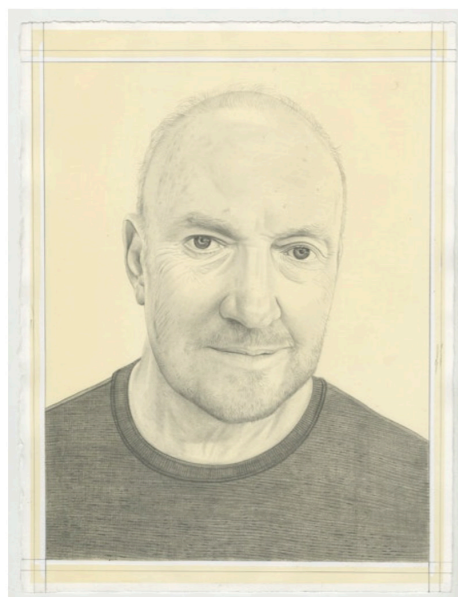


SEAN SCULLY with David Carrier



Portrait of Sean Scully, pencil on paper, by Phong Bui

Sometimes the lives of artists and art writers are linked together in mutually fruitful and revealing ways. When I started out writing about visual art, thirty-seven years ago, Sean Scully played an important role in my life. After great youthful success in London, knowing that America was the home of ambitious abstract painting, he moved to New York City. And then, after a few difficult, frustrating years in America he submitted his enormous manifesto painting *Backs and Fronts* (1981) to *Critical Perspectives: Curators and Artists*, an exhibition organized at PS1 by Joseph Masheck. I went out to Queens, saw that show, immediately located Scully in the telephone directory, and scheduled a studio visit. At that time, I was teaching philosophy in a provincial university. Soon enough, then, Scully found a New York dealer. As to myself, I started publishing art criticism. In that decade, I learnt a great deal from him, and so after writing one catalogue essay and various reviews, in 2004, I was able to publish the second monograph on him.

There is a very basic distinction, I discovered, between growing up with an artist and meeting them only when they are well established. Had I never met Scully early on, I would have become a different writer. As it is, to some extent we developed a common working vocabulary, in collaboration, at times, with Arthur Danto, who was my philosophy teacher. Ours proved to be a richly rewarding relationship. And since I have happily followed and occasionally reviewed Scully's exhibitions and publications, his coming exhibition, *Wall of Light*, opening February 28, 2018 at Mnuchin Gallery, seemed the right moment to do this interview.

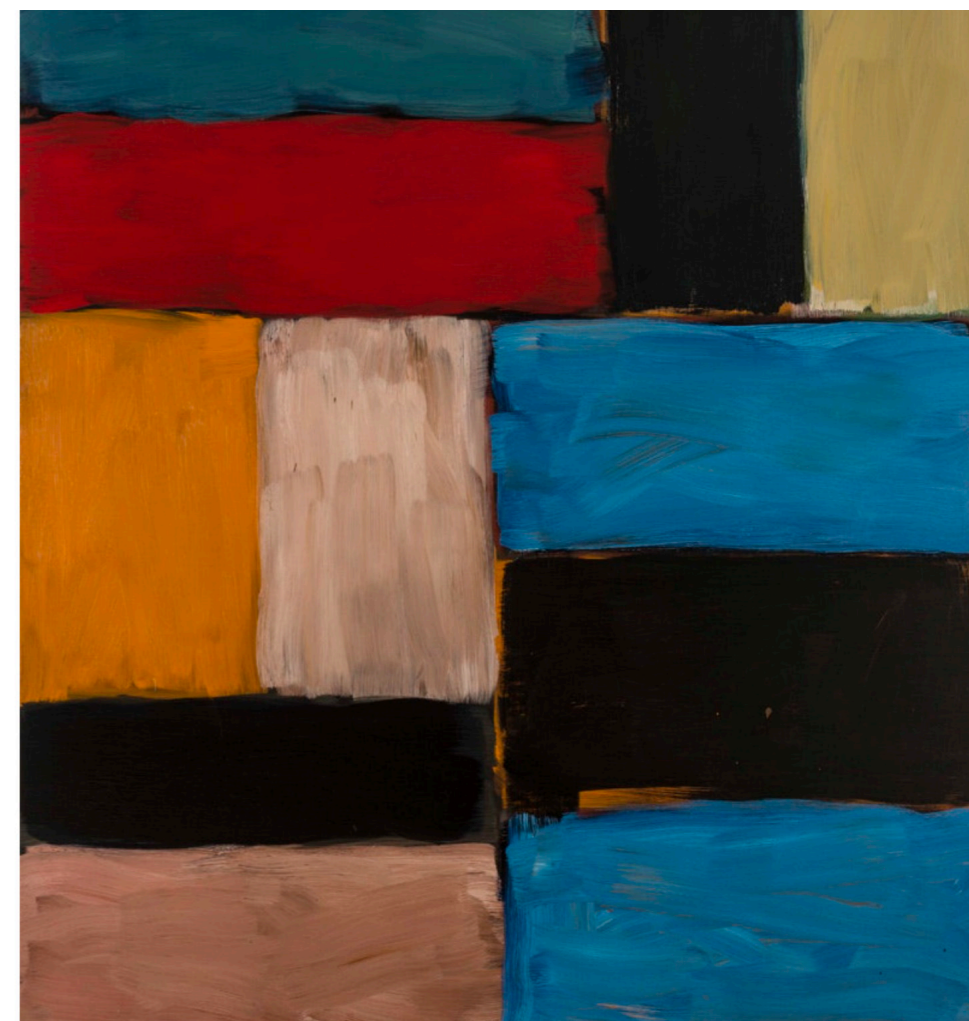


Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Desert Night*, 1999. Oil on linen, 108 x 132 inches. The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, museum purchase.

David Carrier (Rail): Sean, since your Mnuchin show is about to open, I thought that we might start by discussing the origin of this series of paintings called “Wall of Light” and how they differ from your prior work. I would say your 1980s works are about conflict, about what happens when opposed forces jam together. And then the “Wall of Light” works, by contrast, reveal a calm utopian world—a harmonious place from the end of history.

Sean Scully: The beginning of the “Wall of Light” paintings came when I was sitting on a beach in Mexico in Zihuatanejo. I'd been visiting the ruins and I was in a moment of repose, so I made a little watercolor that was a memory portrait of my impression of what I'd been doing. After seeing how the light at different times of the day had affected the sacred temples that I was visiting, I wrote “Wall of Light” under it. However, since I was involved in my '80s collision paintings, the subject of which was discord—such as the way the city was slapped together, and the way people and ideas competed for survival—the “Wall of Light” paintings had to wait their turn. After all, I couldn't really paint Utopia whilst painting pictures with titles like Clash.

Rail: Would you accept the idea that there's this difference between your two bodies of work?



Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Red Yellow*, oil on canvas, (2012). Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery, New York.

Scully: Yes, it's pretty obvious that the “Wall of Light” paintings, and the '80s paintings are completely different. Most of the divisions in my '80s paintings are made sculpturally; whereas in the “Wall of Light” paintings they are painted into place. Plus, the title *Wall of Light*, is clear in its aspiration: to make a wall that is not a brutal divider.

Rail: Can you say what inspired you to make abstract walls?

Scully: I wanted to make walls that were positive, since many of them are not.

Rail: I've always thought that your titles were important. How do they function in the “Wall of Light”?

Scully: I want, and wanted to, rescue abstraction from remoteness. So I made my abstract paintings lurch towards association. I have been giving them, strong associational, metaphorical titles for a long time now. *Wall of Light Desert Night* (1999) was painted from memory after a trip I made to the desert outside Las Vegas.

Rail: Here, then, we might get to a larger question, which seems to me a central concern for you. How, without any recognizable subject, does abstract art acquire meaning?

Scully: Walls in most cases are negative, although it's true to say that without walls you can't have buildings, or indeed subways. However, I wanted to make an antidote to the way the world is brutally divided. There is an exhibition that I am participating in in Caen, France, very soon, that deals with the whole subject of the wall in art. I think it will be very interesting. It's true of course to say that without a wall I don't have anywhere to hang my painting. Which is a painting of a wall. So it's true to say, they've helped us to live, however they've also helped us to loathe each other.

The world has essentially been made by war. So it's not a pretty place. Right now we have a dope running this country who wants more of this, and he is not alone in creating isolation and fear. Trade and art has always been a way to cross these borders. It's an antidote. And abstraction, in particular, has a metaphorical, insinuating power that is difficult to edit or control. In my "Wall of Light" paintings I am making a wall that is full of shifting relationships, that appear and disappear.

Rail: Recently I have seen in the commercial art world the fantastic interest in artists from everywhere, which is a very new development. In the catalogue for his famous 1964 show at the Fogg, at Harvard, Michael Fried announced that the leading living painters were three white men, all New Yorkers. When I interviewed Okwui Enwezor for *Brooklyn Rail*, we talked with a sense of wonder about that cultural confidence—it's gone. Has this change affected you?

Scully: The world has changed dramatically. As it should, and as it needs to. The lines of communication in the art world, and other worlds, is beyond the control of a few locked-down, hardened, major-city positions. Sure they are important, but the direction of the art world is out of their control. Paris, London, and New York no longer call the shots as they did, even twenty years ago. The internet has, of course, made the world, less geographically physically fixed into place. I was actually in the audience at Harvard in 1972 when Michael Fried said that Jules Olitski was the greatest painter in the world. It's not possible now for a New York insider to nominate a New York insider as world champion. However, it still ought to be a possibility, among other possibilities, because it might be true. If other things can be true, so can that.

Rail: You've often written about the importance of being an immigrant going from Ireland to Great Britain, and then Great Britain to America. Does knowing this influence how people look at your art? Do you think that people respond now more readily to this complex personal history?



Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Orange Red*, oil on canvas, (2000).
Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery.

Scully: I'm not formed in one place, which has caused me difficulties in the past. However, the world has since re-organized itself around me; my immigrant history has become positive. I have a global access that seems somehow affected by my personal story, the way my art has developed, and the global reach it now has. I have an exhibition on now in Moscow that has been seen by a huge number of people. Maybe the way the Russians look at my work is different from the Chinese or the Mexicans. But that doesn't matter to me I only want them to be able to use it, and to psychologically cross borders.

Rail: In your essay on Morandi, you contrast his provincial situation in Italy to the ambitious world of American-style Abstract Expressionism. Now that America is no longer so triumphant, how is our contemporary art changed?

Scully: Well, I wrote on Morandi, and how his work slowly ascended through the rigors of the art world. If things change around you, you are seen differently. It's as simple as that. The transavantgarde artists who were his contemporaries in the fifties and sixties, like [Gino] Severini—who is an interesting artist—are no longer as famous as they once were. I don't agree though that America is no longer triumphant. America is still a great place. And economically, China's growth is spectacular, but they come from a debased position, and when their people get our freedom, they won't any longer be willing to travel massive distances to work for next to nothing. Then they will have our problems.

Rail: Something else has changed in this period—the rise of our grand mega-dealers. You, it seems, have avoided showing with them. Why? What kind of setting do you prefer for your art?

Scully: I have avoided the mega-dealers basically because I don't trust them, or the idea. I have more interesting and mutually helpful dialogues with my galleries than I ever could have with a department store that is pretending to be a gallery.

Rail: In the 1980s, abstraction was in a curious position. Of course there were major figures—but no longer was it the wave of the future, as Rothko had believed. How do you feel about its situation now?

Scully: I was included in the famous survey in MOMA in 1984. There were about six abstract-ish painters. [Elizabeth] Murray, [Katherine] Porter, [Blinky] Palermo, [Brice] Marden, [Thornton] Willis, and me. The rest was flying sofas, and four-eyed people. However, Julian Schnabel and Susan Rothenberg made some truly impressive paintings. I loved it because even though a lot of the paintings from the '80s haven't stood the test of time, some have. And the energy level was wonderful. But this is the cruelty of the star system. A pop-artist friend of mine once told me, "In 1960 there were 112 pop artists and in 1970, there were 12." I personally wouldn't mind if there were none. But I'm also okay with twelve. Abstract painting has made a significant comeback, and there are some great abstract painters around.

Rail: Here is a naïve question: how does an abstract painter keep going? I mean, a figurative artist finds new subjects. And so successive paintings are different. Obviously abstraction requires a different dynamic. How would you describe yours?

Scully: To be honest, I don't know the answer to that question. I always loved what I was doing, and I thought it was a privilege. I came out of extreme poverty. When I first came to New York, I mistook discouragement for encouragement. Since nobody actually shot me, I thought I was welcome. So it was a beautiful misunderstanding. Really, it's always a question of how you take things.



Courtesy the artist.

Rail: When we first met, thirty-five years ago, you were a resolute city-dweller. “A few hours in the country were more than enough,” you once said. But recently you moved both your residence and studio to outside of the city. How has that change influenced your work?

Scully: That’s true, but then I didn’t have my son. My first son died shortly after we met. Then I went quietly into crisis. Love is bigger than anything put in its way. We moved to Tappan for our son, so he could grow up with nature. And of course, everything benefitted. I think my work has been greatly affected by this, and indeed color has made a dramatic entrance into my studio, uniting my early work with my current work.

Rail: I know that you were very close to Arthur Danto, who wrote repeatedly about your art. Has anyone taken his role in your intellectual life?

Scully: Nobody can replace Arthur Danto. Nor will they.

Rail: Your last show at Cheim & Read introduced your sculpture to New York. (I know that previously you’ve shown sculpture elsewhere.) When did you start making sculpture—and what is the relationship of these works to your paintings?

Scully: I have also written about my sculpture, and how it relates to my teenage years in London when I was working a bailing machine, and loading huge vans with flattened cardboard boxes: transforming an empty negative space into a crowded negative space. When I made a huge stone block, down in Aix-en-Provence, I simply made a three-dimensional version of one of my paintings, where space is crowded out. The idea of stacking is obsessively interesting to me, and of course it occurs in my paintings.

Rail: You’ve written very vividly about your political life in London in the 1960s. What, if anything, survives now of the spirit of those times?

Scully: You might argue that we did not succeed in the ’60s. However, there was tremendous social movement as a result of it. Apartheid is gone in South Africa, and nuclear proliferation slowed down. I am in favor of mutual nuclear disarmament. Since the development of this kind of weaponry, it is collective insanity. So, just because a movement is not a complete success, it cannot be judged a failure, since any degree of progress, however small or large, is worth fighting for. I personally think that artists should rule the world, since most politicians of all stripes are as dumb as bricks, while artists invent solutions that are humanistic.



Sean Scully, *Air, recinto, marble and cantera* (2018). Courtesy the artist

Rail: Can we talk a little about your practical concerns with political art?

Scully: My work, generally speaking, is not overtly political. I believe that once art shackles itself to a clear identifiable political agenda, it can no longer be great art, which seeks transformation. However, lately I made some clear political art, since I felt cornered into it: due to the folly of our last election. These paintings are called *Ghost*. Since that’s what the ideals of a great nation will become, if it doesn’t make a U-turn. Whether they are, or will become, great art, I have no idea.

Rail: Recently you’ve had large exhibitions in China—shows that you’ve gone there to organize. You may remember—when I taught there, some years ago now—I gave a lecture on your art. What was your personal experience of China? How was your art understood, and was it changed by this experience?

Scully: I didn’t go to China for them to change my art, I went there to change their art. And to accelerate the process of freedom. I must say, I was surprised by how liberal they were in relation to my freedom to speak my mind.

Rail: If an ambitious, young artist asked you for advice, what would you say?

Scully: Well, first I think it’s a stupid question. My answer is always the same. Think only of what you are contributing, not of what you are getting out. The world will love you, that’s for sure, but you have to love it first.

Contributor

David Carrier

David Carrier is writing a book about the historic center of Naples.