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Sean Scully's Abstract Paintings Have Stories to Tell

Minimalism sought to empty out narrative pictorial content. Scully's goal has been to put it back.

David Carrier July 7, 2022

Sean Scully, "Heart of Darkness" (1982), oil on canvas, 8 x 12 feet. Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Society for Contemporary Art (image courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource NY, © Sean Scully)

PHILADELPHIA — Some great artists develop quickly. Others take time to find themselves. If we knew only Mark Rothko's figurative works from the 1930s, if we only possessed Philip Guston's 1950s abstractions, then they might be considered minor masters. And if we only had Sean Scully's works made before 1981, he would be a distinguished, somewhat idiosyncratic minimalist. He was born in 1945 in Dublin into abject poverty; recently, he said, "We wanted to be poor. Our aspiration was to be poor, not starving." His family soon moved to England where, after real struggles, he entered art school. "When you are born poor, you have to cross incredible social barriers to get into higher education ...," he has said. (All quotations from Scully are from *Abstract Painting, Art History and Politics. Sean Scully and David Carrier in Conversation*, Hatje Cantz, 2021.)

He proved a fast learner — when he was just 30, he sold out his first London show. But because he knew that an ambitious abstract painter needed to be in the United States, he uprooted himself again and moved to New York, where he spent some difficult years making austere, narrow-striped minimalist paintings. Initially, Scully had to protect himself in this challenging new environment, where painting was beleaguered. In a very literal way, these tight grids functioned as protective devices, like the bars on windows. "Grey Red" (1975) is a perfect example — its thin, narrow gray and red horizontals suggest a protective grating. Such grids, an influential art historian wrote at about that time, are "what art looks like when it turns its back on nature."

Sean Scully, "1.21.89" (1989), watercolor and pencil on paper, 15 x 18 inches. Collection of the artist (image courtesy the artist, photo by Brian Buckley, © Sean Scully)

Then, in 1981, he painted "Backs and Fronts," a 20-foot-wide manifesto. In this massive painting, 12 striped panels in varying widths and colors are jammed together. No grids here. Usually when I describe such dramatic artistic transitions, I must speculate on the impetus. But in Scully's case, I was lucky enough to be there right at the start. I saw "Backs and Fronts" when it was first exhibited in 1982 at PS1 in Queens. I recognized immediately that it wasn't like any contemporary painting I had ever seen. Minimalism sought to empty out narrative pictorial content. Sean's goal, starting with "Backs and Fronts," was to put it back. He wanted to tell stories about politics; stories about his life, pleasures, and sorrows; and to respond to Old Master and contemporary art.

Figurative art presents many diverse subjects. Abstraction, he discovered, can be equally rich. Scully loves to tell stories and so it was liberating to find that abstraction, too, could achieve this. “Heart of Darkness” (1982), for example, refers to Joseph Conrad’s novel. “A Bedroom in Venice” (1988) is based upon a drawing by Turner. Scully discovered that windows, stripes of different colors and widths, could be inserted in his background panels to compose a narrative. He also created small and large walls of light, revealing the changing natural light in many of the places he works or visits. “It couldn’t be simpler,” he has said. A wall of light is “a painting of a wall.” And since the light on these walls is very varied, so too are these paintings. Thus “Mooseurach” (2002) is a wall of light from near his German studio, and “Wall of Light Roma” (2013) is an Italian wall.

Sean Scully, “Uist” (1991), oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches. Private Collection (courtesy Beaumont Nathan Art Advisory, image courtesy the artist, © Sean Scully)

Scully showed that the traditional genres of European figurative art could be recreated abstractly and used to tell very varied stories. A group of Scully's small paintings from 1982 ("Swan Island," "Ridge," and some others from that period) are his pictorial equivalent to old master still life paintings. Works such as "Landline Pink" (2013), with wide horizontal stripes, are his abstractions of landscapes. Finally, to complete Scully's traversal of European art's history, is the Doric series, painted on aluminum, his homage to the columns of ancient Greek temples. With the aid of his titles, the commentary provided in the excellent catalogue for his current exhibition, *The Shape of Ideas* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the colors and forms of the works themselves, viewers can identify his subjects.

The setting of "The Shape of Ideas" encourages reflection on Scully's subjects. Walk from Rogier van der Weyden's two-paneled "The Crucifixion, with the Virgin and Saint John the Evangelist Mourning" (c. 1460), in which red fabrics hang behind the figures, to Scully's "Vita Duplex" (1991), in which the panels of white and black stripes on either side are broken by a vertical insert. Almost a self-portrait, it represents a facade that has been split open. The insert running through it makes a reference to W. B. Yeats's idea of a divided soul. Here, Scully says in the catalogue, he "broke a stripe in the middle of the surface."

Sean Scully, "With" (1988), color woodcut, 29 7/8 x 30 inches. Purchased with Edgar Viguers Seeler Fund, 2019 (image courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2020, © Sean Scully)

Like van der Weyden, Scully creates visual energy through striking juxtapositions. Look at "The Deposition" (1961) by Bob Thompson, in the exhibition *Elegy: Lament in the Twentieth Century* (on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through July 24), and then view Scully's "Precious" (1981), which presents him being taken as an infant by his loving parents, their "precious cargo" (Scully's phrase), from Ireland to the relative safety of London. Like Thompson, Scully memorializes difficult moments of lived experience. Or consider "Allegory of Sight (Venus and Cupid in a Picture Gallery)" (1660), by Jan Brueghel the Younger (in the concurrent exhibition *Pictures in Pictures*). Like Brueghel's painting, Scully's "Pale Fire" (1988) features a window within the picture to open up the pictorial space. But where Brueghel's images focus on the power of sight, as the catalogue explains, this "picture captures both the spirit and the structure of Nabokov's masterpiece and the compelling interrelationships — at once closely connected and distant — that it delineates between fact and fantasy, reason and madness, and the world and its reflection."

The influential critic whose account of grids I quoted earlier is Rosalind Krauss. "Walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality," she wrote in her essay "Grids," was a drastic restriction, "because the fortress they constructed on the foundation of the grid has increasingly become a ghetto." This is a "ghetto" from which Scully has escaped. From "Grey Red" to his majestic big "Landline North Blue" (2014), with its wide, vertical whites, blues, and blacks, it's apparent how far he has come. The line on the land is the horizon. In that way, this work is very different from Abstract Expressionist art. It has affinities with the landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich. Abstract painting has been transformed.

Sean Scully, "Union Yellow" (1994), oil on linen, 7 x 8 feet (image courtesy the artist, © Sean Scully)

Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas *continues at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through July 31. The exhibition was organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and curated by Timothy Rub, director emeritus; and Amanda Sroka, associate curator of contemporary art.*