

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 back the superficial veneer of things to reveal the invisible geometry that pulses beneath', writes Kelly Grovier

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

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



Backs and Fronts, 1981 (Credit: Sean Scully)

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

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



Araby, 1981 (Credit: Sean Scully)

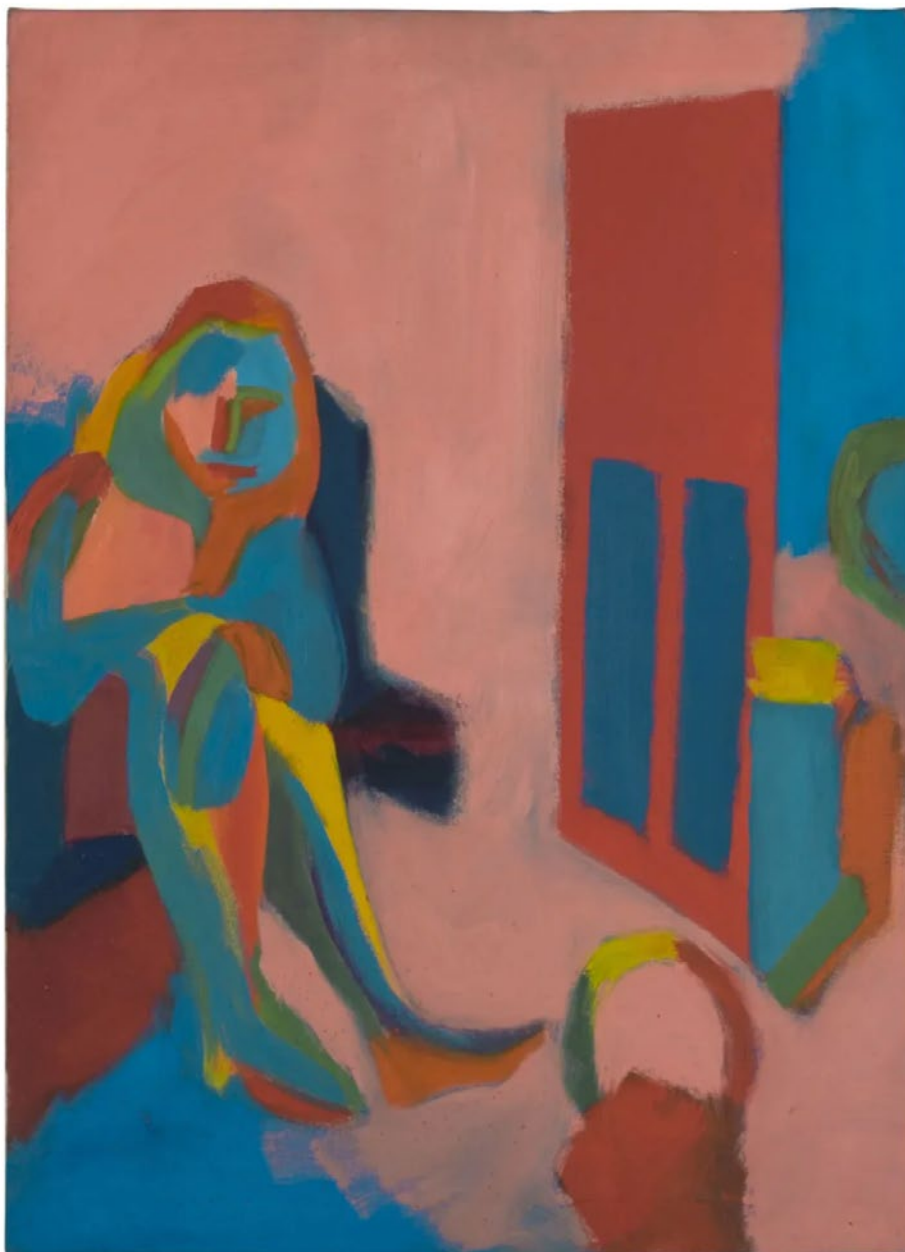
Among those who were present to hear the commotion caused when Backs and Fronts was first exhibited in New York's PS1 art centre (part of the Museum of Modern Art) in 1982, was the art historian and writer Robert Morgan, **who recently reminisced on the impact that the work made at the time.** "This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

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

Turning point

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 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 of 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.



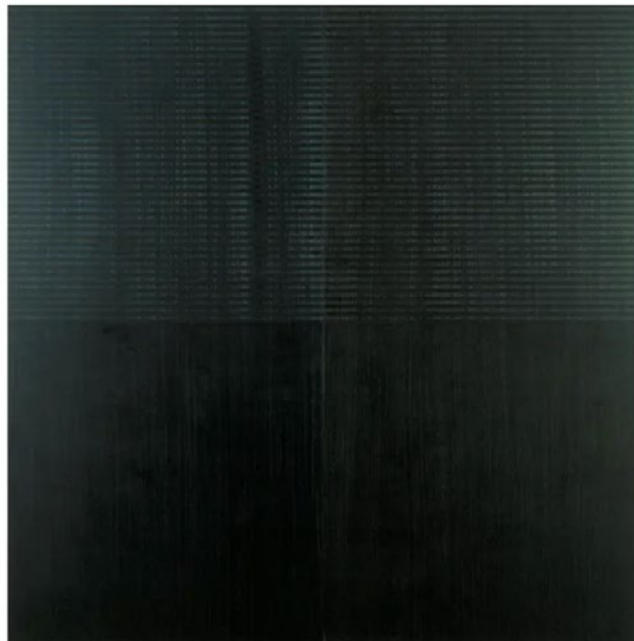
Untitled (Seated Figure), 1967 (Credit: Sean Scully)

"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 the lines of Minimalist dogma, respecting its ascetic etiquette – eschewing from his canvases 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 had been restored, the colour from his painting and life was all but extinguished.

"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."