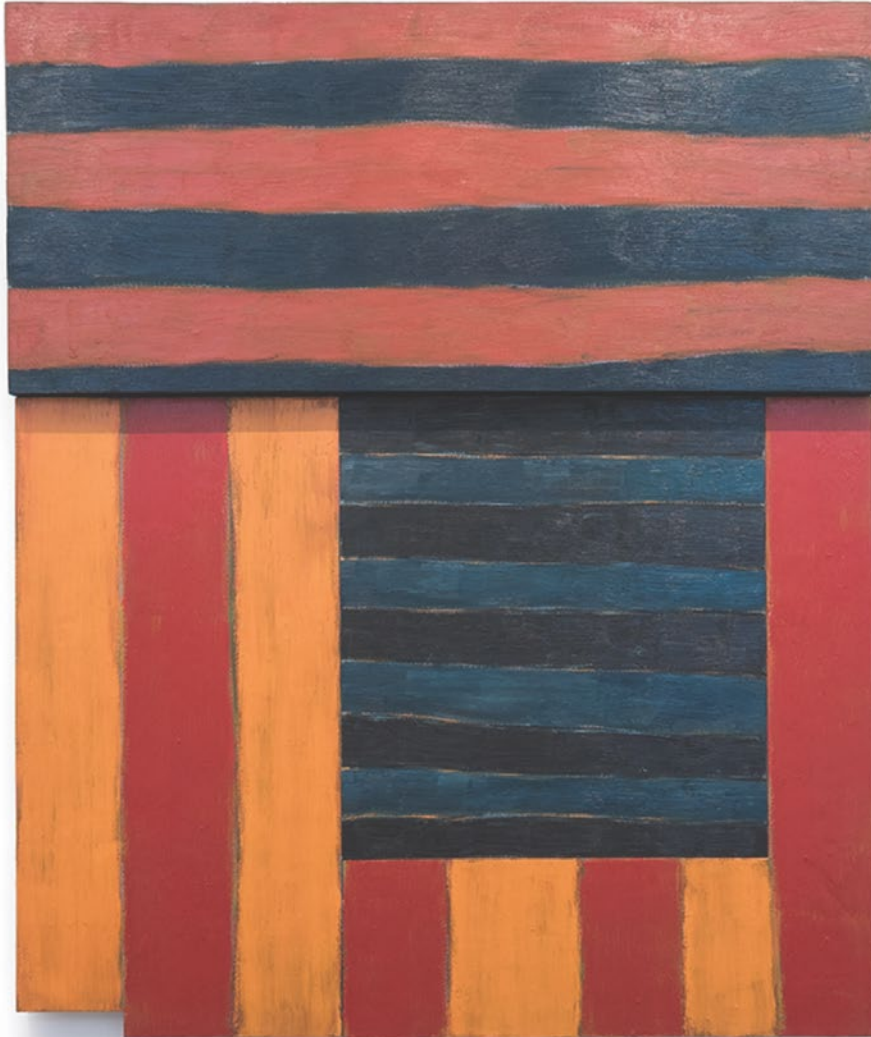


Art & Antiques

Allan, Rebecca: *Beyond the Horizon*

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## Beyond the Horizon



**Sean Scully's painting takes geometric abstraction into a realm that is both emotional and philosophical.**

By Rebecca Allan

Painting is a mercurial discipline. Creating a work of art from the combination and manipulation of pigments, liquid binders, and tools manipulated by the hand to metaphorically convey an idea, memory or a place is a slippery endeavor. Only by delineating the boundaries of the creative project over time can an artist establish a fertile field for the cultivation of endless variations within this condition of unpredictability.



*Untitled (Window)*, 2017, oil on aluminum, 101.6 x 88.9 cm.

Sean Scully, Private Collection, All images © Sean Scully

In the art of Sean Scully, such boundaries create something akin to the shifting borders of an agricultural plot, within which the intentions, ambitions, materials, and labor of the farmer intersect, hopefully resulting in a productive harvest. Scully's commitment—working with the interplay of vertical and horizontal bands of layered color within the painting's frame—has provided a place to contemplate, respond to, and expand beyond the traditions of geometric abstraction in art as well as the philosophical principles of humanism and the broader art-historical and geographic influences that he embodies.

One of the most accomplished living artists, Scully inhabits his achievements with satisfaction and yet with humility, regarding the act of painting as hard-won and constantly evolving. He believes unwaveringly in the unique capacity of painting to bring forward and reveal aspects of human culture, society, and relationships to the natural and constructed world that no other medium can similarly convey.

This spring, "Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas," a major survey of the Irish-born American artist's career, is on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (April 11–July 31). Initially presented at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and expanded for Philadelphia, the exhibition

was curated by Timothy Rub, the George D. Widener Director, and Amanda Sroka, Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at PMA. Featuring more than 100 works from the early 1970s to today, the presentation includes paintings, watercolors, color lithographs, woodcuts, and etchings, many shown together for the first time. Highlights of the PMA presentation include a rare series of color aquatints made to accompany the poetry of Federico García Lorca, and a selection from the *Landlines and Robes* (2018) portfolio, both from the museum's collection. The juxtaposition of paintings and prints illuminates the interdependent relationships of technical and philosophical inquiry in Scully's remarkably productive and sustained 50-year career.

The accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Sean Scully: The Shape of Ideas*, written by Rub and Sroka, is the first to thoroughly examine Scully's art within a biographical context. It is co-published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Yale University Press.

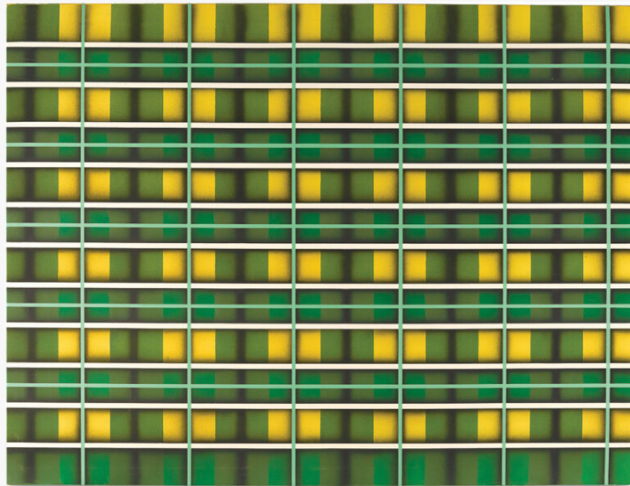
Scully was born in Dublin in 1945 and raised in a dangerous enclave of South London. His parents had left the hardships of Ireland and emigrated when he was four, at a time when London was scarred by World War II. Art became a sanctuary for Scully from an early age. His father, a barber, worked constantly to make ends meet, and Scully endured harsh deprivations, with periods of uncertain housing, street fights, and moral admonitions from religious authorities. At 15, he left school and worked variously as a typesetter, commercial artist, and plasterer. He managed a blues club and sang in a band. But as a youth, he was adept at drawing and, motivated by the freedom and release that art provided, managed to enroll at Central School of Art in London, followed by the Croydon College of Art, finally earning a bachelor's degree from Newcastle University.



*Heart of Darkness*, 1982, oil on canvas, 243.8 x 365.8 cm.

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

In 1972, Scully came to the United States through a painting fellowship at Harvard University, then moved permanently to New York in 1975. In 2013, he was inducted into the Royal Academy of Arts and has been shortlisted twice for the Turner Prize. In 2014, his exhibition “Follow the Heart: The Art of Sean Scully 1964–2014” became the first career-length retrospective of a Western artist to be presented in China. Today, Scully lives and works between New York and Bavaria, Germany, with his wife, the painter Liliane Tomasko, and their son Oisín.



*Green Light*, 1972–73, acrylic on canvas, 245.1 x 321.9 cm.  
Mr. Albert Li, Private Collection; Dublin City Gallery, Hugh Lane Gallery,  
Dublin

The Philadelphia exhibition begins with significant works that were made in the early 1970s, during the fellowship period at Harvard University. His stay there gave Scully opportunities to travel to New York, where he encountered comprehensive museum collections as well as the contemporary art movements of Minimalism and other forms of abstraction emerging in the city.

*Greenlight*, from 1972, is a pulsating “supergrid” of fluorescent yellow, emerald, and mint-green rectangles, crisscrossed with thin black and white bands. Scully had already begun his ongoing experiments with the conflicts of order and disorder, creating a painting that had its own glow-in-the-dark quality and visual logic. The work reflects the varied influences that informed the artist during this period, including a profoundly influential 1969 trip to Morocco, an encounter with the kinetic constructions of Venezuelan artist Jesus Rafael

Soto, the inventive Op Art color worlds of Bridget Riley, and the emotionally charged paintings of Mark Rothko.

*Inset #2*, painted the following year, is a more complex investigation of the capacity of color, line, and shape to confound our sense of time and space. This work comprises two canvases, one tucked within the other. Moroccan walls with their inlaid tiles, were an inspiration, suggesting the simultaneity of past and present. Using a rubric of techniques—spray paint, masking tape, and a paint roller—Scully created on a flat surface the illusion of a woven fabric that alternates between crisp focus and blurriness. For Scully, *Inset #2* is a “process painting...showing two paintings at once, an earlier stage and a later stage surrounding it.”

In the 1980s, now settled in New York, Scully occupied a studio at 110 Duane Street in Lower Manhattan, where he generated some of his most transformative paintings. Embedded in a vibrant, competitive community of artists, where many of his peers were reviving traditions of figurative art, Scully remained committed to his investigations of geometric abstraction. Unlike Piet Mondrian with his analytic abstractions, however, Scully wanted to infuse his geometries with sensuousness, drama, and soul. At Duane Street, he made paintings from multiple panels, affixed to each other and painted with opposing vertical or horizontal bands of color. Scully has always held that painting is the result of stress, of life’s conflicts, and that abstraction is actually a form of realism.





*The Fall*, 1983, oil on canvas, 294.6 x 245.4 x 19.1 cm.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Jeffrey H. Loria, 2017. All images ©  
Sean Scully

*Backs and Fronts* (1981) is considered one of Scully's most important works in both scale and ambition. Here, he joined together 12 canvases of varying dimensions that march across a width of 20 feet. Opposing stripes of different widths are painted in off-key hues of red, white, blue, orange, and pink, backhandedly evoking an American flag, while the brushwork gives each color band a fuzzy edge. Scully evokes the jumble and compression of architectures and of the city, even though he was initially inspired by a European work—Picasso's Cubist masterpiece *The Three Musicians* (1921). Picasso's painting symbolizes the human relationships and pathos associated with the death of his friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire (appearing as the clarinetist) who had died of wounds suffered in World War I. Indeed, for Scully, whose mother worked as a vaudeville singer, music of many genres (rhythm and blues, classical, traditional Moroccan) has been a lifelong catalyst and a necessity in the studio.

Informed by his love of the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, Scully began to alter his approach. Rather than drawing first on the canvas and then making the painting "from the outside in," he would let the paintings take shape incrementally, while he made decisions more spontaneously in response to things that happened just moments before. This

process mirrored the performance of music, particularly blues and jazz, which have their organizing structures that allow improvisation to occur. This improvisatory impulse also more truthfully reflected his experience of the unpredictable, conflicted nature of society and his desire to create works that were emotionally charged and physically aggressive.

*Heart of Darkness*, from 1982 (the title a reference to Joseph Conrad's novella), was made during a residency that Scully had (and shared with his first wife Catherine Lee) at The Edward Albee Foundation in Montauk, N.Y. Three attached canvases of varying widths set up an irregular visual rhythm that is complicated by colliding stripes. Asphalt black, road-stripe yellow, maroon, and white bands create optical vibrations that generate both fiery and fluorescent qualities of light. The vertical stripes are a reference to Henri Matisse's *Bathers by a River*, while the yellow ones came in at the painting's completion, after Scully noticed a series of rough yellow stripes painted on the post office columns on Lispenard Street near his studio. Just one year after *Heart of Darkness* was completed, Scully's 18-year-old son, Paul, died tragically in a car accident.

Scully first visited Mexico in 1981, beginning a long and fruitful connection to the country's culture and art. There, he began making watercolors for the first time since art school, completing approximately 60 between 1981 and 1992. *Mexico Azul* (1983), a small watercolor on paper measuring just 9 x 12 inches, speaks to the vibrant colors and textures of light on stone and of Mexico's vernacular architecture. The watercolors of this period ultimately led to Scully's enduring "Wall of Light" series, which emphasizes brick-like stacks of color that alternately allow light to pierce through or create a sensation of compression or erosion.

*Landline Pink* (2013) is a transcendent work in the exhibition; it is one of the most transparent, yet luminous canvases. While many of the artist's works encapsulate untold hours of labor, this stacked arrangement of horizontal bands has an ease and gauziness that belies a lifetime of integration of practice. Part of the extensive "Landline" series, the painting's origin dates back to a 1999 photograph taken on a cliff in Norfolk, England. In 2012, when a serious back injury required a long and difficult convalescence, Scully began to simplify the physical demands of painting by making only horizontal gestures with the brush across the canvas. While the word "landline" refers to the liminal space between the edge of the land and the sky, to Scully the works of this series are not abstracted landscapes. Their juxtaposition of twilight oranges and reds compressed by the upper swath of black conveys the intertwining of nostalgia (for tools and for technologies of communication that have become obsolete) with the swaying movement of a dancer, implied by the left-right-left swing of the brushstrokes.

Scully's painting process and the range of metaphorical qualities that he achieves are in part the result of his mixing various proportions of oil paint from the tube with turpentine, linseed oil, and drying agents. These mixtures—made in buckets that accommodate large, flat brushes that can be swirled around—have varying levels of viscosity and fluidity, allowing for an endless range of texture and transparency.

Lush, sensuous, and held together by the tension of an internal gravity, Scully's paintings vibrate with energy generated by their nuances of facture and interactions of shape and color. They can also be confounding, resisting easy or literal interpretations. The works draw us in, then compel us to make time for the emergence of emotional responses that can be generated in us if we allow it. We might take a cue from the exhibition's title, borrowed from a 1956 interview with the writer Samuel Beckett, who said, "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas....it is the shape of ideas that matters."