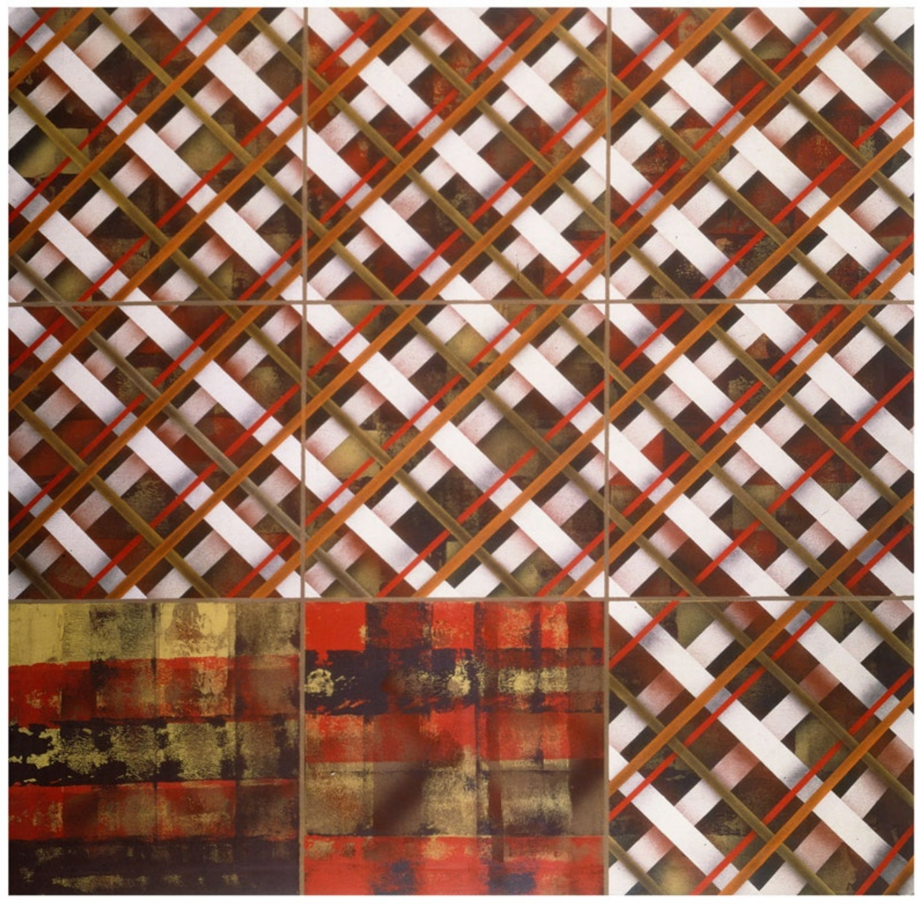
The Brooklyn Rail
1 June 2022

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Sean Scully: *The Shape of Ideas*

By Raphy Sarkissian



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.

ON VIEW
Philadelphia Museum of Art
April 11 – July 31, 2022
Philadelphia

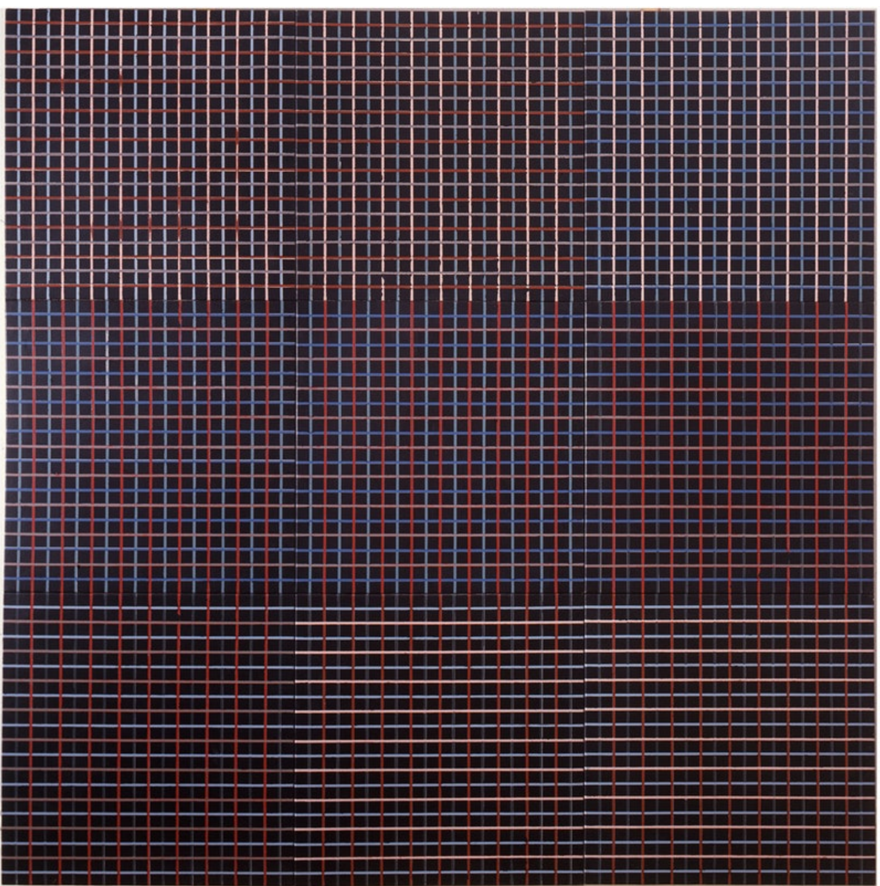
More and less, neither more nor less. Perhaps an entirely other question.[1]

—Jacques Derrida

Nothing could shed light more eloquently on Sean Scully's oeuvre of the past five decades than the subtitle of the riveting retrospective that is currently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art: *The Shape of Ideas*. Mirroring a primary definition of art as a form of representation and echoing the Platonic and Aristotelian debate on form and content, the rhetoric of the title takes on a Beckettian quality in light of the primarily abstract pictorial language of Scully's work. Here the boundaries of form and content dissipate, as medium and message are rendered interchangeable, undermining the closure of meaning and anticipating those interpretations that emerge from the perception and intuition of the observing subject.

Expertly curated by Timothy Rub and Amanda Sroka, this impressively presented exhibition methodically unravels Scully's lifelong formulation of a set of geometric motifs, often organized within gridded configurations as blocks of color. Over one hundred works by Scully, spanning from 1972 to 2021, are on view in the Dorrance Special Exhibition Galleries and Korman Galleries. They encompass paintings, watercolors, drawings, aquatints, woodcuts, etchings, color lithographs, and a digitally-printed suite. Presented chronologically to a great extent, Scully's work also unfolds thematically, a progression marked by the section titles "Variations on the Grid," "A Stripe Like No One Else's," "Multipanel Paintings," "Insets and Checkerboards," "Wall of Light," "Doric," "Landlines and Windows" and "Sean Scully as Printmaker." In the preface of the superb catalogue of the exhibition, Marla Price aptly notes, "The systematic elements of [Scully's] 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."[2]

"A friend of mine asked me if paintings spoke. If it was possible," recounts Scully. "I said yes: but with the language of light."[3] As vertical and horizontal delineations in Scully's visual fields celebrate abstraction's autoreferentiality by inviting the viewer to reflect upon the optical and haptic properties of a given work, geometric segments of color impart rhythmic interchanges of shading and luminosity. Scully's "language of light" operates through brush-marked surfaces with multiple strata of tonal variations, where primary geometric forms and topographies explore the experience of sameness and difference, the relation of the image to the framing edge, closure and openness of forms, optical movement and stasis, limitation and extension of shapes, and the function of parts in relation to the whole.

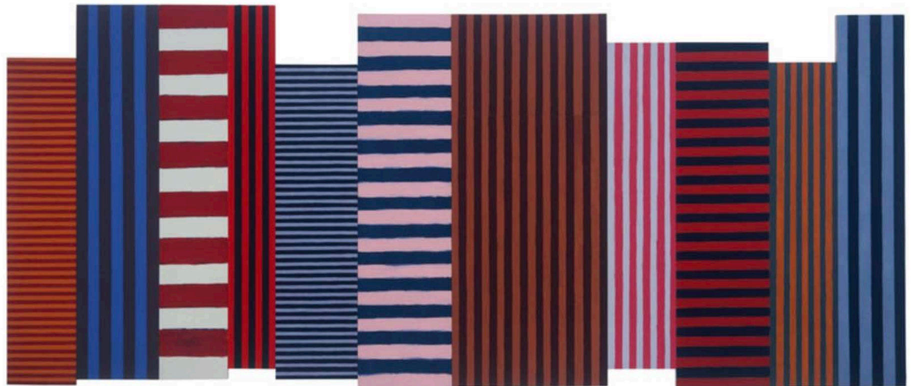


Sean Scully, *Black Composite*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 90 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist. © Sean Scully.

A “pioneer of a new kind of abstract painting” has been Deborah Solomon’s succinct verdict of Scully, deeming his achievement as a bridge between the utopian model of modernism and the works of such contemporary practitioners of abstraction as Amy Sillman, Mark Grotjahn, and Mark Bradford.[4] Donald Kuspit has described Scully’s “Wall of Light” series as having “a self-enclosed Romanesque rather than an open Gothic look,” characterizing them as evocations of walls, rather than windows, through which light appears to stream.[5] The late philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto has described the artist’s own poetic intent by claiming, “Scully is far from a formalist artist, and expects his work to transmit metaphors of the widest human relevance.”[6]

Scully’s output, since its outset, has been a relentless conjugation of the formalist properties of abstract painting, proposing the work as a physical manifestation of an “idea” in and of itself, a self-contained visual realm that nonetheless remains in conversation with the contemporary status and history of abstract painting. *The Shape of Ideas* demonstrates Scully’s desire to investigate and reinvent geometric abstraction with an expressive virtuosity that pays homage to the formalist logic of modernism, simultaneously expanding its aesthetic and hermeneutic possibilities.

Frame and surface: these two structural elements recirculate steadily throughout Scully’s practice, hazing the distinctions between object and image, where line and color disintegrate the taxonomy of figure and ground. This enterprise reveals itself through reiterations of pictorial frames within optical spaces (as in *Green Light* [1972–73]), through the assembly of multiple panels of varying measurements (as in *Backs and Fronts* [1981]), through a dialectic between gesture and frame (as in *Heart of Darkness* [1982]), through protruding and sunken surfaces (as in *The Fall* [1983]), through insets and gestural veils of paint (as in *A Bedroom in Venice* [1988]), through interchanges between tactile and pictorial lines (as in *Vita Duplex* [1993]), through a reinvention of the classical modernist grid (as in *Mooseurach* [2002]), through a geometry of dramatic painterly gestures (as in *Landline North Blue* [2014]).



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.

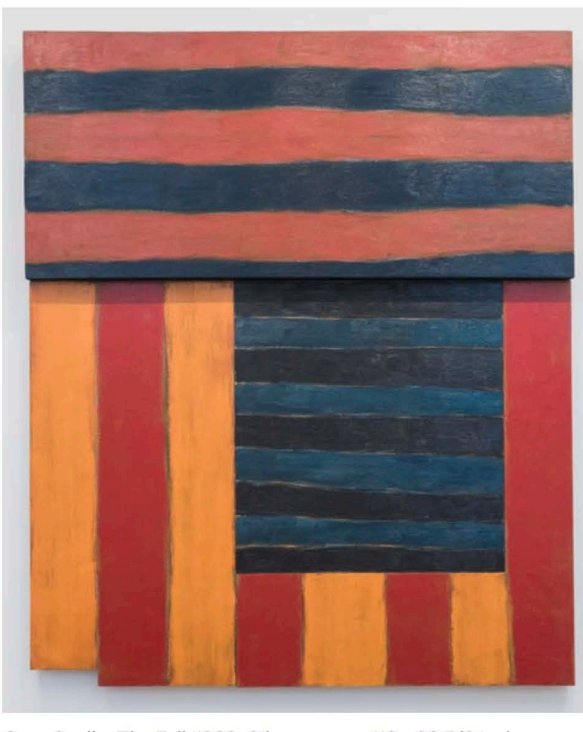
The titles of these paintings may perform as subtexts, threatening to breach the bounds of abstraction’s autonomy. Similarly, the writings and interviews of Scully reveal his conviction in abstract painting as a conduit for narrative, emotion, poetry, idea and thought. Nevertheless, as Scully has offhandedly stated, “I’m not trying to make paintings that are decipherable and ‘understood,’ because I don’t think that’s what is needed; that becomes a dead

thing. I try to make paintings that are not conquerable, that can be reused over and over again, that are not merely designs. … My paintings are about flaws and about life (street life)."[7] In 1989, reading his paintings as "fierce, concrete and obsessive, with a grandeur shaded by awkwardness," art critic Robert Hughes would assess Scully's recurring leitmotif as "a stripe like no one else's." Indeed, Scully's self-interrogative dialectic runs throughout this survey: throughout, the spectator confronts a formalist language probing itself from within.

Upon entering the section titled "Variations of the Grid," the first painting the visitor confronts reveals itself as a latticed abyss, an optical quandary, an unmistakable embodiment of Plato's Allegory of the Cave that addresses reality as opposed to perception. *Inset #2* (1973) is an eight-foot square acrylic painting Scully executed in response to the geometric patterns of Hard-Edge painting and Op Art, only to pair the objectivity of geometry with the amorphousness of Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Bridget Riley, Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler are a few of the paradigmatic names that *Inset #2* evokes, except here Scully addresses the discrepancies of reality and appearance by inventively integrating the formalist contraries of linearity and painterliness, flatness and shading, surface and depth.

In hindsight, *Inset #2* now registers as a formative example of Scully's distinctive pictorial language, espousing a geometry that is more carnal than cerebral, more visceral than rational, more elusive than Stella's famous "what you see is what you see." That carnal geometry can now be read as a revelation of subjectivity, despite the distinctly objectivist associations of its ordered series of horizontal and vertical lines. In Scully's hands, abscissas and ordinates become approximations that structure pictorial space as a dialogue between the rational and irrational, the ideal and real, essence and appearance, the logical and lyrical. "This is my way of making the paintings human," Scully has stated, claiming that a painting "represents the flesh of the body."[8]

In 1972, through *Harvard Frame Painting*, Scully proposed a definition of painting as a screen, a physically open entity, an amplified disclosure of the warp and weft threads that structure the weave of the linen support. Exhibiting structural interchanges among wooden frame, felt, sacking and paint, the armature of this work registers as a visual interrogation of painting's basic structure. As a gridded matrix encapsulating the literal opacity and transparency of real objects and real space, *Harvard Frame Painting* exists between painting and sculpture, evoking the disorderly knotted ropes of Eva Hesse just as readily as the comparatively methodical idiom of Mondrian. We are here reminded of Hesse's astonishing *Metronomic Irregularity I* (1966), for instance, a seemingly nonrepresentational triptych where the mediums of painting and sculpture coexist, provoking extra-pictorial possibilities of reading, where the Apollonian and Dionysian converge.



Sean Scully, *The Fall*, 1983. Oil on canvas, 116 x 96 5/8 inches. Courtesy the Philadelphia Museum of Art. © Sean Scully.

Black Composite (1974) is a diagrammatic acrylic painting comprising nine square canvases assembled as a matrix, where each panel features a linear grid in various colors, all set against black backgrounds. As the horizontal and vertical lines here have been fashioned with the aid of tape during successive phases of realization, *Black Composite* reveals accidental marks left from the partly mechanical process of defining the complimentary and contrasting lines. To thus "use the means of order to create disorder … and to make something that you couldn't really break down analytically" has been Scully's aim, the desire that motivated him to adhere to the conventional medium of paint, despite the medium's abandonment by many of his classmates at Newcastle University in England in wake of the 1968 political and social protests across the globe.[9]

Scully's move to New York in 1975 would inaugurate a half-decade of so-called Minimalist paintings and works on paper, as exemplified by the acrylic painting *Grey Red* (1975) and oil painting *Fort #3* (1980). The shift from the medium of acrylic to oil allowed the layering of a range of colors, altering the observer's chromatic grasp of the surface when it is examined up close. Though *Fort #3* may suggest an austerity in tune with Minimalism's employment of the impersonal and fabricated, it simultaneously disrupts this ethic of depersonalization. Scully's relation to the Minimalist path was at once open and reserved, since the mechanized means of art production favored by that movement would ultimately contravene his commitment to the medium of paint applied solely by hand and his reconciliation of the polarities of geometry and gesture, objectivism, and lyricism. In his incisively written 1979 essay, the late art historian Sam Hunter characterizes these paintings as being "unique today in their particular combination of painstaking method and emotional intensity."[10]

The title of *Boris and Gleb* (1980) signals a shift toward abstraction's metaphoric potential—here a horizontally striped panel abutting its vertically striped counterpart becomes suffused with Christian iconology. Such a pairing of horizontality and verticality also conjures up the fundamental aspects of man's vertical position as addressed by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The upright posture of the human body, set apart from the horizontality of animals, as Freud argues, would lead to civilization's fateful condition: "Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty of exterminating one another to the last man."[11] As Scully has firmly indicated, oil paint has an indescribable capacity to "resist the deadening ambition of the modern world to control everything, absolutely."[12]

At this point, Scully abandoned the use of tape so as to allow the brushstroke to come to visibility, leading to outstanding multi-panel paintings such as *Rose Rose* (1980), *Precious* and *Blue* (both 1981), and the acclaimed *Backs and Fronts* (1981), first exhibited in *Critical Perspectives: Curators and Artists* at PS1 in New York in 1982. Though it was initially titled *Four Musicians* and accordingly comprised four vertical panels, eight additional panels would be added, culminating in a monumental work through which "Scully turned his Minimalism inside out into a species of Expressionism," according to David Carrier.[13] As Rub notes in the exhibition catalogue, *Backs and Fronts* represents the most decisive step in Scully's career.[14]

Sean Scully, *Chelsea Wall #1*, 1999. Oil on canvas, 110 x 132 inches. Courtesy the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2022. © Sean Scully.

Named after islands, *Elder*, *Ridge*, and *Bonin* (all 1982) are intimately scaled works that were executed during Scully's residency at the Edward F. Albee Foundation in Montauk, New York. By overlaying one striped panel upon another, *Elder* engages with real space, incorporating real shadow into what has now become an abstract relief. These works would soon be translated into mural-scale paintings that occupied Scully's practice for half a decade, as evidenced by *The Fall* (1983), *Tonio* (1984) and *Falling Wrong* (1985).

The singular place these abstract reliefs occupy within the history of the second half of the twentieth century prompts dialogues with the work of Louise Nevelson, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Lee Bontecou, and Donald Judd, to name just a few. From today's perspective, the absorbing play of light and shadow upon works by such contemporary practitioners as Imi Knoebel, Leonardo Drew, Rachel Lee Hovnanian and Gabriel J. Schuldiner suggests aesthetic exchanges with Scully's visual syntax of the 1980s. The decision to treat his painting as a sum of protruding and receding objects rather than a mere image certainly informs Scully's subsequent move: his invention of the inset, a signature device that he continues to explore in his current practice.

In pairing arrangements of geometric forms and chromatic luminance that define both real and pictorial surfaces, Scully's work simultaneously triggers and unsettles the semantic values of abstraction and illusion, representation and non-representation, figuration and non-figuration. If "both abstract and representational" or "neither abstract nor representational" might easily describe the viewer's experience or interpretive task, such phrases seem also to be welcomed by Scully, who has insistently declared, "I'm not trying to say anything different from what you want to say; I want to say the same thing. I want to make visible what we feel—not just what I feel, but what we feel."[15] As Scully aims to represent through painting what language cannot, his project brings to mind Vasily Kandinsky's attempt to do the same. Drawing on Jacques Derrida and Edmund Husserl in discussing Kandinsky's ambition,

Leah Dickerman writes, “Derrida ... notes Husserl’s blind spot, his failure to recognize that all perception is itself framed by speech and cannot exist outside it.”[16] But for Scully, it is precisely the extent to which painting can counter the compartmentalized structure of language, and the extent to which perception can exist outside of speech, that is most crucial. Here, seams of luminosity overturn flatness, exposing the epistemological sutures of language and thought.

1. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (1972), trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 173.
2. Marla Price, “Preface”, in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, eds. Timothy Rub with Amanda Sroka (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 9.
3. Sean Scully, “The Language of Light” (2000), in *Inner: The Collected Writings and Selected Interview of Sean Scully*, eds. Kelly Grovier and Faye Fleming (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2016), p. 85.
4. Deborah Solomon, “The Duane Street Years” (2006), in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, p. 237.
5. Donald Kuspit, “Sacred Sadness” (2007), in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, p. 231.
6. Arthur C. Danto, “Between the Lines: Sean Scully on Paper” (1996), in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, p. 238.
7. Scully, “The Sublime and the Ordinary” (1989), in *Inner*, p. 20.
8. Scully, p. 23.
9. Scully, quoted in Timothy Rub, “Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas,” in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, p. 21.
10. Sam Hunter, “Sean Scully’s Absolute Paintings” (1979), in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, p. 219. Originally published in *Artforum* 18, no. 3 (November 1979), pp. 30-34.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1964), p. 92.
12. Scully, “Oil Paint” (1995), in *Inner*, p. 37.
13. David Carrier, cited in *Sean Scully: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings: Volume II, 1980—1989*, ed. Marla Price (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018), p. 61.
14. Timothy Rub, “Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas,” in *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, p. 41.
15. Scully, “Empathy” (1986), in *Inner*, p. 15.
16. Leah Dickerman, “Vasily Kandinsky, Without Words,” in *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), pp. 46-53, above quote from page 53. See also Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

The Washington Post
27 May 2022

The Washington Post

ART

Abstraction seemed a dust bowl, but Sean Scully made it bloom again

The Philadelphia Museum of Art surveys a half-century of the artist's career

Review by Philip Kennicott

Sean Scully's "Black Blue Window," from 2021, is painted on aluminum, which gives the paint a luminous sheen. (Collection of the artist.Photographer: Elisabeth Bernstein/Sean Scully)

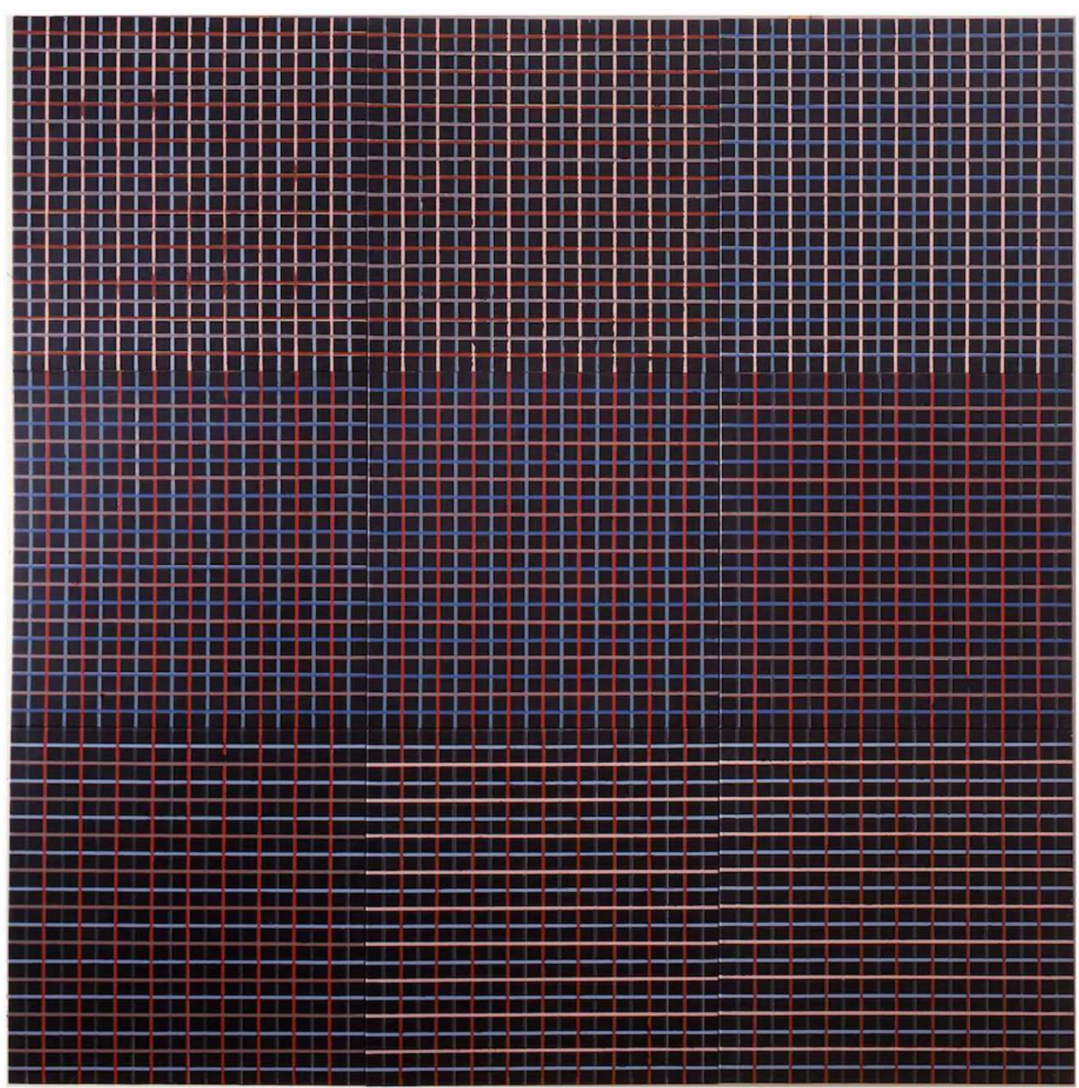
Three years ago, I visited the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, in Venice, to see the 16th-century church of the same name, designed by Andrea Palladio. This was during the Venice Biennale, so the church was also hosting an exhibition called "Human" by the Irish-born American abstract artist Sean Scully.

I was both intrigued and annoyed by the show; intrigued because I had never seen so many works by Scully in one place before, and annoyed because the installation seemed to compete with the church itself. A giant tower of colorful panels rose up below the central dome, and in other spaces, Scully's watery brush work seemed to dissolve the church itself, flooding it in the ubiquitous water of Venice's canals and lagoon. The show also included touching figurative sketches, which is rare for Scully. He is a thoroughly well-branded artist, and his work is most often encountered in museums singularly, one large painting in a gallery of other abstract works, suggesting a gorgeous carpet of color, like an enticing decorative object.

Now there is an opportunity to see the full scope of Scully's career in a generous and comprehensive survey of his painting since he emerged as a young partisan for abstraction in London in the early 1970s. "Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas" opened in April at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, with more than 100 works, including some of his most monumental paintings, along with drawings, woodcuts, etchings and aquatints. It is a seductive show, and may convert skeptics, especially those who feel Scully has been too settled for too long in his personal comfort zone of big, brick-like grids of bold color.

Scully was born in Ireland in 1945, and emerged on the scene as abstraction — especially large, heroic, painterly abstraction — was largely in retreat. His early work was inspired, in part, by a visit to Morocco, where he encountered a rich legacy of textile works. It was there that he began considering an idea that has preoccupied him ever since: how geometry can inspire and suppress order and chaos.

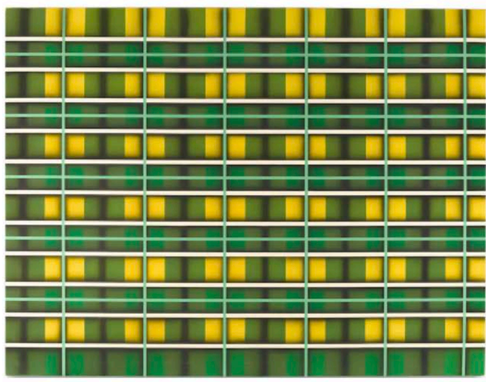
Among the earliest works on view in the Philadelphia exhibition (first seen in a slightly smaller version at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth) is Scully's 1972 "Harvard Frame Painting," in which sacking and fabric are woven on a frame into an irregular grid of overlapping and woven bands. Despite its title, "Frame Painting" is essentially sculptural, existing in a narrow plane of three-dimensional space. It also raises the central issues of abstraction that Scully would explore in his first decades: How strict a grid? How clean the lines? How to control the tension between surface and depth? Should all this be austere or sensuous?



Like his other works from the 1970s, Scully's 1974 "Black Composite" uses rigid lines but complex geometry to suggest multiples iterations of the grid. (Collection of the artist/Sean Scully)

His early responses lived in the world of mod fashion colors and the computer fetish of the 1970s and '80s. He must have depleted a few warehouses full of masking tape to keep all his lines digitally crisp and sharply edged. Works like "Overlay #11" from 1974 are typical: Line for line, the grid is strict, but the use of different colors and densities, and the subtle overlapping of lines, creates multiple grids within the grids, rhythmic patterns that strike the eye like a fusion of Philip Glass and Mondrian.

Later, the masking tape comes off, the edges become free-form and the paintings go from digital to analogue. The grids are looser and the paint, applied wet on wet, suggests yet more ideas about depth, layers within layers on the surface, through which you sense an "other side" to the two-dimensional canvas or panel. As soon as you can see through a painting, it also begins to suggest architecture, a sense of space in front and behind, and the possibility of passing through.



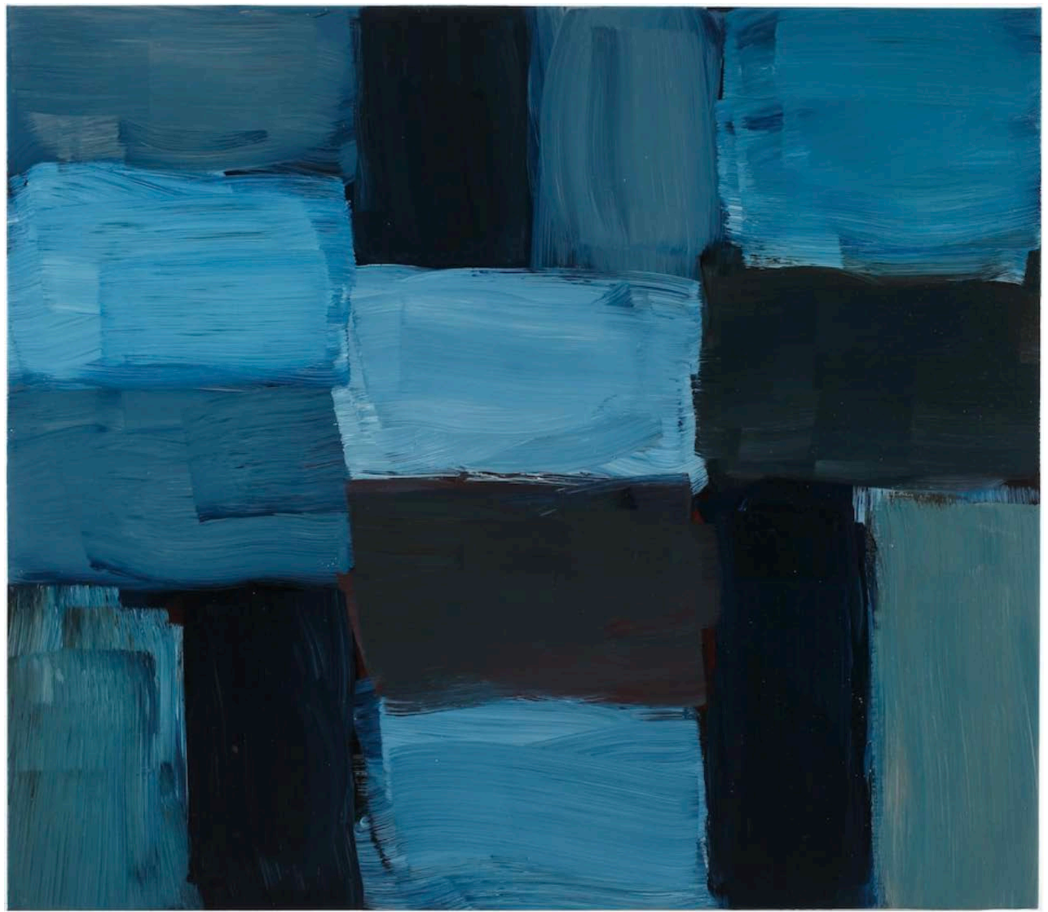
In early Scully works, such as the 1972-1973 "Green Light," the colors feel mod, the grid more regular, the lines sharper and the effect more digital than analogue. (Private Collection. Image courtesy of Bonhams & Butterfields, New York, 2020. /Sean Scully)

The architectural presence of Scully's work is furthered by the scale of his largest paintings, the brick-like patterning of many works, and the physical cobbling together of multiple panels, including insets and overlaid pieces. One begins to think in terms of doors, hatches, coffers and windows, and yet there is often a sense of impenetrability, as if the walls suggest the possibility of passage yet limit egress. These walls can feel like a terminus, defining the impassable limits of a prisonlike space.

Scully has certainly limited his concerns to a very small subset of abstraction. The larger field includes a host of ideas that continue to animate other abstract painters: Is there a focus to the image or are its events evenly distributed? Does the painting suggest mathematical or biomorphic ideas? Is it mapping another reality or avoiding any sense of reality at all?

For the past 50 years, Scully has resided in the small but fertile province of the grid, rotating the crops of his color fields to avoid depleting the soil. Curiously, he reminds me a bit of Romantic English landscape artist John Constable: infinitely inspired by what is near to hand, deeply at home, keenly alert, as only a provincial can be, to the nuances of the space he inhabits. Scully finds analogues in his home place for larger themes from art history, so in his 2015 "Doric Blue and Blue," the grid resolves into the pure brushstroke, the squarish daub of Cézanne. In the four panels of the 2000 "Land Sea Sky" and other more recent works, Rothko is summoned. In yet other images, the grid becomes mere substrate for cultivating Barnett Newman's "zips," now laid out horizontally for better yield.

Perhaps the most touching works in the Philadelphia show are those that suggest the longer arc of Scully's career, from purity to messiness, rigidity to freedom, self-containment to self-expression.



In “Doric Blue and Blue” (2015), Scully's grid resolves into something more like a study in broad brushstrokes, basic patches of paint organized into a collective tension. (Collection of Andy Song. Photographer: Robert Bean. /Sean Scully)

The 2002 “Mooseurach,” named after a Bavarian town where Scully maintains a studio, has bits of red or salmon and blue and green peaking through the interstitial spaces of his darker, more somber-colored bricks. These hints of color suggest light and fire, sky and sunset, cold and heat, while also giving us a sense of the depth of color underneath the color. The particular presence of the brown or tan or white we see on a densely painted canvas is determined not just by the pigment or the light in the room, but by the colors beneath the surface color. So these glimpses of color are both metaphors for things in life and small indexical signs of how Scully creates those illusions. They are fantasy and process at the same time.

They also are worlds away from the strict, surface patterns of the artist’s early work, as if he has found freedom or release from the grid space he laid out a half-century ago. One thinks of Richard II’s speech in prison, as he tries to hammer out an imaginary world from his confinement. Like Richard, Scully has begot “a generation of still-breeding thoughts,/ And these same thoughts people this little world.”

“Mooseurach” (2002) captures a key development in the artist's career, when the natural world seems to peak through the messy lines of his beloved grids. (Collection of the artist. /Sean Scully)

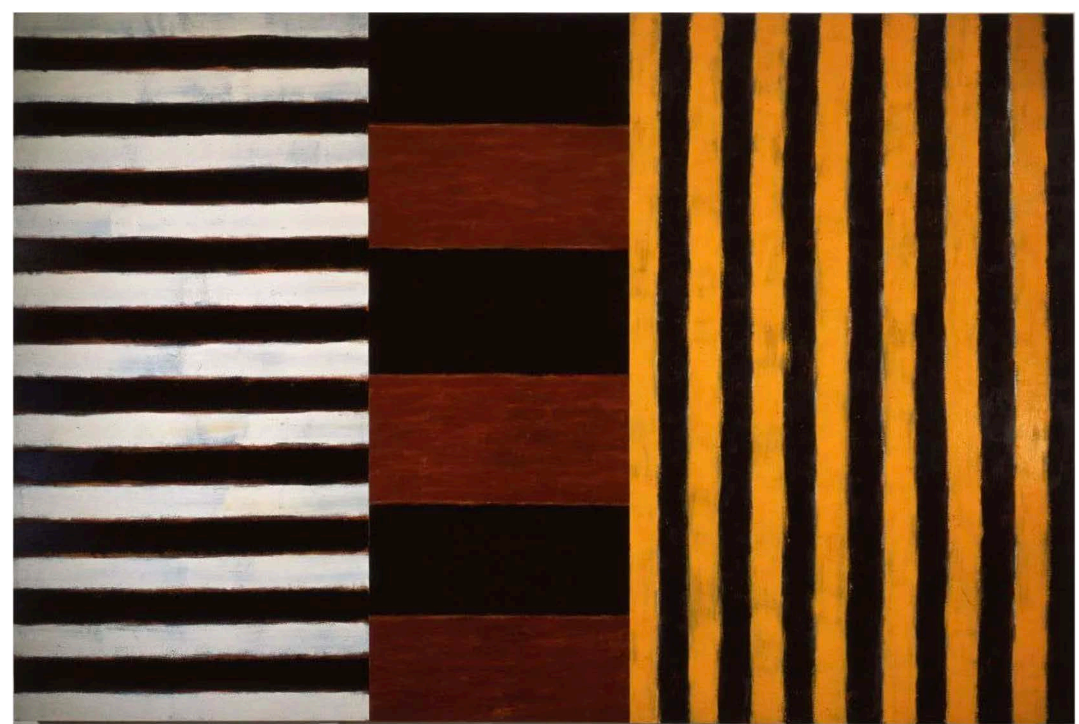
That’s an impressive accomplishment for any artist: to escape their comfort zone without ever leaving it. The Philadelphia survey takes us along for that ride, and it’s a moving journey.

Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas *Through July 31 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. philamuseum.org*.

Widewalls
7 April 2022

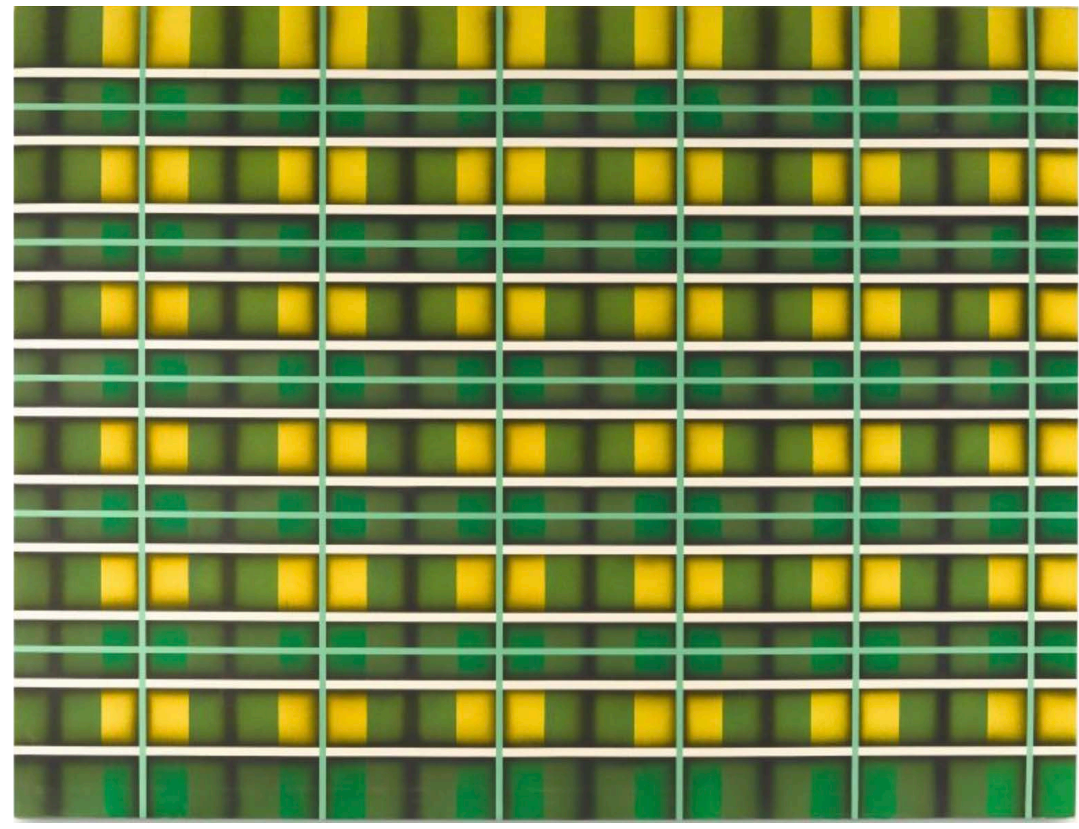
WIDEWALLS

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.

CBS Philadelphia
7 April 2022

CBS Philly

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.

ARTFIX daily
17 January 2022

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.

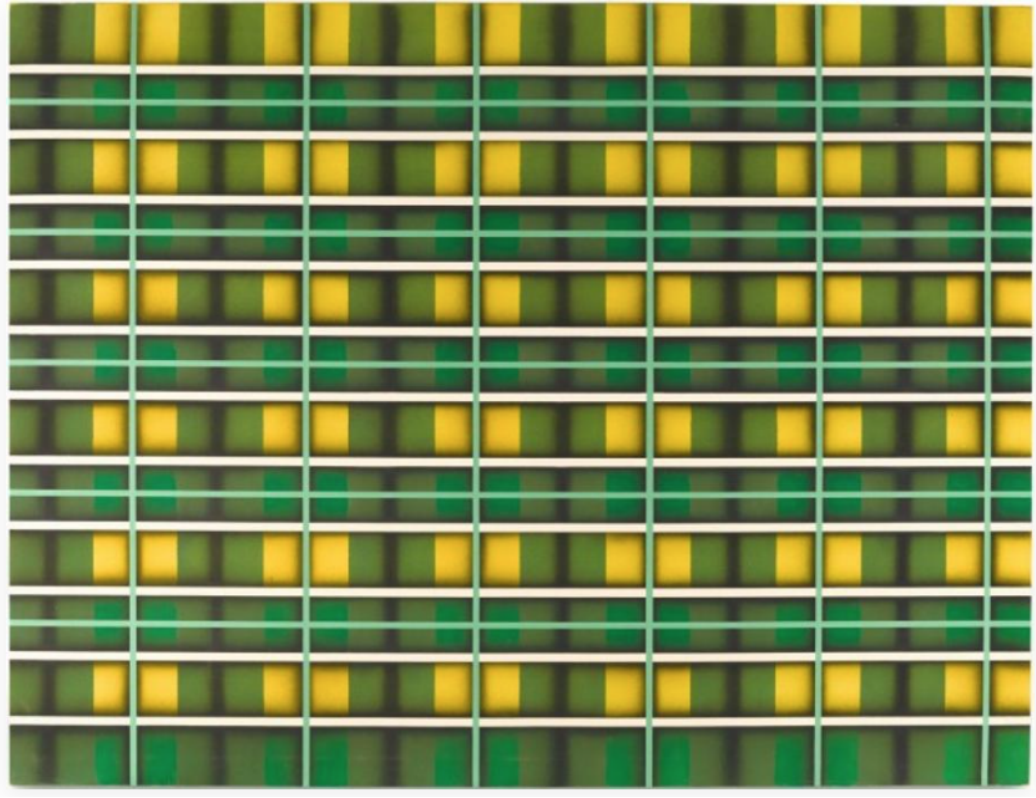
"Backs and Fronts," 1981, by Sean Scully. Oil on linen and canvas, 8 x 20 feet. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of Courtesy Magonza, Arezzo. Photographer: Michele Sereni. © Sean Scully.

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.

"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.

"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."

"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.

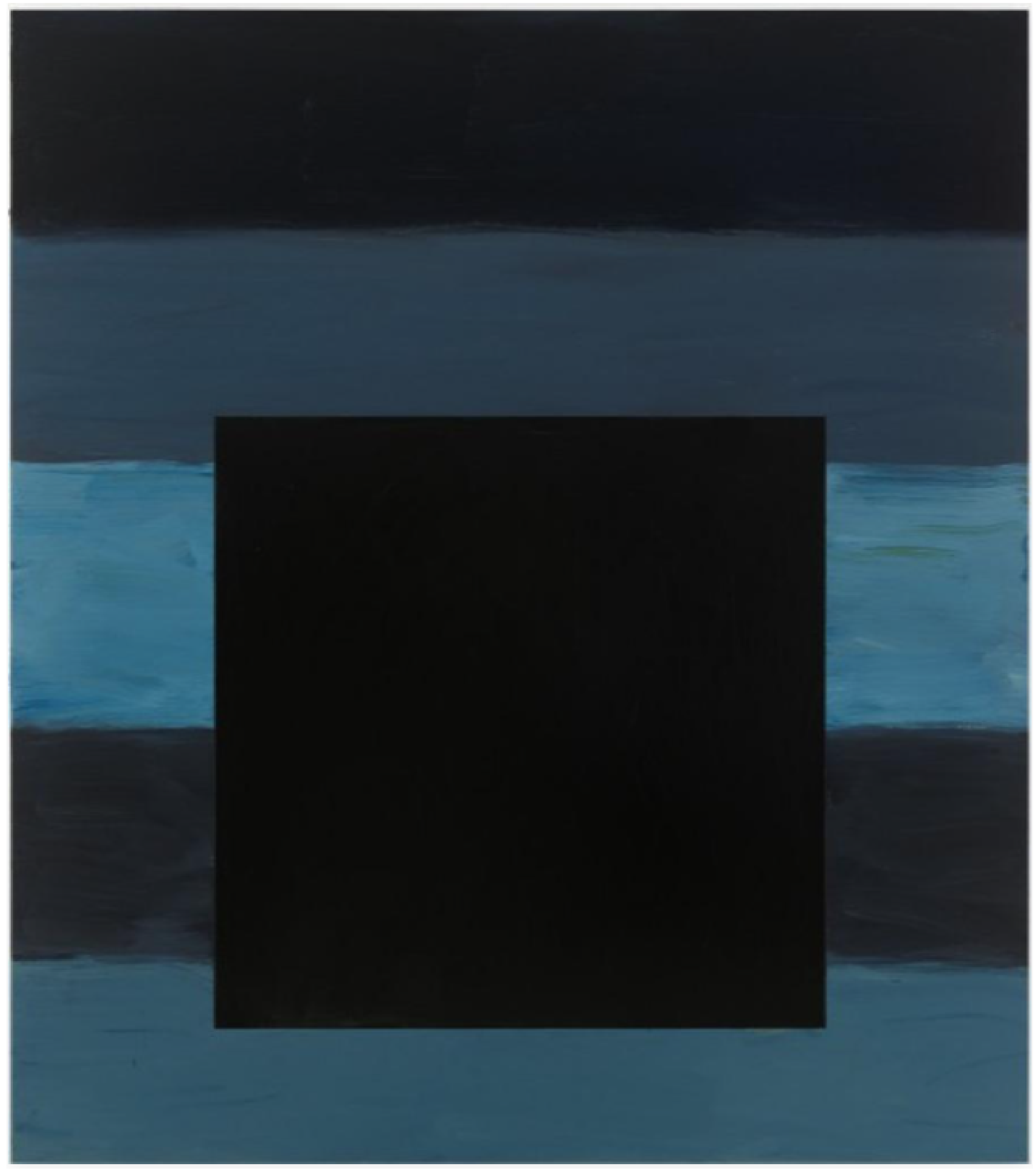
These Wall of Light paintings led to the development of Scully's other, closely related compositional formats, chief among them the paintings of the Doric series, which will occupy another spacious gallery. Scully created this series as an homage to the heritage of ancient Greece, reflecting ideas of 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

LISSON GALLERY

RTE
21 December 2022

Interview - Sean Scully

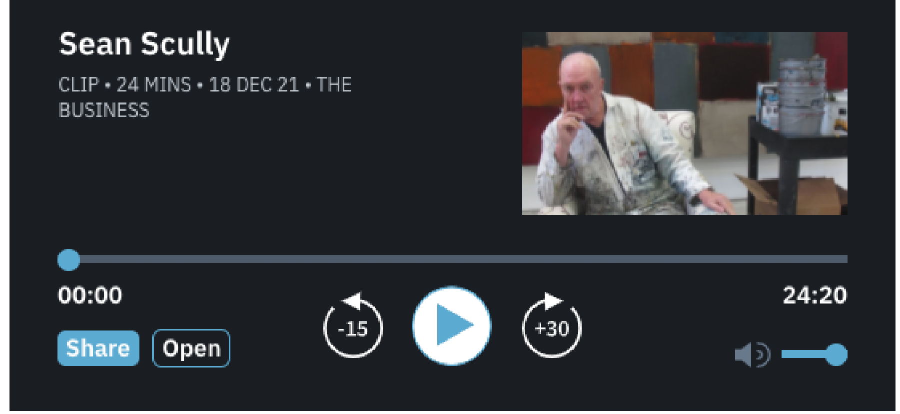
Updated / Tuesday, 21 Dec 2021 10:50

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.



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.

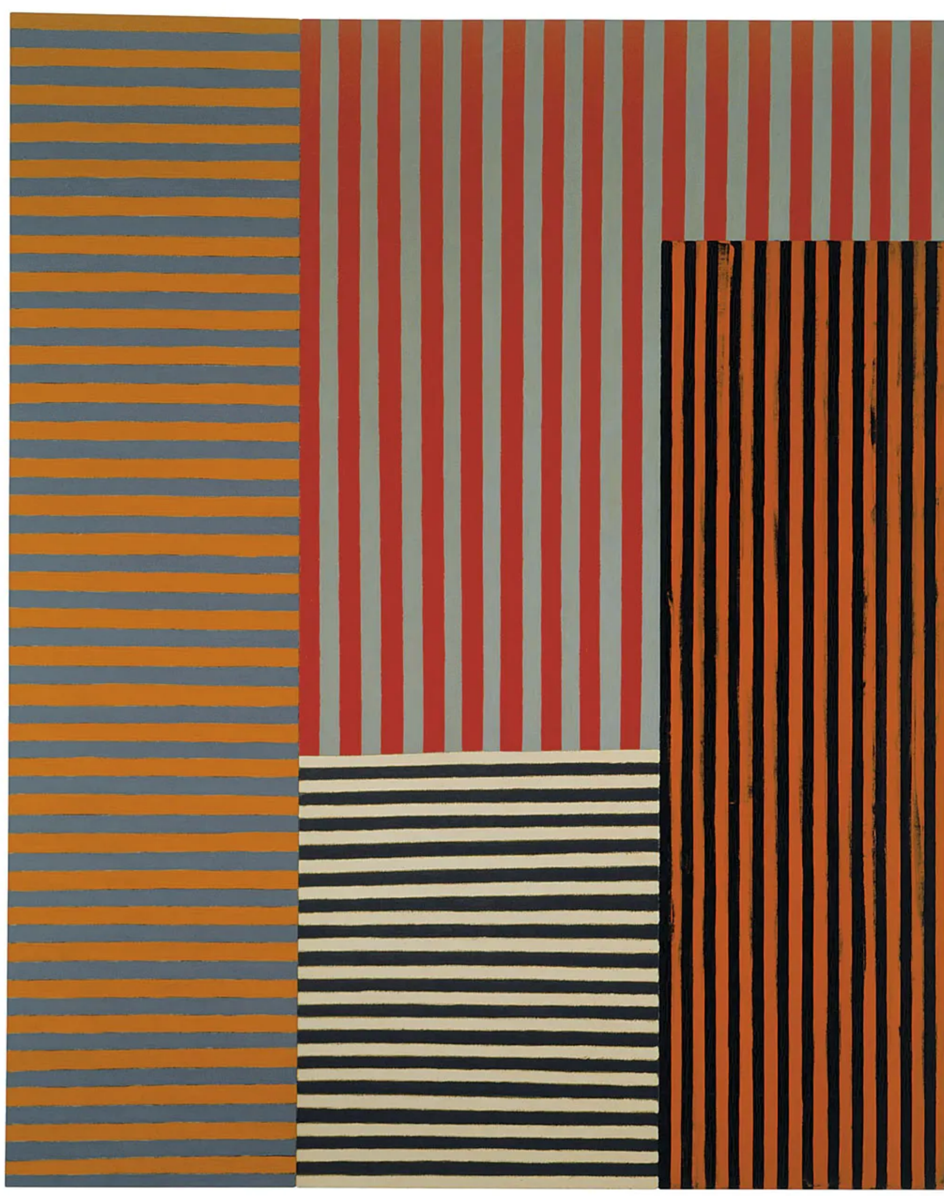
ome great works of art give us symbols to decode. Others decode us. Sean Scully's Backs and Fronts, an enormous 20-foot-long, 11-panel painting of strident stripes and raucous rhythms that thrums beyond the borders of itself, is one of those. It changed the course of art history in the early 1980s by 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."



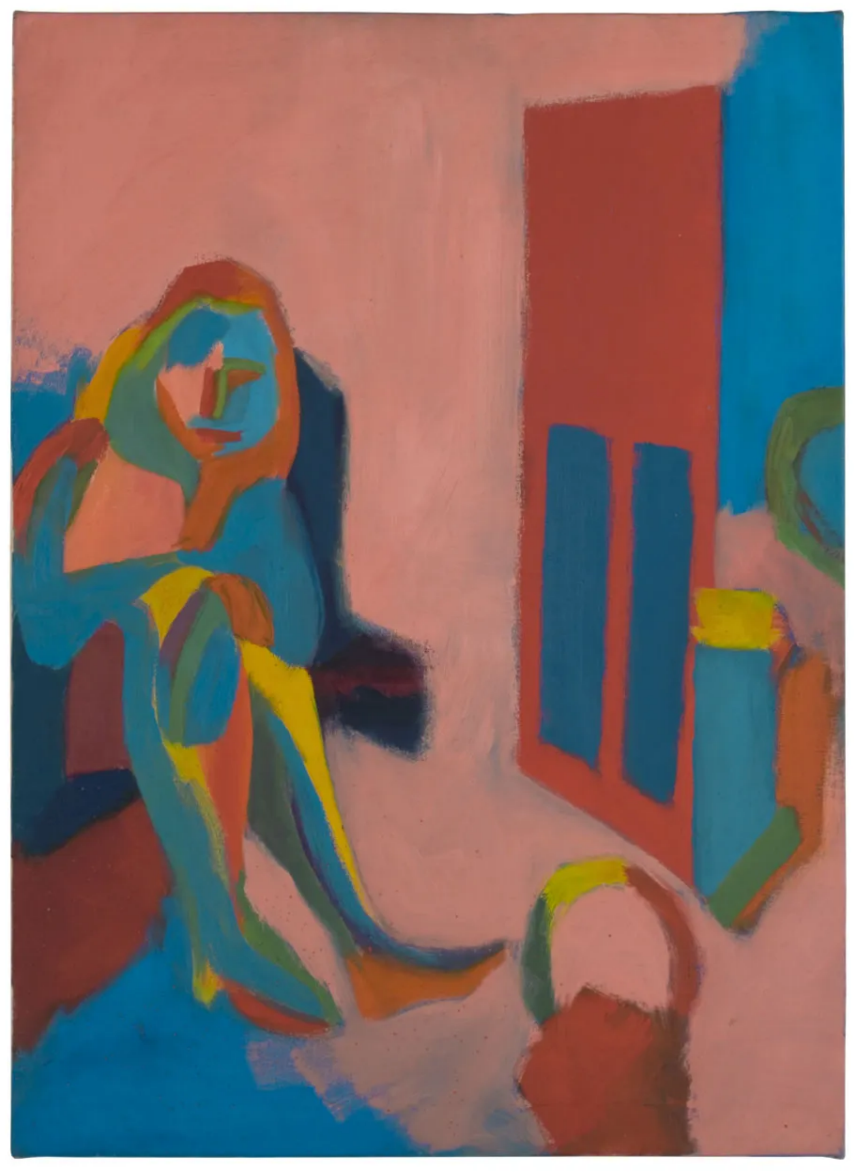
Araby, 1981 (Credit: Sean Scully)

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 young00artist 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)

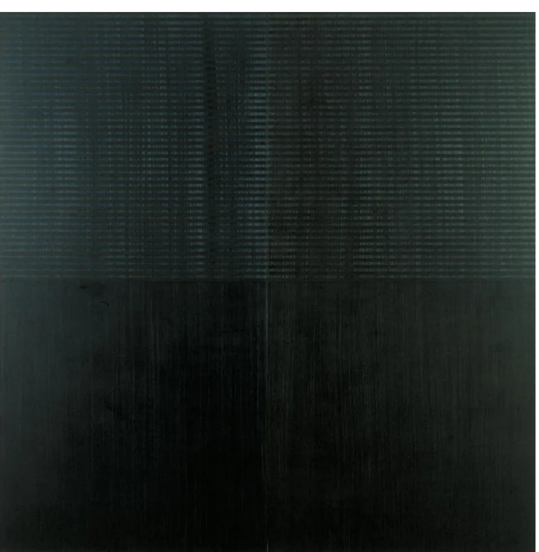
"I've taken a lot from both of them," Scully tells me, "but particularly Mondrian, because what I took from Rothko already existed in Romantic painting in Europe – in Turner, for example. I took a lot from Mondrian – his ideas of rhythm. But I tried to make them more of the street, you know, more knockabout, 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.*

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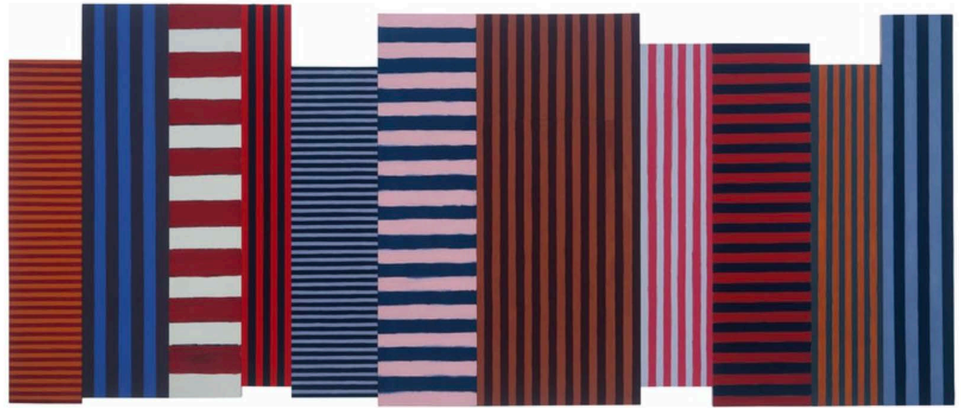
The Brooklyn Rail
3 September 2021

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Sean Scully: *The Shape of Ideas*

By Robert C. Morgan



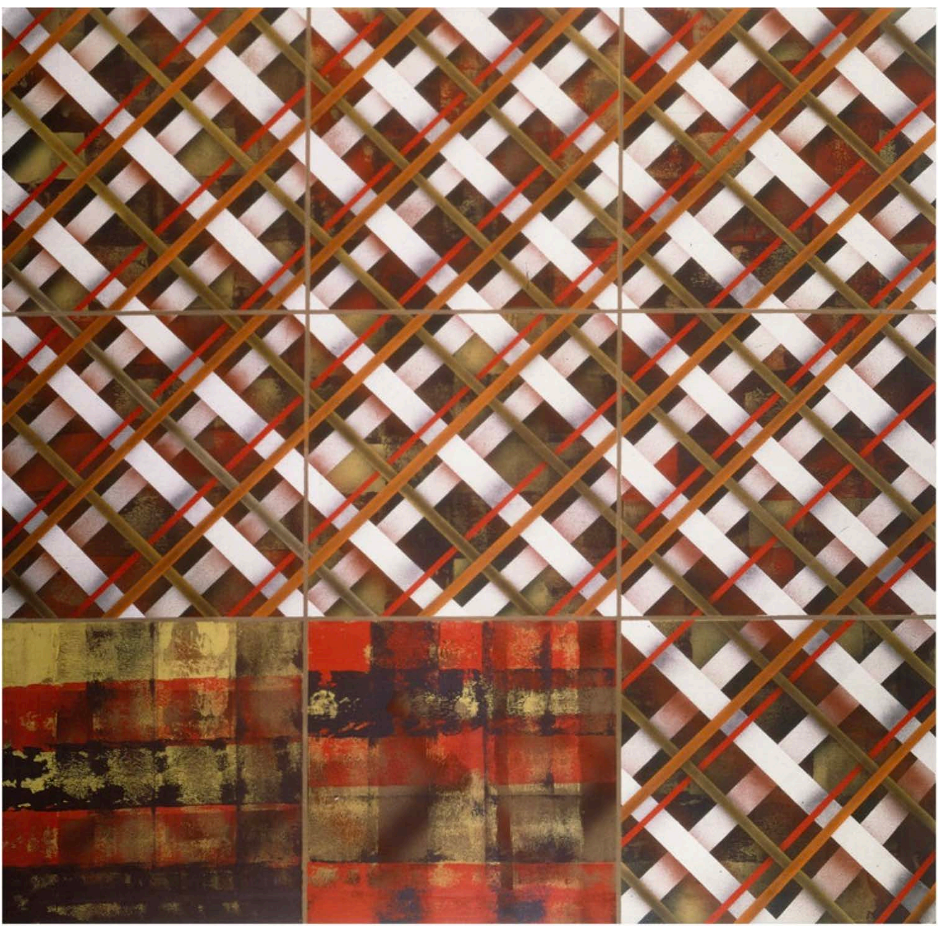
Sean Scully, *Backs and Fronts*, 1981. Oil on linen and canvas, 96 x 240 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Magonza, Arezzo. © Sean Scully. Photo: Michele Sereni.

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.

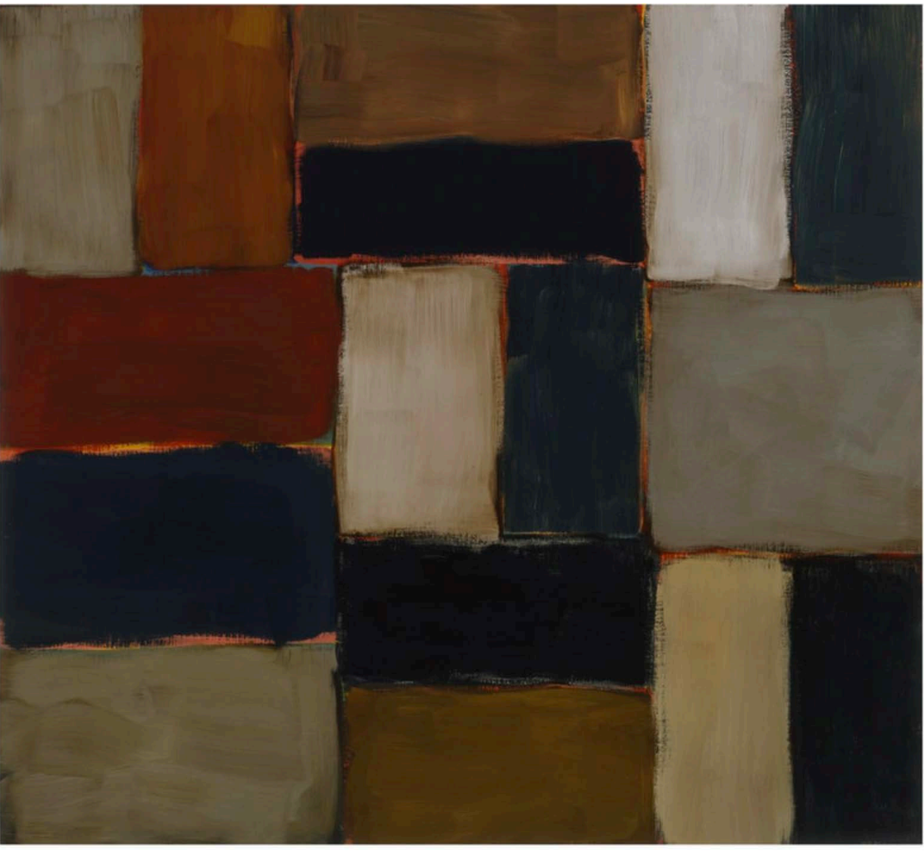


Sean Scully, *Inset #2*, 1972-73. Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy the artist. © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

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

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.

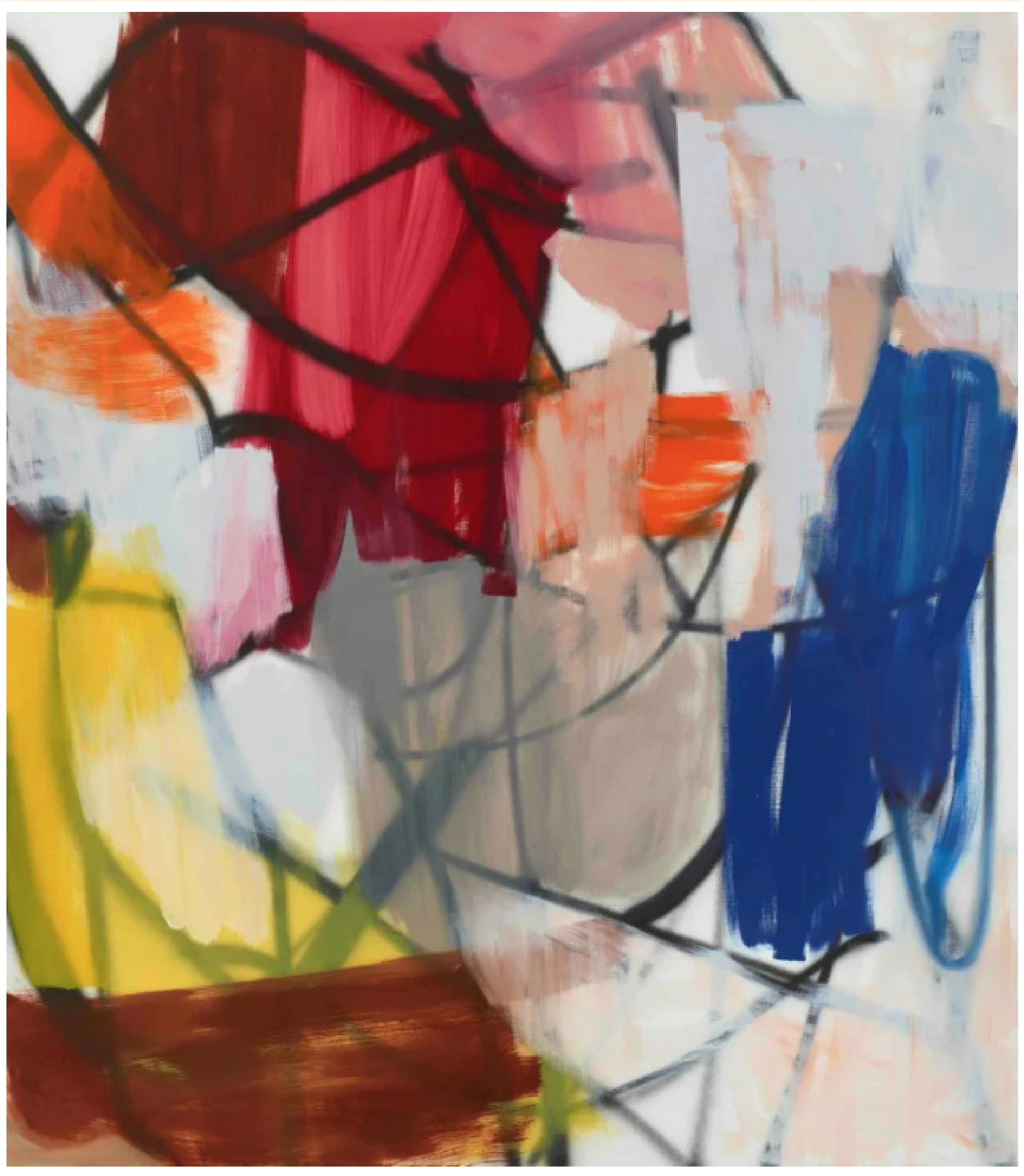
"In Barcelona, you'd go to meetings and they'd speak entirely in Catalan — like saying 'Fuck you'," says Scully. In the playground with their young son, Tomasko was told they should be speaking Catalan, instead of Spanish. "There was too much of that, there — it made it impossible," she says quietly. 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."

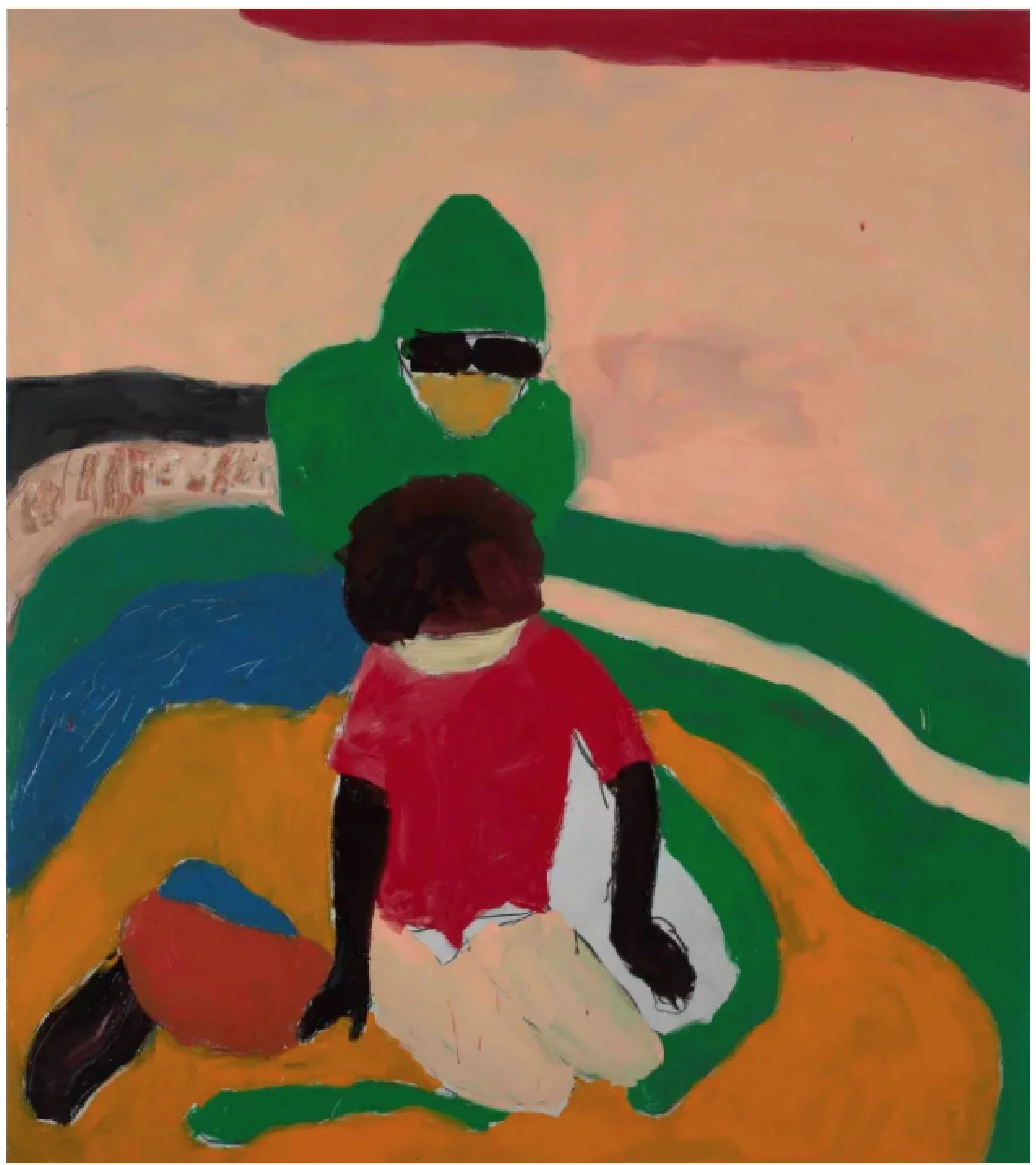
But as a family man, his feelings about today's New York have changed. He shows me an image of a work of his in which his stripes have morphed into those of an American flag and the stars in the top left corner are replaced by rows of guns.

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 Oisin 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

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

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Patron Magazine
September 2021

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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, *The Fall*, 1983, oil on canvas, 9 ft. 8 in. x 8 ft, 62 in. x 7.5 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Jeffrey H. Loria, 2017.

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, Oisin, with his gorgeous curly hair, is often his muse.

Sean Scully, *Backs and Fronts*, 1981, oil on linen and canvas, 8 x 20 ft. Collection of the artist.

“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."

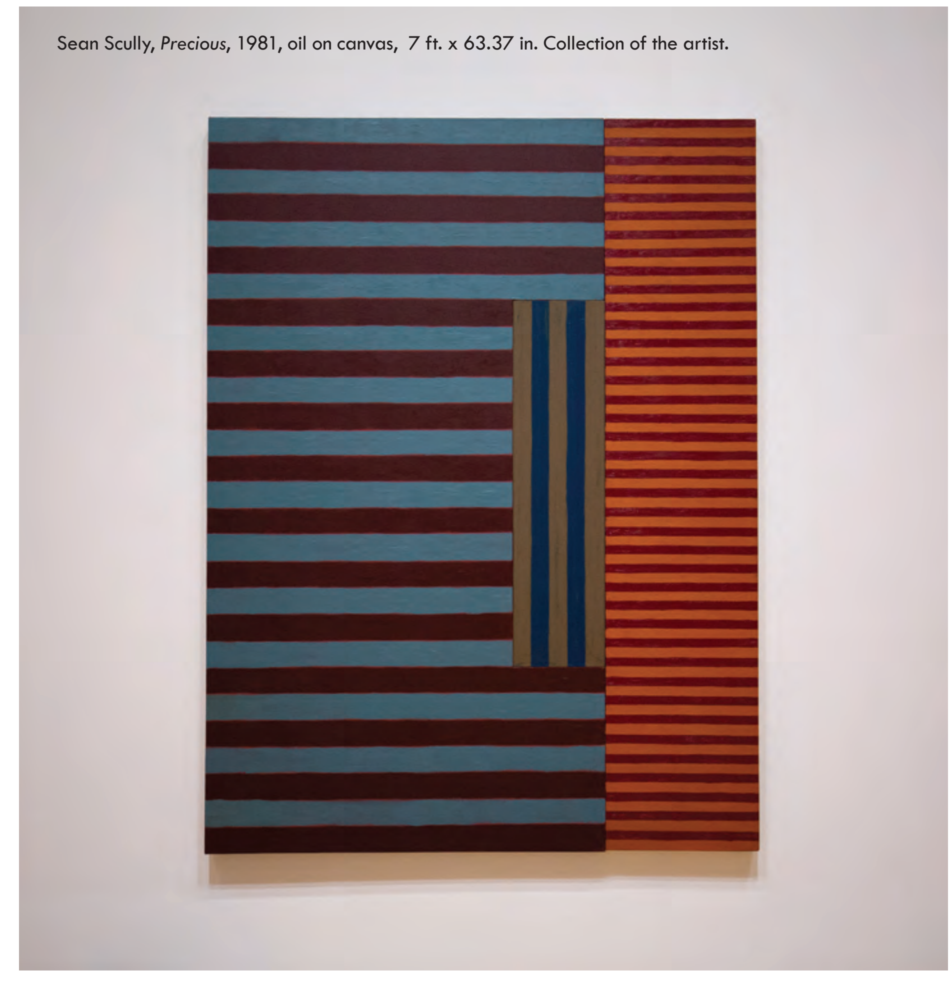
"You can't deny its presence when you see it. For us it was absolutely pivotal to be included in a retrospective of Sean's work," says Sroka.

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.

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26 July 2021

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).

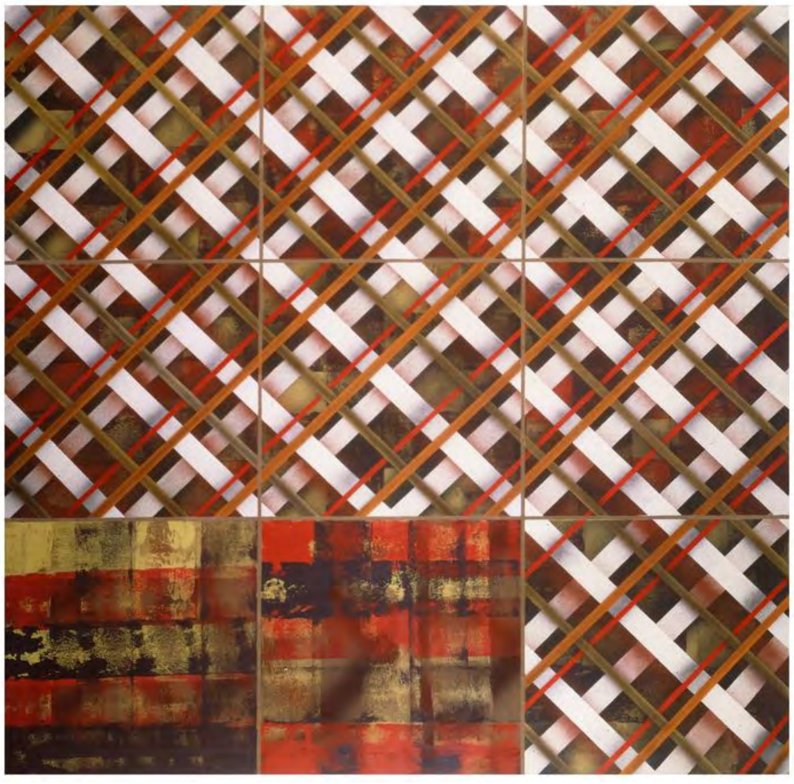
Installation view of 'Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas'

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.'

Artlyst
4 April 2021

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 Reinhard 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 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 Landline 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 Landline 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

*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*

It'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 transfered 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.

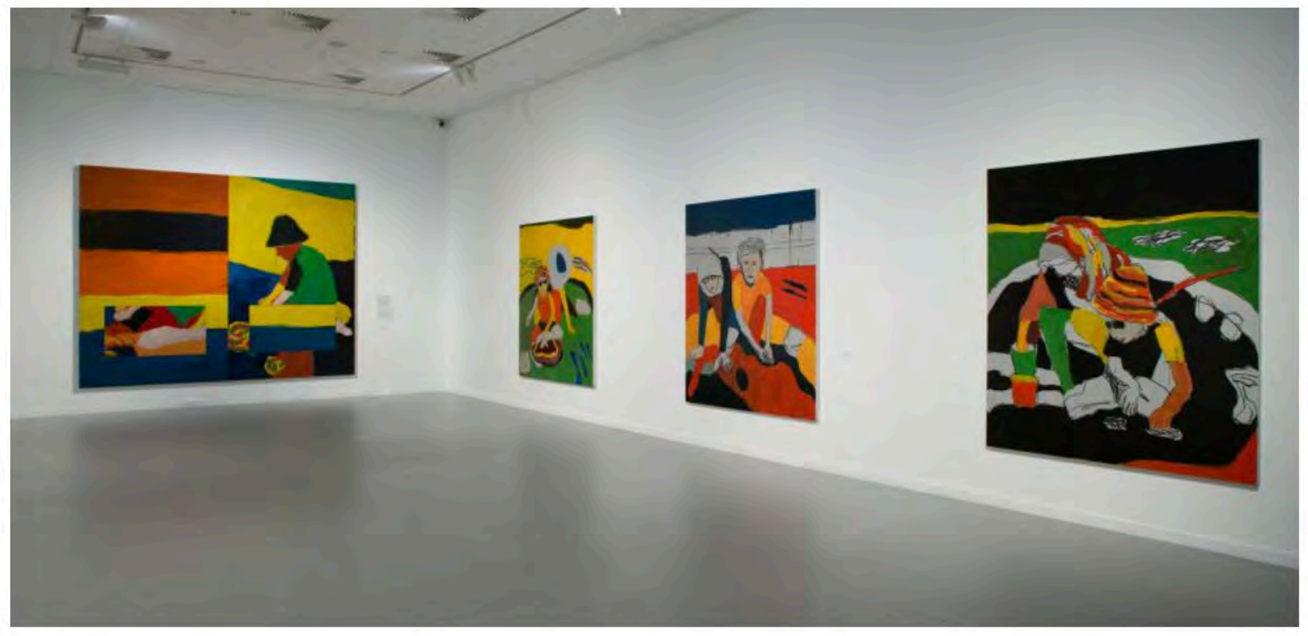
Above and below: Installation views of Sean Scully, 'Insideoutside' at Waldfrieden Sculpture Park.
Photography: Michael Richter

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.

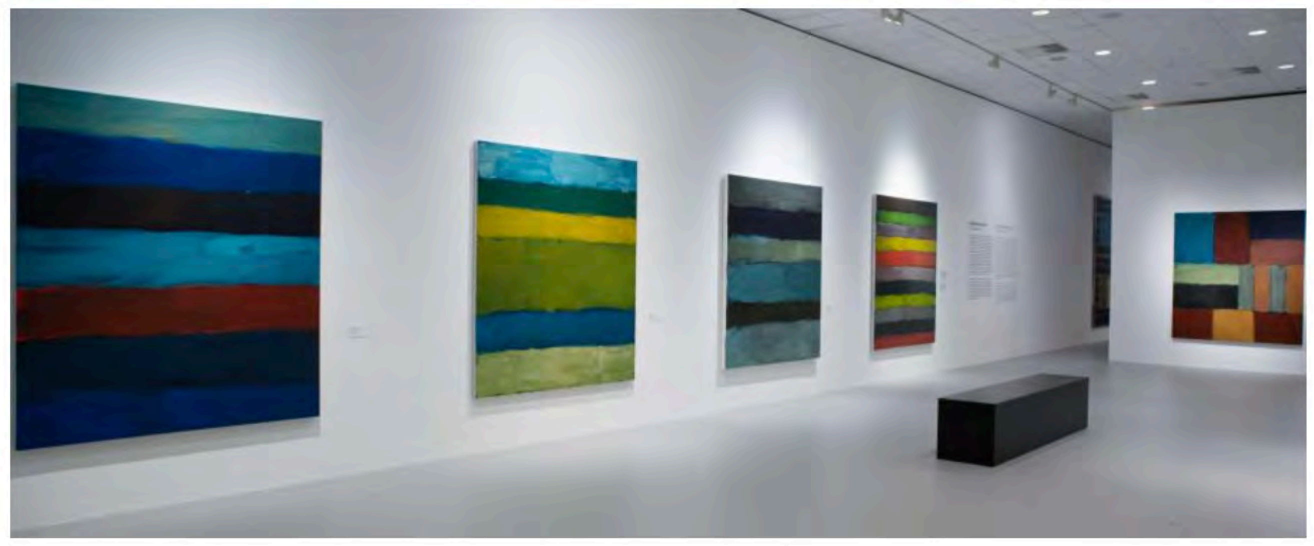
The artist shows no sign of sitting still. Alongside his Waldfrieden exhibition, he's just signed with Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, and will have a show of new work in their space in Marais, Paris in Spring 2021. He's also just unveiled a major retrospective at the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest, 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.' ✱

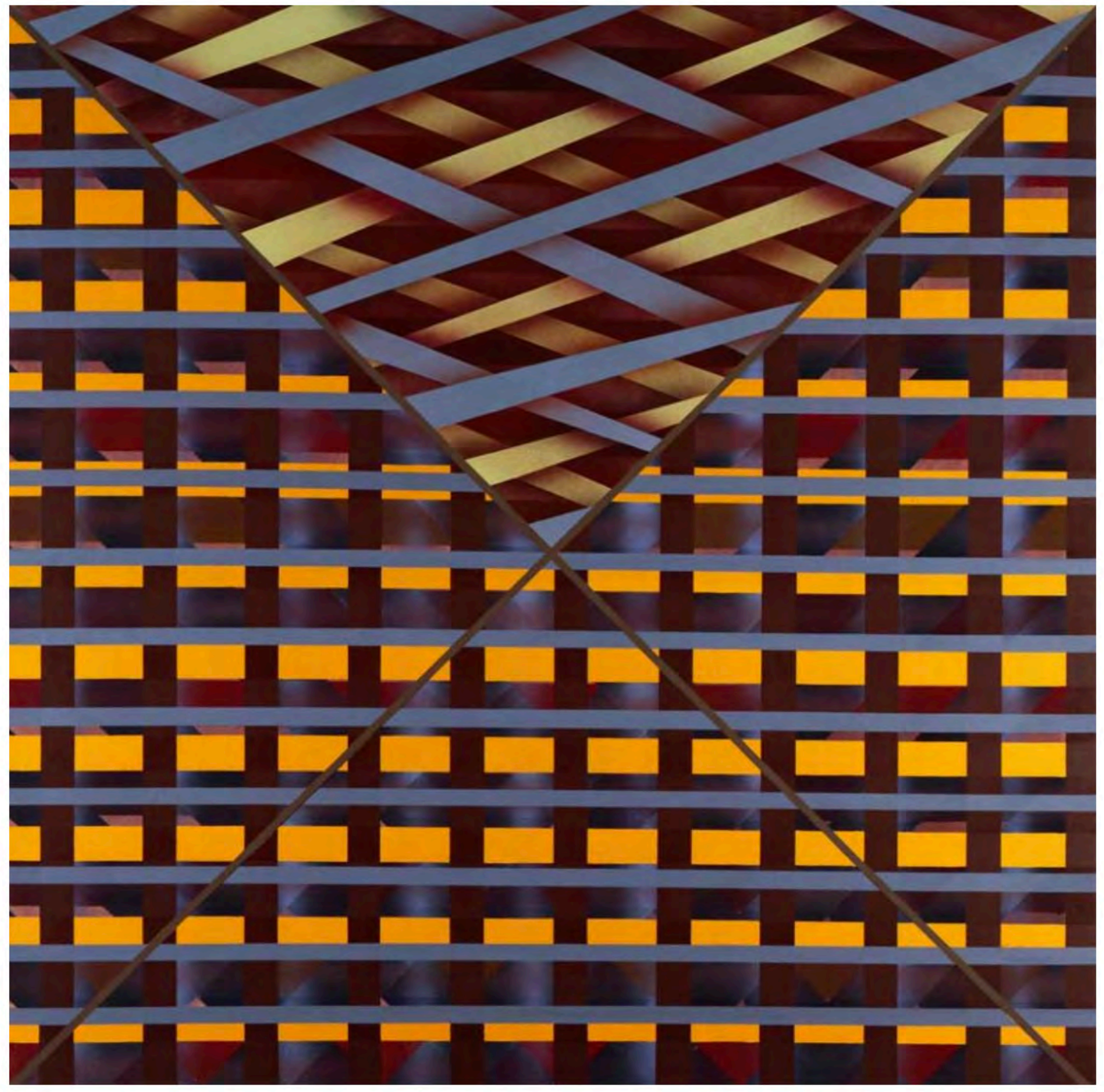
Sean Scully, *Adoration*, 1982. Copyright Sean Scully. *Photography: Sean Scully*



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

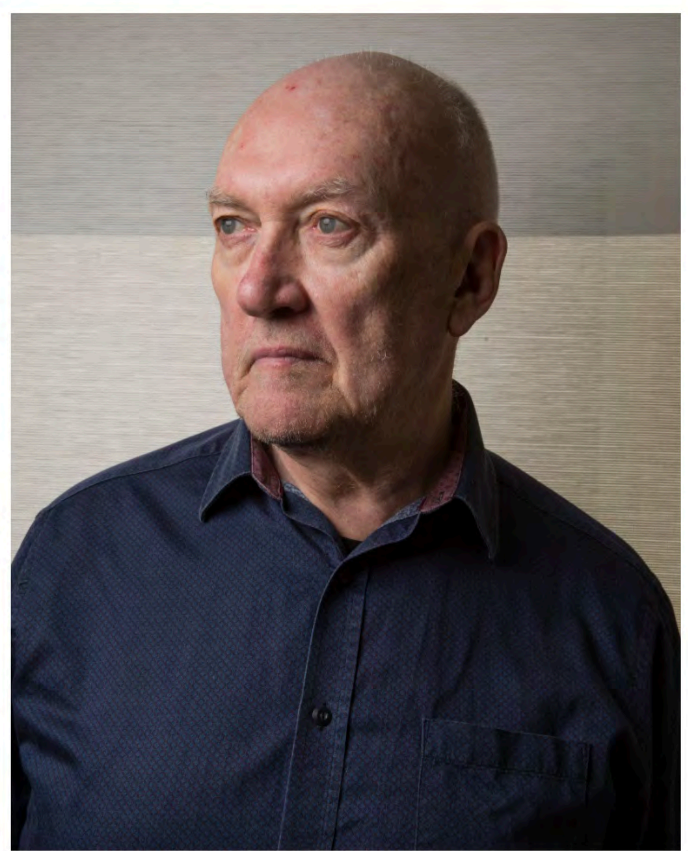
April 9, 2020

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

Irish Examiner

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."

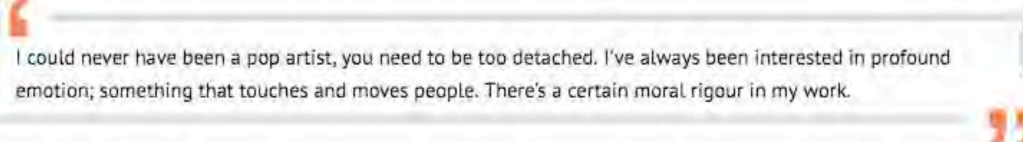
Perhaps a better comparison would have been to his close friend Bono, rather than Trump. Scully says "we have a lot fun together".

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.



"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.

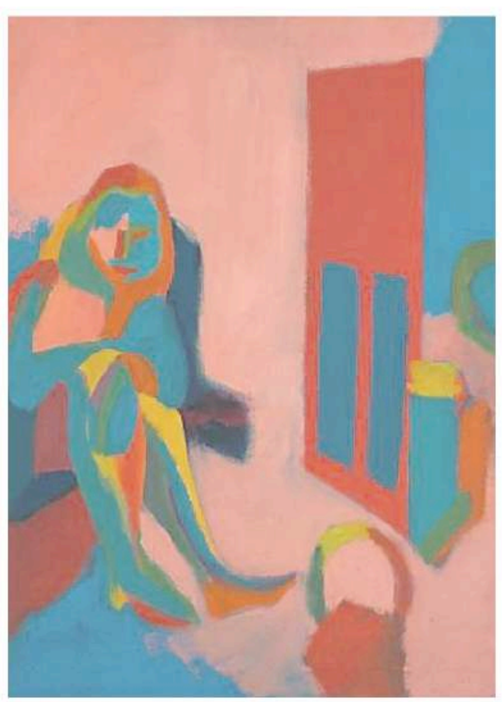
"I wondered what people would expect a young artist to be as famous as; that's not saying that you will be, but it's saying that is your ambition.

"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

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 uncontainable 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

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.

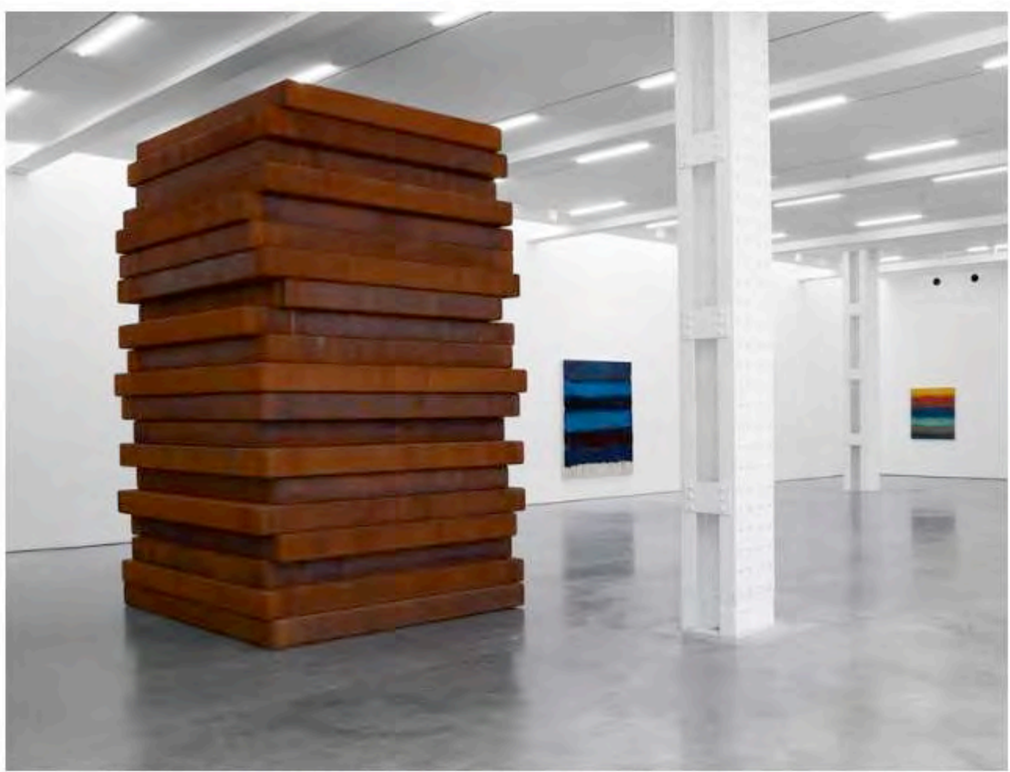
I am not sure about the meaning of *PAN*, the title given to this exhibition by Sean Scully, but the Greek origin of the word would appear to suggest sexual prowess. On another level, it might serve as an indirect allusion to Hellenic architecture, which was influential on the formation of his signature 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.

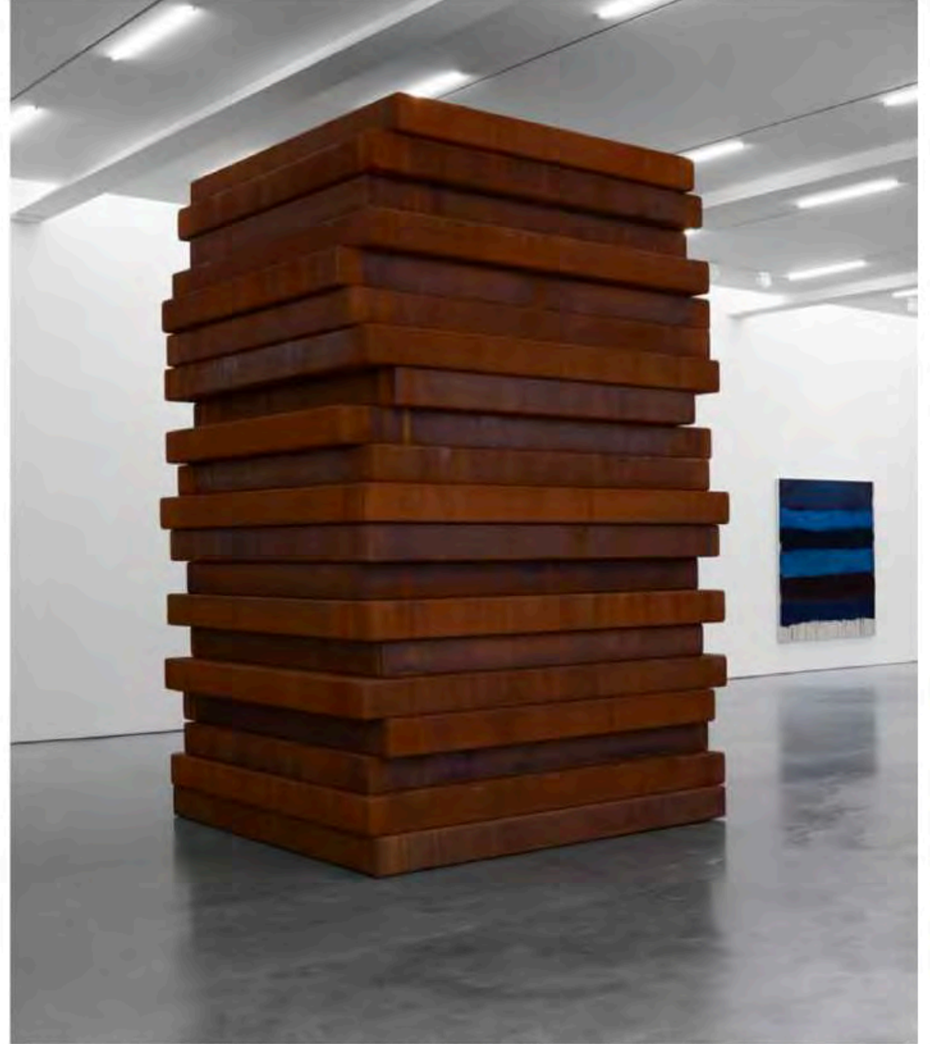
The second venue of the exhibition continues at the 10th Avenue location (near 19th Street) where emphasis is given to Scully's figurative works, both from the 1960s, and more recently from the past two years. The larger, recent paintings, again on aluminum, are titled *Madonna* (2019). The subject matter 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 .

LISSON GALLERY

White Hot Magazine
30 May 2019

Sean Scully: Disembodied Embodiments



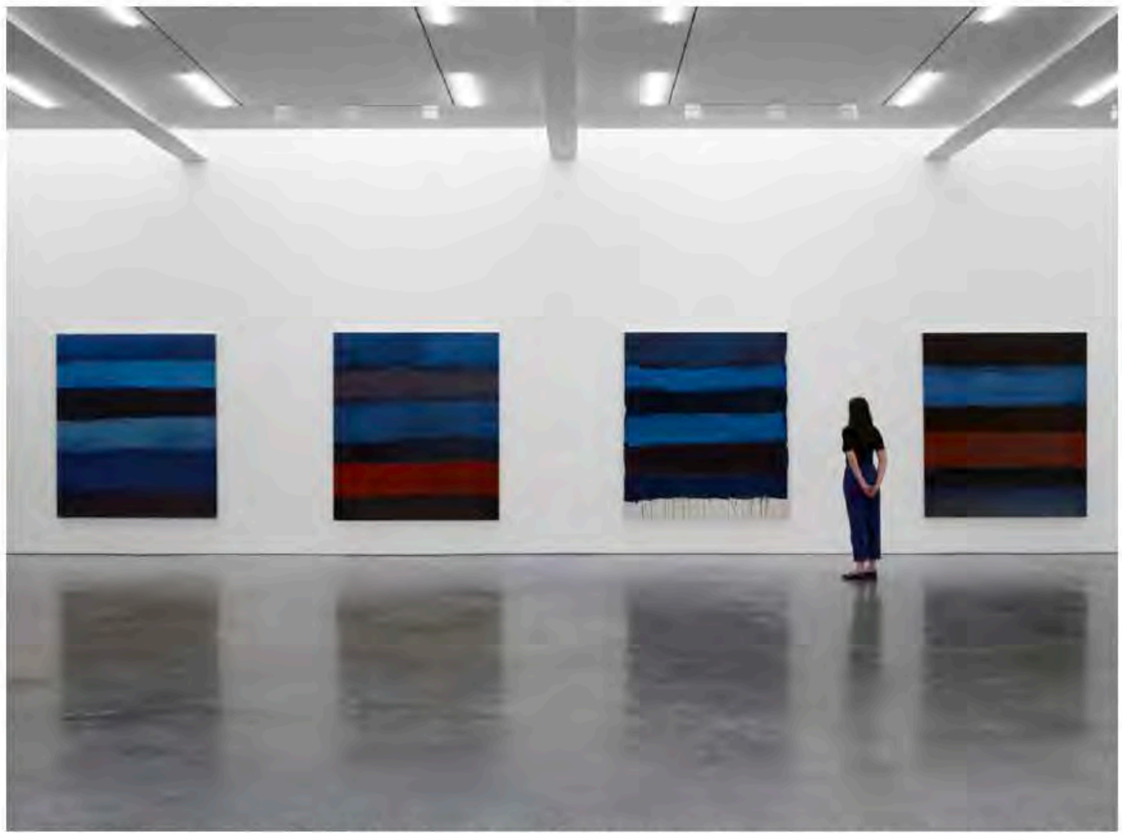
Sean Scully, Shadow Stack, 2018. Corten steel, 176 3/8 by 98 3/8 by 102 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

By RAPHY SARKISSIAN, May 2019

Sean Scully: Pan will remain on view through June 8, 2019 at Lisson Gallery at 504 West 24th Street and 138 Tenth Avenue in Manhattan. 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 24th 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.

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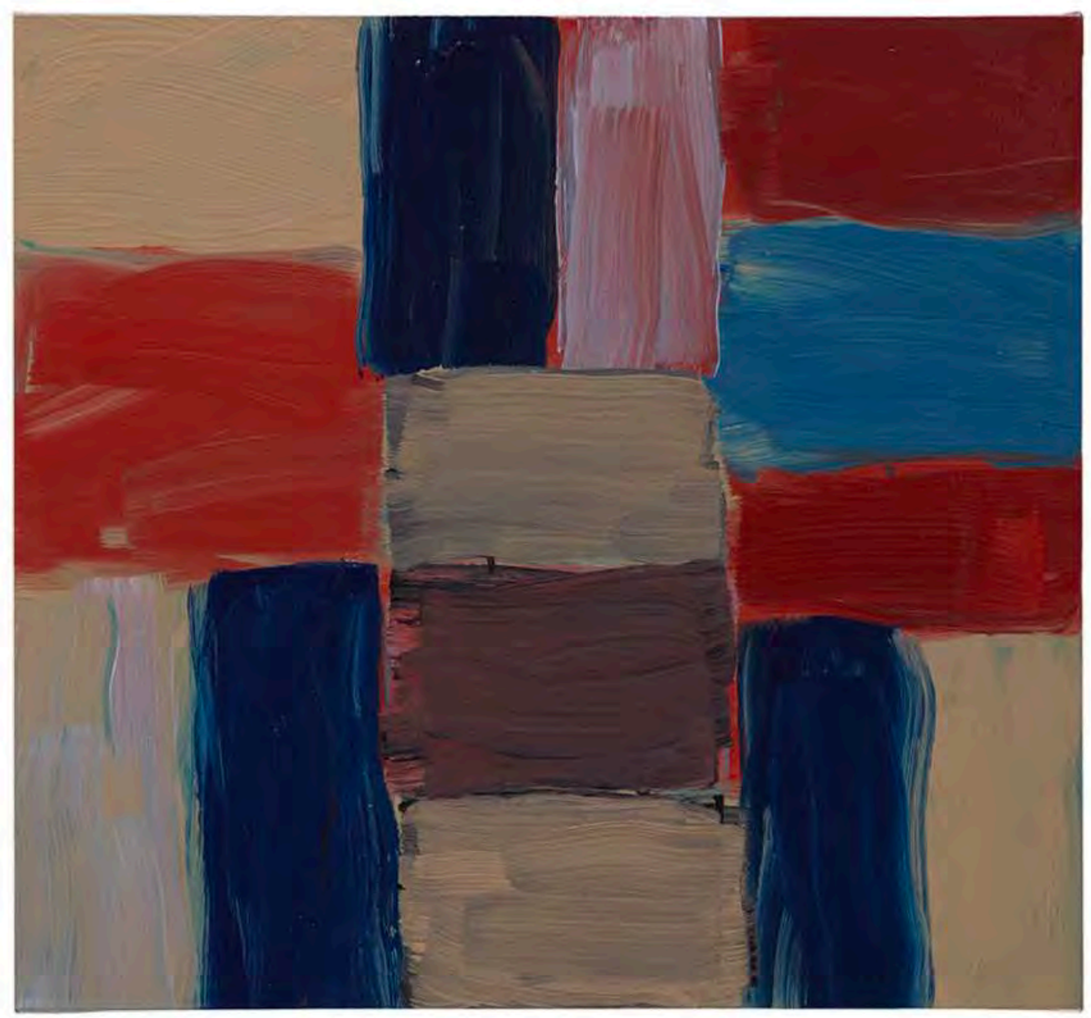
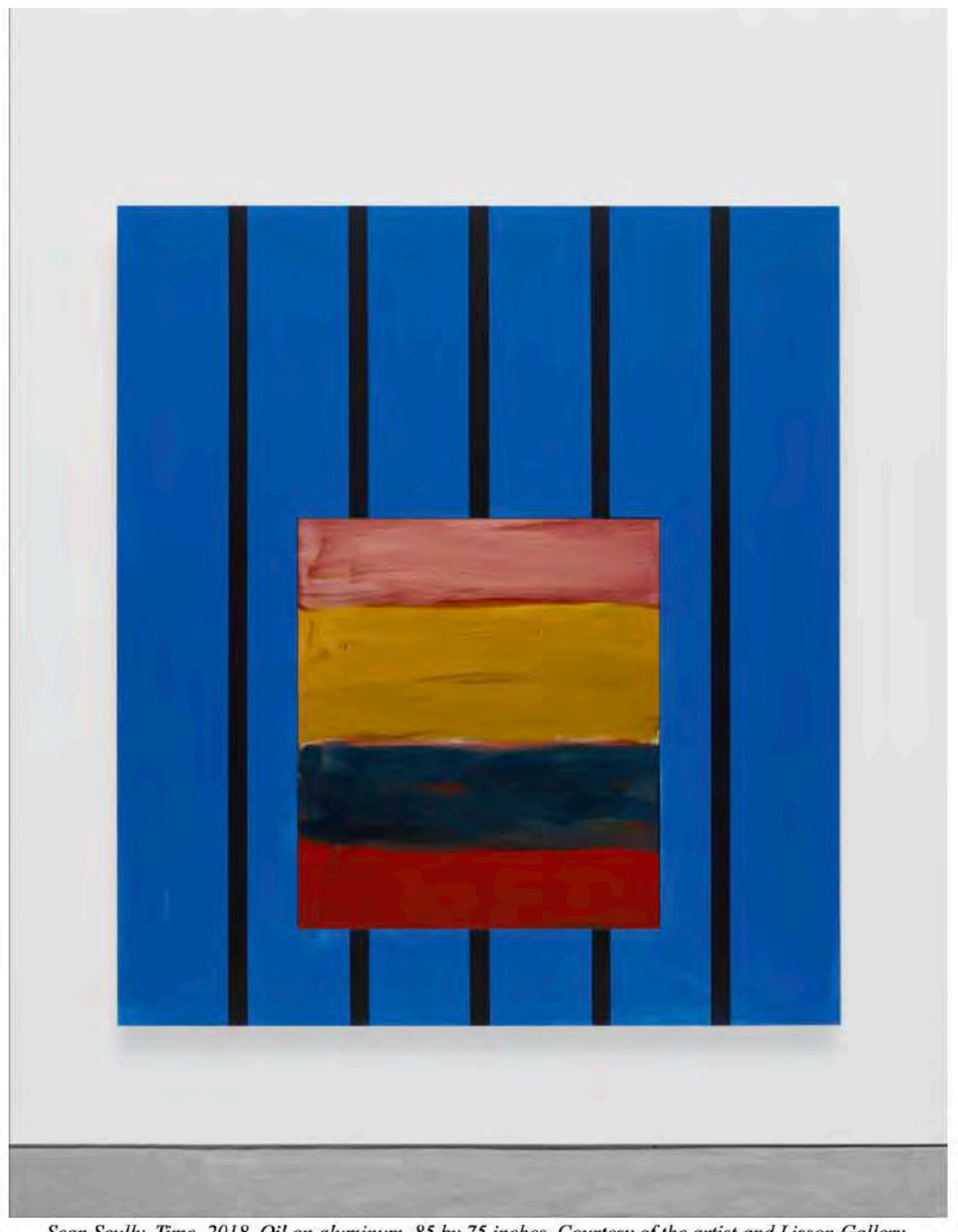
Except that Scully translates that reality "abstractly" through his works, relying upon properties of coloration that we find, for instance, in the minutiae of *Venus and Adonis* (1560s) by Titian, *Venus and Adonis* (circa 1617) by Peter Paul Rubens or *View of Notre Dame* (1941) by Henri Matisse. Within *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 facture 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 florescent 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

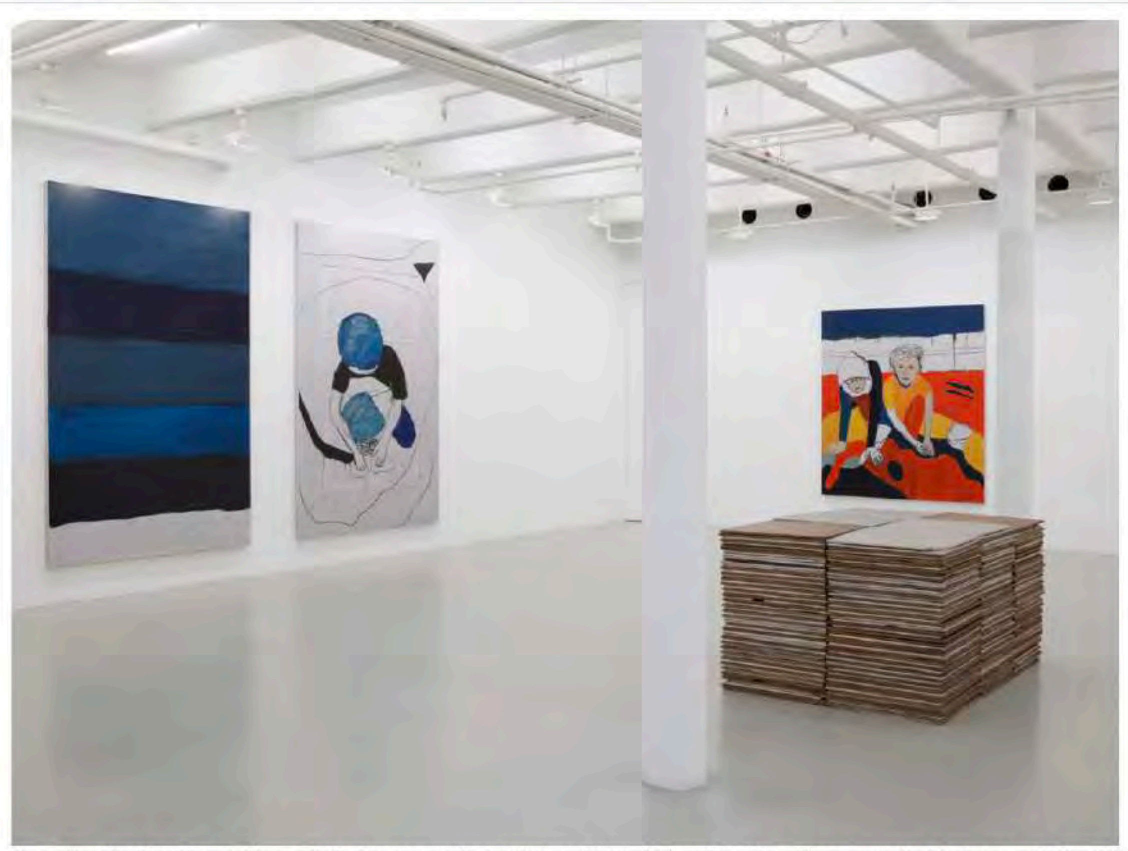
representation of our data-drenched society. But perhaps the bouncing fluidity within Scully's pink, yellow, dark blue and red multilayered bands conveys a sense of return to nature, recalling the critique of technology by Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer: "Man has reduced nature to an object for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

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.[2]

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_sarkisssian.

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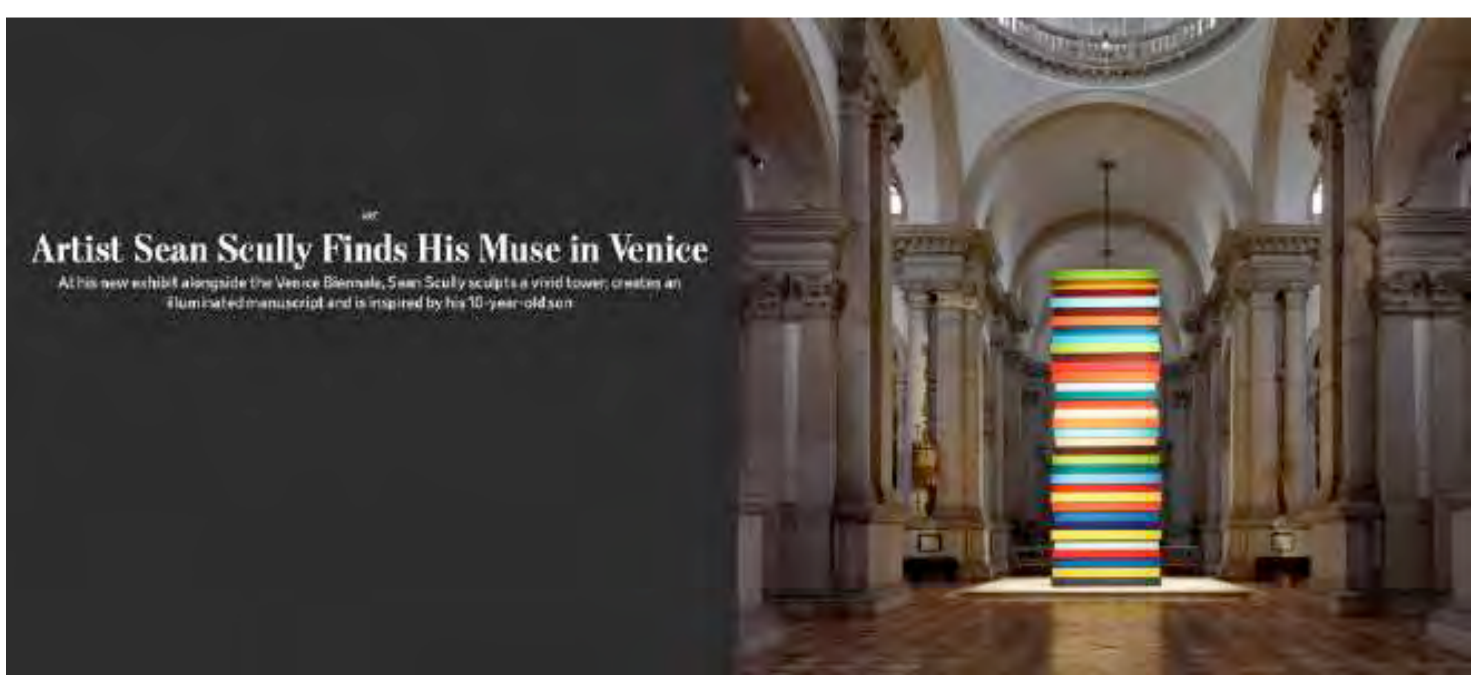
LISSON GALLERY

The Wall Street Journal
11 May 2019

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



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

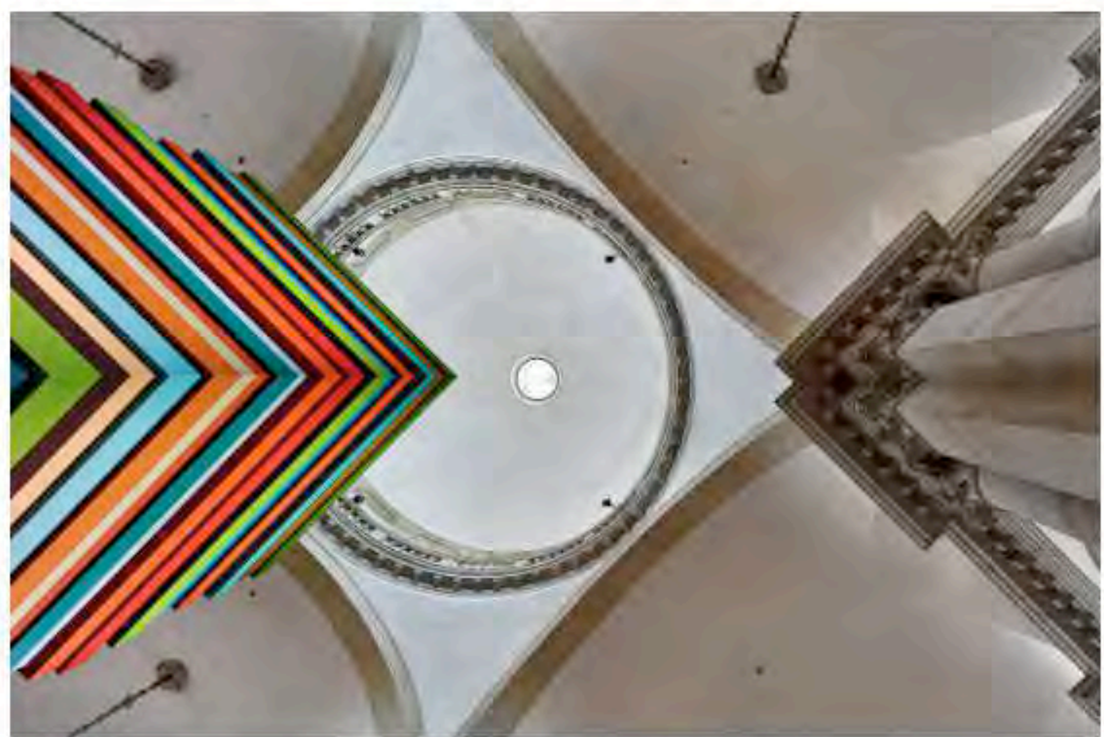
As they enter, visitors confront Mr. Scully's "Opulent Ascension," a multi-colored, horizontally striped tower. It soars more than 30 feet below the dome which, like the rest of the church, is the work of the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. Mr. Scully's tower is made of frames covered with felt 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 you 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.

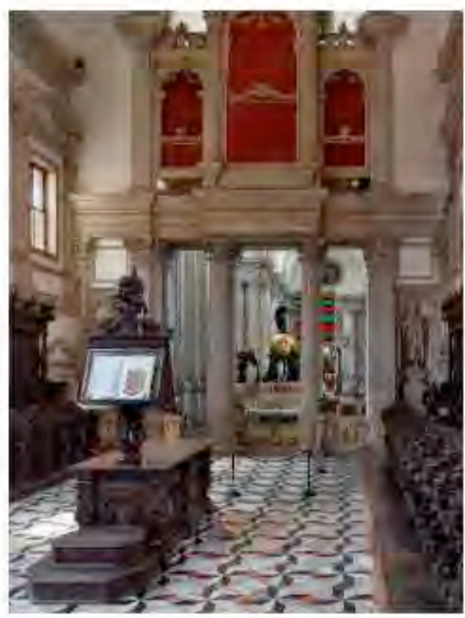
The first of several surprises comes when visitors discover they can walk into the tower from the back. The second comes when they look up. If light is flooding in the windows of Palladio's dome, the sunbeams cast a four-pointed star on the inner walls of the sculpture.



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 MU?LLER

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 candelabra, 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, Oisin (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 Oisin 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.

LISSON GALLERY

The Spectator
20 April 2019

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

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

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.

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.

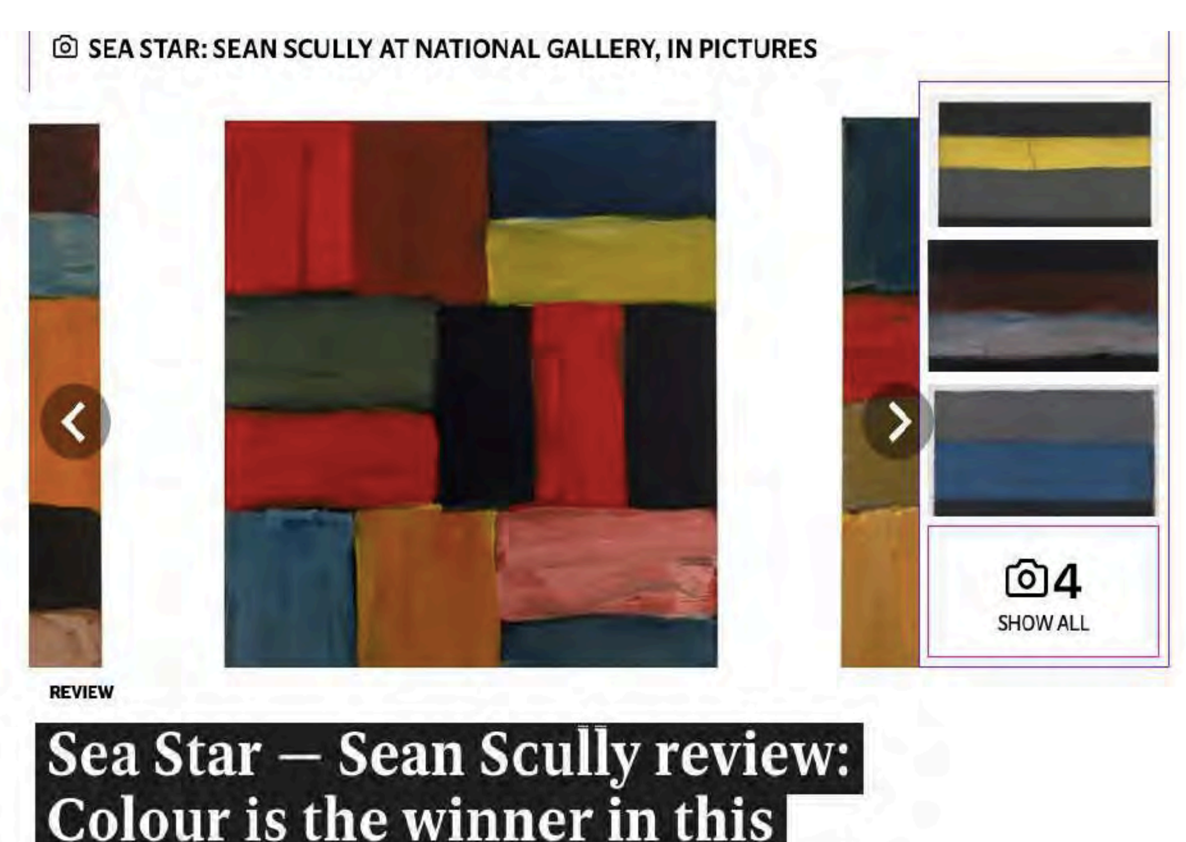
The places Kossoff selects would not strike everyone as exciting. But he makes you feel they are. A charcoal and pastel drawing of the railway lines at 'Willesden Junction' (1962) has the exhilaration and spatial expansion of Turner's alpine scenes.

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.

LISSON GALLERY

Evening Standard
16 April 2019

EveningStandard.



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

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Our rating: ★★★★☆

National Gallery
Charing Cross
WC2N 5DN
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)

LISSON GALLERY

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

Sometimes 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.

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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.

▲ 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!'

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

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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 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, Oisin.

Scully came to fatherhood young, at 20, and very late, at 64. "My love for Oisin 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

"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.

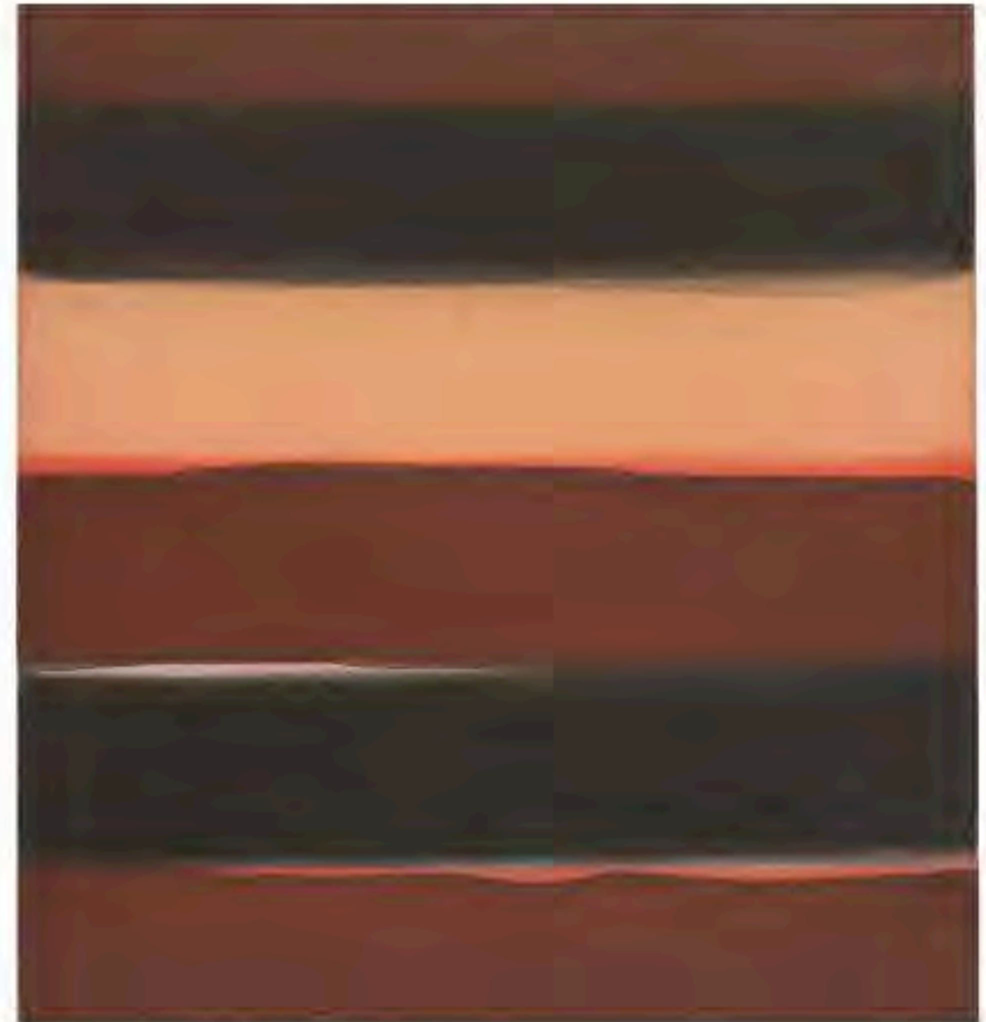
Will the Nineties be fondly remembered? "No... I certainly think that Damien Hirst has made some seminal pieces. He's an interesting character because he tried then to make paintings and fell flat on his face, because he can never let go of his cleverness. I think when you make paintings, you can't have 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 Oisin, who then was six, at the Albertina Museum, Vienna. (Eleuthera is an island beach resort in the Bahamas. And Oisin 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 Oisin [. . .]. 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, "Eleuthera" (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

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

Sean Scully's 2016 oil on aluminum artwork "Landline Far Blue Lake." (Photographed by Susan Dunn / 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.
>
> — SEAN 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 Sean Scully poses in front of his work "Landline Blue Blue" (Luke MacGregor/REUTERS)

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, Oisin.

Sean Scully's 2017 oil on aluminum artwork "Landline Bend Triptych." (Photographed by Robert Bean / HANDOUT)

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

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***.

Susan Dunne

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 1989, starting as copy editor.

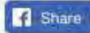
Artnews
04 February 2019

ARTNEWS

MARKET — NEWS

Sean Scully Now Represented in North America by Lisson Gallery

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



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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.

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

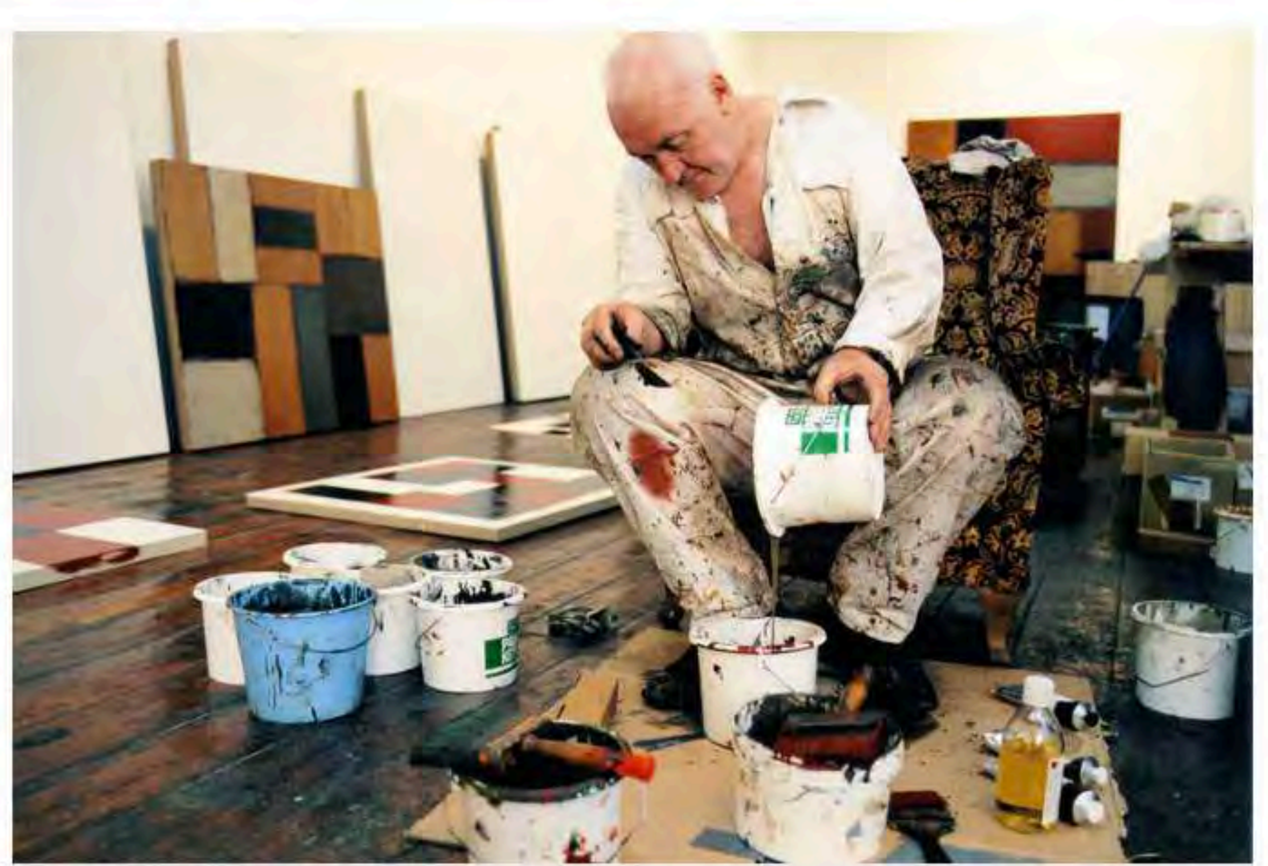
Scully is represented in Europe by Blain | Southern in London; Ingleby in Edinburgh, Scotland; Kerlin Gallery in Dublin, Ireland; and Kewenig Galerie in Berlin. Lisson said that the artist is no longer represented in New York by Cheim & Read, which last year shuttered its Chelsea gallery, in order to 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.

The Spectator
October 2018

SPECTATOR
LIFE



Sean Scully (Photo: Liliane Tomasko)

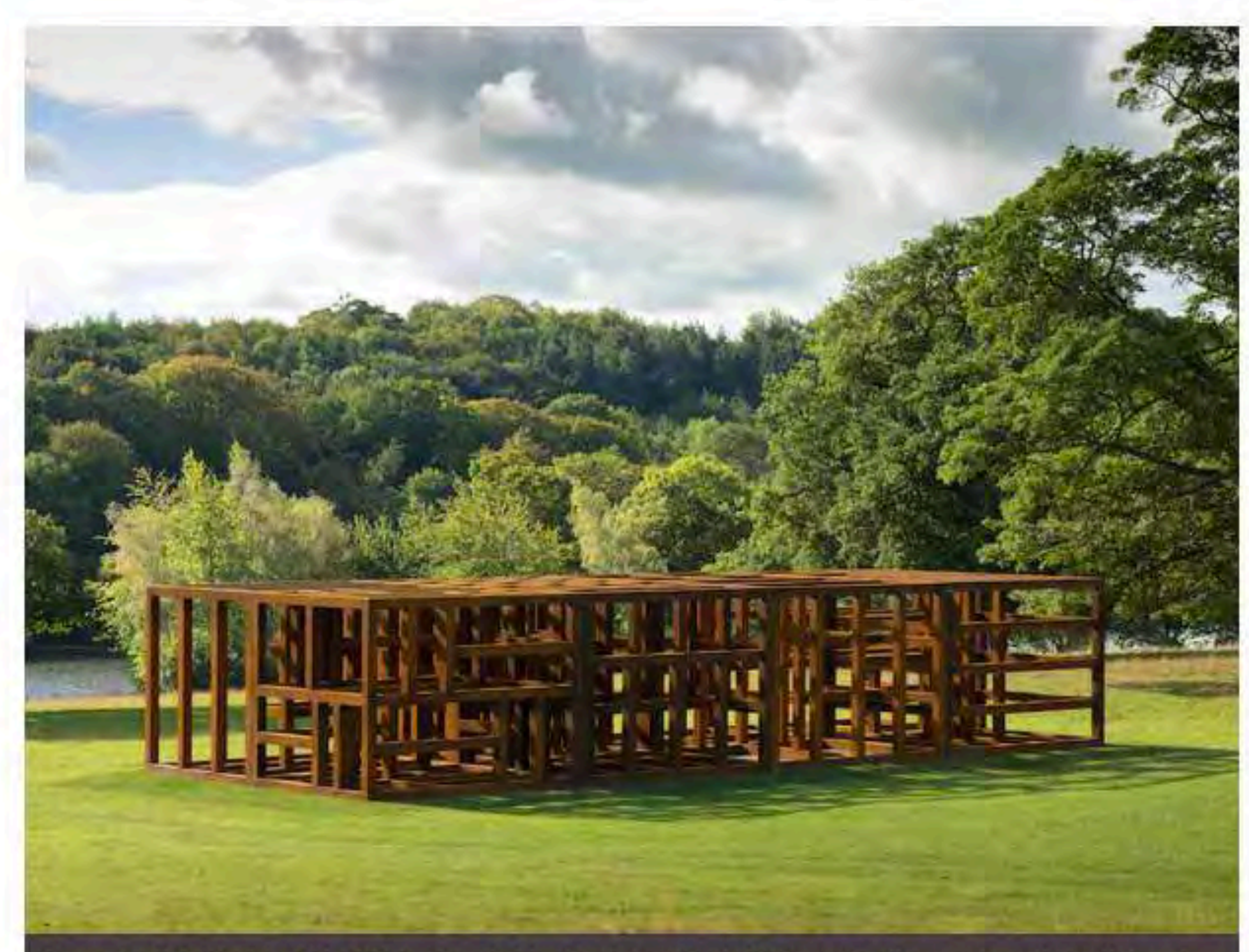
Sean Scully: 'Fatherhood has given my art a new lease of life'

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.

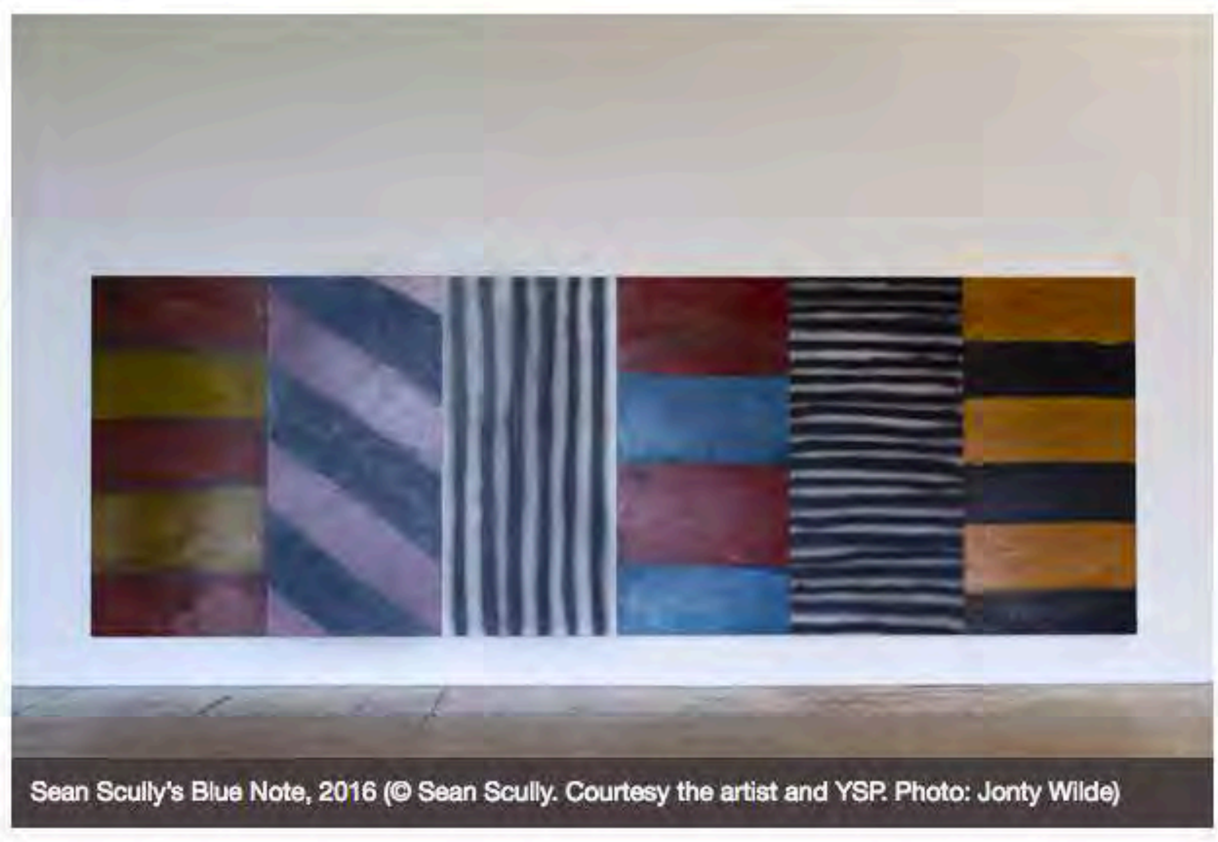
The artist at work (Photo: Liliane Tomasko)

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

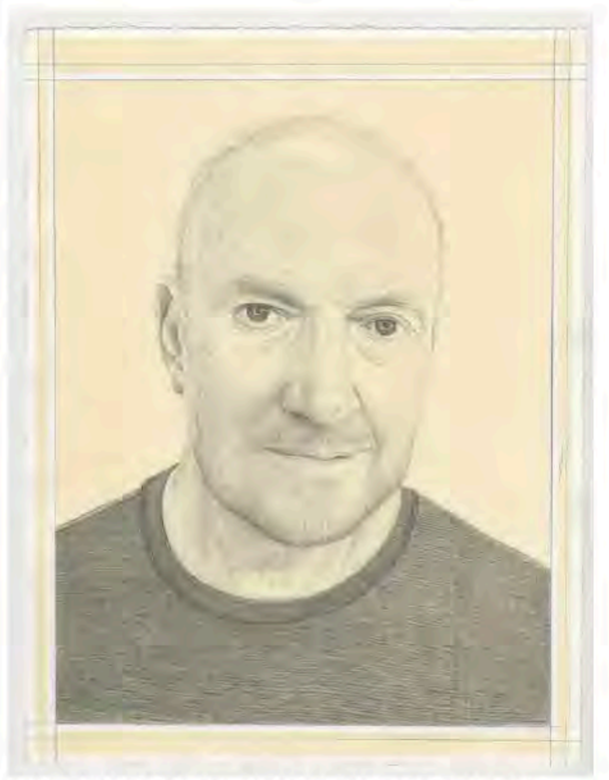
INCONVERSATION

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.



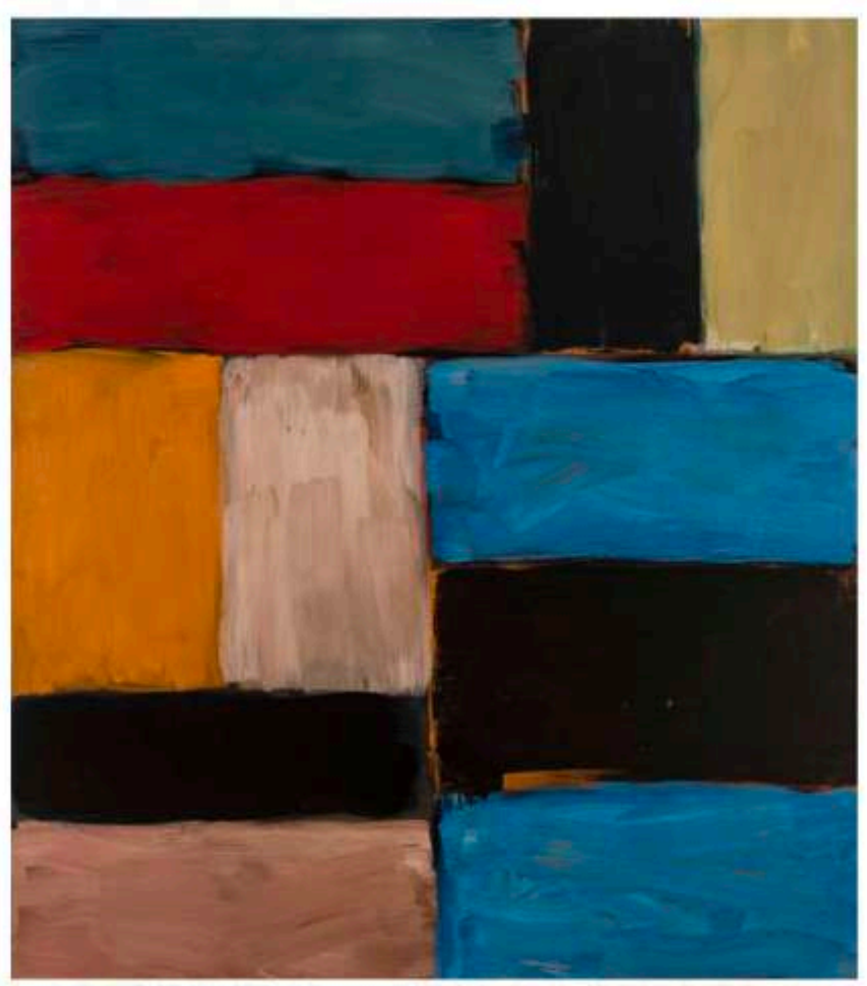
Portrait of Sean Scully, pencil on paper, by Phong Bui

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?

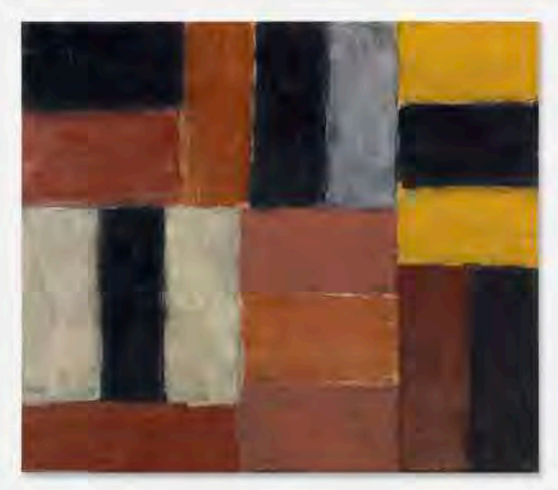
Scully: Walls in most cases are negative, although it's true to say that without walls you can't have buildings, or indeed subways. However, I wanted to make an antidote to the way the world is brutally divided. There is an exhibition that I am participating in in Caen, France, very soon, that deals 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?


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

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?

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 abtstract-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?

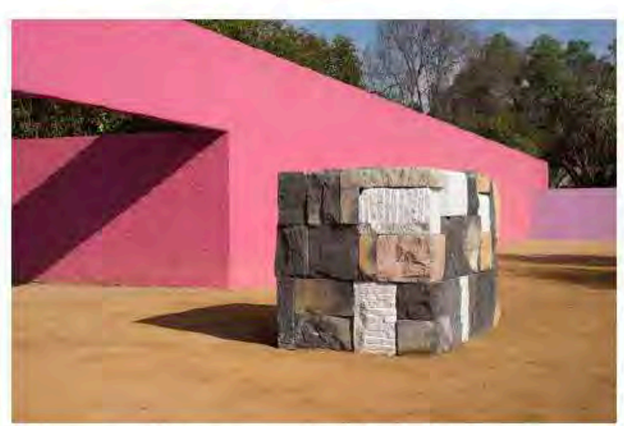
Scully: Nobody can replace Arthur Danto. Nor will they.

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.*

LISSON GALLERY

Art Asia Pacific
12 October, 2016

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 Persistance" 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 1985 show 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?

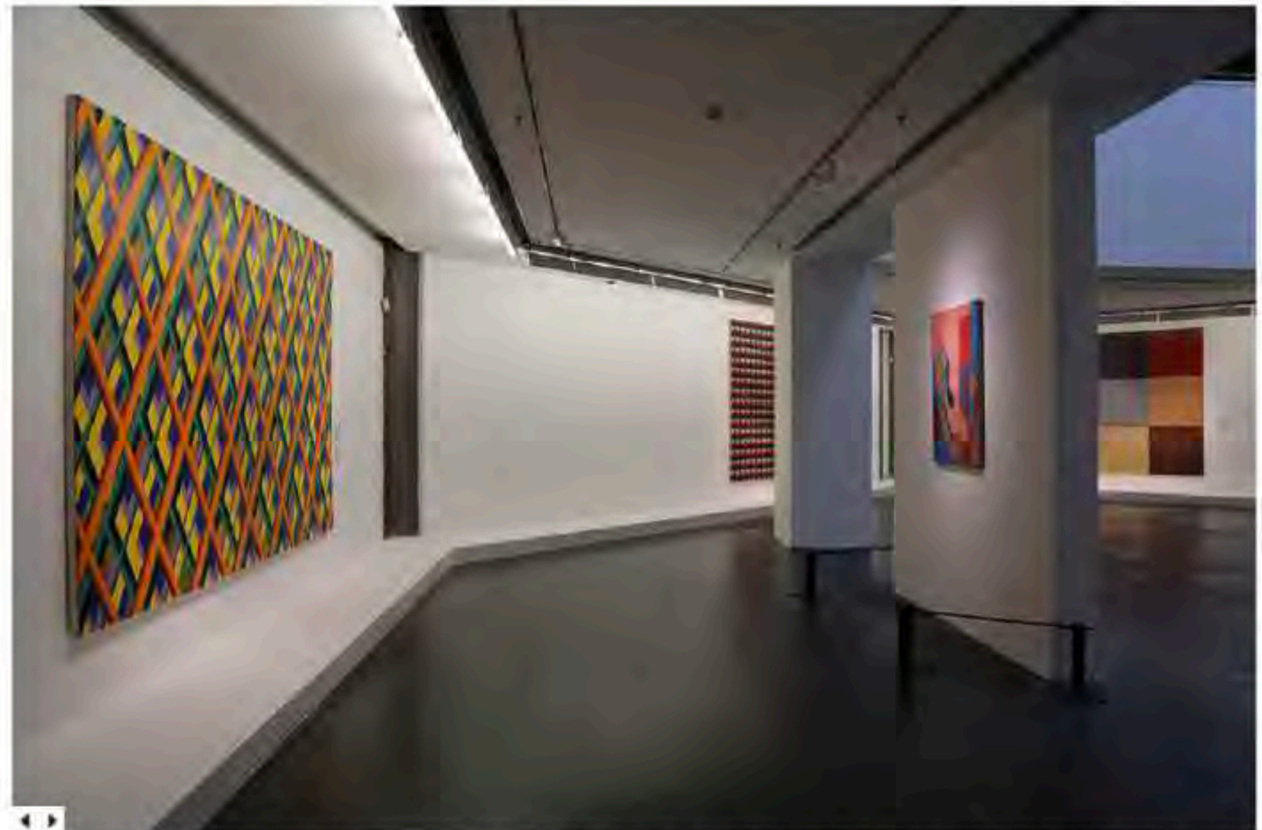
You can't just pick up a book and then sort of appropriate the work lightly.

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 1967–2015 London and New York" at Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou. Courtesy GMoA.

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 x 160 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 Cecília 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, "Cecília", 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 Cecília, 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). 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) 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) 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), 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. Claire Wrathall was a guest of the new Cotton House Hotel in Barcelona

Photographs: Dani Rovira/Museu de Montserrat; Raül Maigí

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

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

With 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.

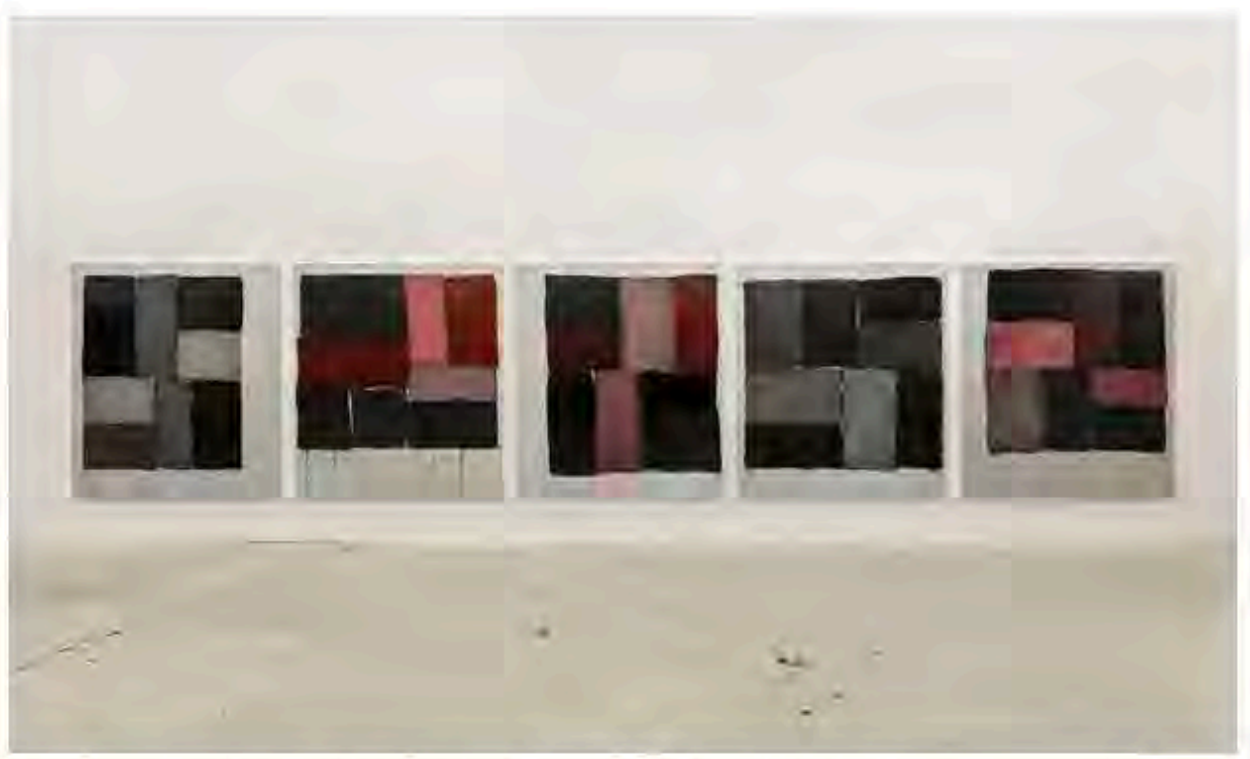
So which of this trinity of influences figures most in his dreams and ideas? "I'm Irish in the mythic, romantic sense but, in the living sense, I'm a Londoner. My wife [the artist Liliane Tomasko] is Swiss and, at home in America, we like to sing Maybe It's Because I'm a Londoner and take the piss out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

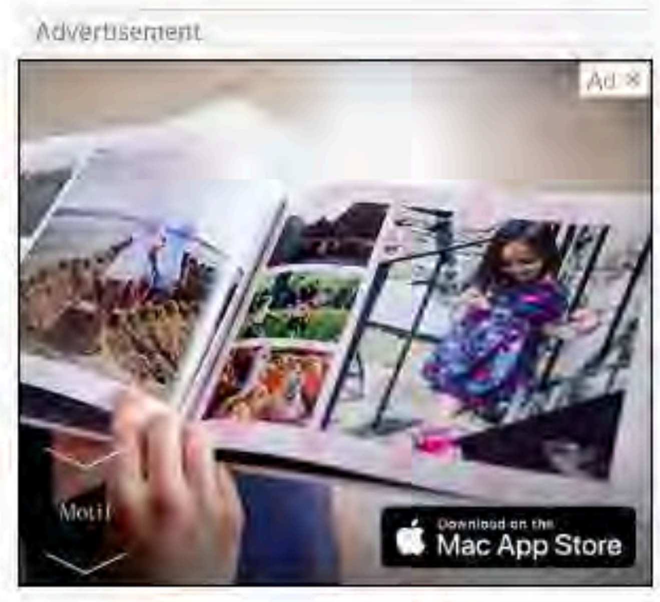
Two Irish writers - James Joyce and Samuel Beckett - are usually mentioned in connection with Scully's work, and have been reflected in it: one of the pictures he's currently working on features Lucky, the slave from Beckett's Waiting for Godot. But, for me, the artist's work has also always invoked 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."

Advertisement



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 along side 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.

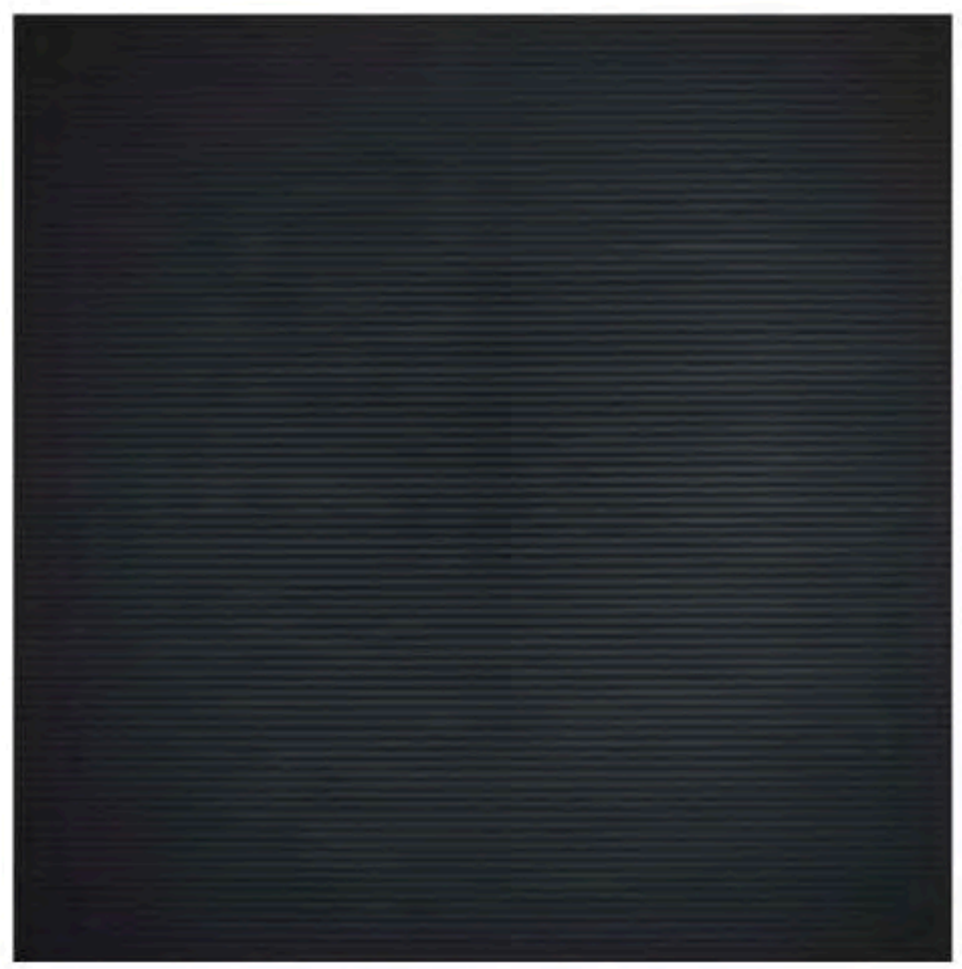
Sean Scully, *Horizontal Soul* (2014)
Photo: Courtesy Ludwig Museum Koblenz

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