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'Turner gets his cobwebs blown away' – Sea Star: Sean Scully review

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](#).

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.