

Prospero | Martial artist

## Sean Scully on painting as combat (and Zen practice)

A boxer, like a painter, must be reactive and intuitive



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By J.J.M. | KARLSRUHE

THE ROUGH trade of boxing and the high-end art world operate at different ends of the social spectrum. Yet for Sean Scully there are parallels between the best practitioners in each field. Both are gifted with a Zen-like quality to react instinctively and follow their intuition. “Boxing requires a huge amount of intuition,” he says. “You have to change your mind about what you’re doing, while you’re doing it. That’s intuition. That’s a lot like what I do.”

Mr Scully dons white overalls to paint, and even works with metal and spray guns, producing art that has the imprint of human labour. Speaking at a press conference at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe for the opening of a retrospective of his work, titled “Vita Duplex”, Mr Scully recalled a time when he fell off his stepladder. The artist crashed into the stone floor and was left nursing a shoulder injury. “In all my years of training in karate I never got injured. This proves that art is more dangerous than karate,” he quipped.

Mr Scully’s large-scale, striped canvases dominate, projecting emotional states, feelings and even the humdrum human interactions that make up the building blocks of life. “My art addresses spiritual values, but it is also part of the world,” he says. Mr Scully’s paintings— which sell for more than £1m—always require interpretation. The many small nuances of the sport of boxing—where the aim is to outpunch or knock out an opponent—are equally invisible to many.

Mr Scully identifies a “combination of intuition and will” in a sport sometimes described as the sweet science. “You find that in a great artist too,” he opines. A distinct characteristic of the great artist is a Zen-like quality of being able to instantaneously “think and react” while in the midst of the creative process, according to Mr Scully. “Zen is trying to understand everything at once. Zen is a celebration of intuition.” He is an admirer of Joe Calzaghe, a Welshman who won the world title in two weight classes. “He would always react in the middle of a fight and find a way to win.”

Mr Scully, who was involved in street gangs as a youth in London, has practiced Eastern martial arts, and he says a Zen-like quality to his work may account for its popularity in China. The Shanghai Himalayas Museum hosted the first major retrospective of his work in 2014. “I consider myself to be a person of the street, and the very interesting thing about Zen is that it does not separate the physical from the emotional world.” Mr Scully says he strives for a “spiritual-physical” unified field in his paintings. “There is a kind of Eastern input in my work. There is that aspect to my work. The idea of marking repeatedly is very ritualistic and akin to praying or chanting.”

Mr Scully is an avid art historian and he says the physicality of his work and a “fusion of the body and the idea” distinguishes it from that of other important geometric or abstract painters such as Mark Rothko or Agnes Martin. “I’m painting stripes or boxes or whatever but I’m painting them as objects in a way. I’m not just painting them as design. I’m giving them a personality. I’m transforming them into something that has a body.”

Mr Scully likens his knowledge of art history to Mike Tyson’s study of boxing under the tutelage of Cus D’Amato, a legendary trainer whom the former heavyweight champion credits with saving his life. Calling Mr Tyson a “boxing historian of the first rank”, he notes that a boxer can’t just “go in there swinging”. Neither can a painter, but it is more common for a boxer to compare himself to an artist than the other way round.

Mr Scully is uninterested in what is in vogue. For example, he began one series in 1983 in Mexico, drawing inspiration from the shadows and light reflecting on ancient walls. “I sat on a beach and I made a little watercolour, and I called it ‘Wall of Light’ as a response to the ruins,” he says. The artist was living in New York at the time and his work was heavily influenced by the aggression and close proximity to others that comes with living in the city. The “Wall of Light” works, though, have a very different feel. After putting the project on hold for 14 years he returned to work on the series again, hardly disturbed by the long break. “I know that when I do it, it will be unpacked in the right way,” he says.

The Karlsruhe show is the most comprehensive retrospective of Mr Scully’s work, consisting of 130 paintings and drawings dating back to the 1960s. For Mr Scully, the purpose of art is a timeless, Zen-like quest to discover our place and purpose in the universe. “Art gives a dimension, poetry, intuition.”

*“Vita Duplex” is at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe until August 5th*