



**SEAN SCULLY**  
**South London Gallery**  
**16 June – 1 August 1999**

---

Sean Scully has said that if he hadn't been an artist he'd have liked to be a film maker (1). Mainly, he has in mind the notion of editing, which he relates to his own work practice of altering the relationships between component elements on his journey to a finished painting. But he also admits to a pang at not having the possibility of making work that can have people in it, not being able to tell stories. His reading of art history tells him painting can no longer be concerned with narrative or figuration in any meaningful way: that territory has been ceded to other media. He remains true to the path of abstraction, and yet he is intent on conveying meaning in his work, on conveying emotion. Our current culture is one of irony and distance, and we live with the axioms of postmodernism: there is nothing new to invent, the notion of originality is a nonsense. Much of our contemporary art is consequently aiming to work more by way of commentary, challenge, or subversion. The art itself is increasingly concerned with, even filled by, what's already around: the art is engaging closely with it, and in a sense processing it.

Sean Scully's response is to identify a kind of "power source" for all this (advertising, TV, the media - actualities), and he respects the fact that many artists choose to plug their work into this. But he sees himself as plugging into a different power source: art history. He looks back to artists from whom he's learned (certainly back as far as pre-Renaissance Italian art) and, when looking forward, he's sustained by a belief that his own work will go on conveying something to people who come to view it. He accepts the action and reaction of successive generations; he admits to a hunch the wheel might be turning again, that there's a stepping up of interest in his work. He

accepts there've been times in the past (and there will be in the future) when it stays in the museum basement. He's playing a long game.

It is important to Scully to make work which is not closed, not too immaculate, not like a theorem ended by "Q.E.D." He has several themes going on in his work at any one time, and moves between paintings (returning to a work over and over before he feels it's finished): he "wants to keep the door open" in terms of his work process. He wants his work when completed to be open, too: there's something for the viewer still to do. In this, oddly, he is echoing Peter Lanyon who wanted "to engender a sense of disequilibrium. He felt that a reciprocal energy flowed between his paintings and those who looked at them so that, in effect, an image was only completed by a viewer's reaction to it."(2) One of the themes to which Scully returns frequently is that of the window. It has resonance for him in an art historical sense (I think of a painting like *The Open Window* of 1905 by Matisse.) In terms of the contemporary world, too, the window is to him "a brilliant invention ... it gives us a double reality."(3) Scully is acutely aware of the juggling we do, of colliding and incompatible ways of seeing things at one and the same time, of the multiple imagery which surrounds us. He wants to connect with the world beyond his work, but his connections are less specific than those made by many artists: perhaps he sees a trap lurking there akin to that of minimalism. Scully has to stay in motion.

He is committed to painting. He describes the process as being similar to playing a musical instrument; it takes a long time to get really good at it. It's a matter of "becoming what you paint" - getting the idea, the embodiment of the idea, and the technique all together. I think he feels that for many young artists now, it's just too hard, it takes too long. I don't think he means to imply that other media are soft options, but he stands in opposition to the view, as expressed succinctly by John Tozer recently, that "painting seems a somewhat rustic and anachronistic instrument." (4)

Scully was born in Ireland. He was raised in England, yet in his early years he was raised beneath what he's called an "umbrella of Irishness." His expulsion from this (in the main brought about through a transfer to a tough local school) was an early trauma; joining and parting, separation and collision are crucial elements in his art. We see this most famously in those canvases where he has inserted smaller canvases, such as *Red Light* 1999 (which also reveals the theme of windows, of course) but his paintings are almost always constructed from canvases joined in some sense or another. He paints them separately, takes them apart, works

on them some more, tries them together again ... There are always borders: once expressed in the use of tape, now appearing at these lines where elements join and sunder.

Scully graduated from Newcastle in 1971. Having got there after a hard slog through night school, he was already 26. One can sense, in the energy and commitment visible in his early work, that he felt there was ground to make up, he felt time had been lost. He spent a year in the States on a fellowship but moved there to settle in 1975. He showed selected paintings from his first decade of work in 1981, in a touring show I initiated at the Ikon. At around that time, Sam Hunter recorded the fact that Scully "paints in the color-ground with large swipes of a seven inch housepainter's brush." Hunter understood the emotive element in the artist's "playing with colour" and in the physicality of his working process. (5) It was following that exhibition that Scully's paintings underwent a profound change: the working process erupted through the constraints of ideology. Essentially, he broke with minimalism; convinced that communication had ceased, he felt trapped in aridity. He threw away the masking tape; expression flooded into his art. He withdrew from what he now categorises as a particularly American way of doing things; what he calls "an ethic of efficiency, economy of means, extreme focus and specialisation." (6)

The U.S. has been, nonetheless, an important and beneficial element in his life and work: it was a place where he feels accepted and yet remains an outsider - a classic energy source for an immigrant. He is still primarily resident in New York, but he spends time in the UK and in Spain. He enjoys having a sense of "non-nationality" - he goes where he feels he needs to be. He thinks of himself as an Irishman who's hardly ever been in Ireland: it's a place he loves, a place to visit and show his work - but he wouldn't live there because it exists in his mind as an ideal place and the ideal could not by definition survive reality. It's the key Irish experience of departure and a sense of a lost land.

The stripes. Scully has always used stripes, though they've undergone infinite variations. He speaks of them as an armature. It's as if he needs them before he can begin; the stripes hold at bay a pressing infinity of alternative possibilities. Then he can think; then he can play; then he can build. Similarly, he thinks of the drawing he makes on a canvas as simple, as obvious; it is strong enough to carry the complexity of the paint and the colour, a St Christopher. Scully's canvases are literally heavy too: the stretchers supporting the linen are beautifully and elaborately built things. The weight is partly a consequence of technical necessity, but it's an attribute Scully enjoys for

itself. The paintings are like human bodies - harder to move around than you think. The scale of the work doesn't spring from a desire to intimidate; it's probably in part unconscious - the artist is a large person himself. At the same time I think he needs the bigness of the overall painting to carry the fine detail.

There are dualities in Scully's work, dialectics in the sense that something new emerges from the collision between elements within it. It's true of the artist too: you hear it in the way he speaks about his work, about art, about a lot of things. The canvases are massive, but this is set against the finish which is so delicate. There's a superficial impression of crudity (almost funny in its way, kind of touching) but it's set against the sophistication of execution, revealed when you spend time with Scully's work. It's primarily energised by rhythm: big beats through to tiny rippling syncopations. The deepest rhythm is a duality: either/or, this or that, good or bad, right or wrong, the image and its mirror image. *Four Large Mirrors* is the major work in his show at the South London Gallery: it consists of four paintings, each 9 feet high by 8 feet, and each of these is made from two halves, each 4 feet wide. Interestingly, Scully talks of the join in each of these paintings as "a cut" - joining and sundering are expressed as one. He is aware a viewer tends to stand in the centre of the double panel and is therefore also "cut in two." Each side of our bodies is different from the other: we are always asymmetrical. Photographs look strange to us because we're more familiar with a mirror image which reverses that asymmetry. The four paintings making up *Four Large Mirrors* hang four feet apart, so the whole piece requires a run of some fifty feet of wall. It is the product, perhaps, of an aspiration to make a mural: like the Stations of the Cross, this work forms a single narrative running the length of the gallery. Yet the narrative keeps referring back into itself with each painting containing "reflections" within itself and each of these also mirroring another.

It takes time to analyse these rhythms in Scully's work; it's hard to make yourself count the stripes running down the paintings and thus to realise how many different sequences there are, how they connect across joins. There's no regularity: the rhythms are breaking as soon as they're made. Things are changing and flowing against each other like cross-currents in a tide race. Scully has evolved a way of working which isn't "all-over" and yet the works don't look or feel as if "composed" either; they're more built than composed. (Accompanying Mark Glazebrook's perceptive essay from 1997 (5) is a photo of a dry stone wall, and Glazebrook "cites" this as a probably unconscious source for the characteristic structuring of Scully's work.) He likes his paintings to be hung low on the wall,

they stand in front of us as much as we stand in front of them. It's interesting, therefore, that two of the most recent paintings are titled *Wall of Light*. It's a paradox in itself, implying a barrier and yet something we can pass through; it evokes the way people speak of near-death experiences.

Scully talks about the stripes as "flowing" and about the colours as going "in different directions." And they do: partly because there's often a barely perceptible slope in the border line with the next block or stripe of colour and partly because of the brush marks. And it's partly a product of how the colours interact. The surface of the paint makes me think of water, set in motion by breeze: close to, I can see into these surfaces (the paint is applied wet on wet, the colour is built up in layers) yet when I stand back to look at them, the paintings seem solid and opaque. They don't allow your eye to settle: like an albatross, you feel that if you land anywhere, you might never take off again.

Sean Scully uses a language few other artists use now. He speaks of himself as a romantic, he uses words like "beauty", he thinks of what he's doing as being concerned with the spiritual, he wants his work to be heroic, he aspires to the idea of universality. His art is abstract yet it deals with emotion. It's profoundly humanist. His paintings are repositories.

*Hugh Stoddart*

1. Catalogue The Catherine Paintings, Kunsthalle, Bielefeld 1995.
2. "Peter Lanyon" by Margaret Garlake, Tate Gallery Publications 1998.
3. Interview with Hans-Michael Herzog, op.cit.
4. John Tozer "From today painting is dead" Contemporary Visual Arts Issue 21.
5. Sam Hunter. Artforum November 1979, reproduced in catalogue Paintings 1971-1981, Ikon Gallery Sept 1981.
6. Interview with Hans-Michael Herzog, op.cit.
7. Mark Glazebrook. Essay in catalogue "Sean Scully : Paintings" Manchester City Art Galleries 1997.