Sean Scully

R. Eric Davis: Why do you make art?

Sean Scully: I think that I wanted to do something in my life that wasn't ordinary - which wasn't normal. I couldn't bear to live my life as a normal person, put another way: conventionally. So if I had a choice between living in suburbia and being dead, I would rather be dead. That implies I am going to do something with my life that is not ordinary. Then it is only a question of what that is. I could have gone into a number of different things.

When I was young I was extremely political. We talked about this the other night. I don't think there is such a thing as effective political art. There is only art that is politicized. You either do politics or you do not. I wasn't interested in pretending to be political while I was an artist. There is another aspect to it. I came from an Irish background and started out life as an immigrant. I went to a convent school and I was yanked out because my parents had a big argument with them and I was put into a state school, which was full of emptiness and violence. In other words, I moved from something very exotic and difficult, but rich and full of mystery and the belief in another reality, in a reality that we couldn't see, that we could only imagine, into something that dealt with just what you could see. What you could imagine did not even seem to be a question. I found the banality of it crushing and the shock profoundly disturbing. I think at that point, taking all of those things into account, at some early moment in my life I decided I was going to be an artist.

Davis: It was the most abnormal thing you could do, or the most adventurous?

Scully: It was the most adventurous, in a sense the most dangerous, the most insecure, and, potentially, the most profound thing I could do.

Davis: The most life affirming.

Scully: Yeah, the most life affirming, that is a very good way of putting it. So my work is really based on a kind of idealism and romanticism with beauty and form and profundity all wrapped up.

Davis: It seems beauty is a pejorative in art right now. Over the last three centuries there have been varying ideas about beauty in art. At the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of beauty was that it was a direct and personal response. At the end of the nineteenth century the belief was, more or less, that beauty was only related to beliefs and moral judgements and not independent of other values. Now, at the end of the twentieth century it doesn't seem beauty matters. Is beauty still important? Does it stand a chance in this next century?

Scully: Beauty is denoted by a word that we have invented. We have invented the word out of necessity. Therefore, I think it is logical to believe we will continue to need to use that word in the future. I don't really believe in these kinds of ruptures. I don't think things change that much. The difference between the eighteenth and nineteenth century is quite great in some ways, but there many things that carry over between the classicism and order of the eighteenth century and the romanticism, or what one might argue is the romantic order, of the nineteenth century. There are certain characteristics that run through art. At the end of the twentieth century, we are going through a phase, in this decade, where form and beauty do not seem to sit very well together or with anything else for that matter. However, it is interesting to note that only ten years ago we were saturated with nothing but a certain kind of emotive painting. Look how it has changed. It can change back again, it can turn on a dime, and it does. I'm pretty sure it will.

I think coming to the end of the century has something to do with, perhaps, a certain kind of closing down, knocking down, maybe a kind of hysteria that accompanies the closing of something. It is almost as if the ship of the twentieth century is about to go down and everybody is scrambling around trying to see what they want to take off and how they are going to get off. Pretty soon the twenty-first century will start and then we will want to start building up again, that is what I am interested in. I am interested in making something very affirmative. In times of crisis, and we are in a certain crisis now in relation to the kind of art I am interested in, it always comes down to a few people. Especially in art it comes down to a few people who are prepared to fight for something and prove a point. It is, of course, difficult to say in advance what is going to happen, what the outcome of this debate will be. I simply cannot think that human beings will be able to discard their desire and need for something that is sublime, something that transports them, takes them out of time, takes them out of the banality of the everyday world. I just can't see it happening with the

virtual, because to make something is tremendously powerful in and of itself. Even before we get to the point where we judge its value, the fact that someone has gone to all the trouble to make something is very moving.

Davis: At what point does something become beautiful? Does it only occur when "true art" emerges or is it simply an effect of creation, the process of creation?

Scully: I think it is very difficult to decide, to quantify what goes into it. There was a period where people thought a certain shape in relation to the "S" made beauty. The serpentine river in London is based on that principle and you would find this shape occurring in paintings, or people talking about paintings and looking for this shape. I don't believe you can do it like that. I am not sure I believe in "schools" either. I am really an individualist. The question for me is whether or not something moves me and engages me. If I am moved and engaged by something, I find it beautiful. For me the term beautiful is not pejorative, it is always affirmative. If I say I find it very convincing, even though it is ugly, the fact it is done with such authenticity and conviction and it is finally persuasive, it becomes beautiful. In other words, I don't think beauty is simply a question of appearances. It can come out left field and redefine itself. It can be something you've never seen before, or it can be something you think you have seen before, like my work, that presents itself with another life.

Davis: So there is no real standard for beauty.

Scully: No, there is no standard anymore. There is no way of formulizing it anymore. There is no way of making a treatise to say in advance what beauty is, that is not the age we are in. I think we are in an age where there are many different options open. More or less, everything is possible in art. There aren't really any barriers anymore. There aren't really many barriers in socio-sexual behavior anymore. This all goes together, of course, as part of a cultural parcel. The only thing for me that distinguishes whether or not I think something is moving or profound or necessary or beautiful, they are all more or less the same thing to me, is whether it is convincing. And this in the end comes down to the character of the person making it, not the style in which it is made. I don't think that works any more.

I can be convinced by a painting by Lucian Freud and very unconvinced by a painting by Eric Fischl, but they are both kind of

expressionistic figurative paintings. One has a kind of force behind it, a moral fury, and a resistance I find interesting. The other is just full of acquiescence and complicity. Even though they look superficially similar, they have an entirely different effect on me. I can say the same thing about many abstract painters.

Davis: Yet beauty plays a role in determining the value of art.

Scully: Certainly.

Davis: Is it playing less of a role than it used to?

Scully: No, I think it plays an extraordinarily important role. I think it plays a crucial role. When I look at, for example, at Bill Viola's piece on death, I find it extraordinarily beautiful. Of course it is a sad subject, but it's dealt with very sensitively and it ennobles us. That in itself is beautiful. That's why I say it is not a question of appearances. It is a question of whether something is, to my mind, humanistically convincing. That to me is a very important factor. I think what we need is an extraordinary humanistic assertion made by individuals and that is our great necessity at this point in time. The whole thing, as something that can be codified, as it was, let's say in the time of Clement Greenburg, has become unraveled. The only thing that can put it back together again is extreme individual action. That is why I am so comfortable in a time like this, because I am so much of an individualist. In a sense, it is my time. It's a perfect moment.

I think I'm a good person to have around in a shipwreck in the sense that culture has run aground. The ship of culture has hit a sandbank, or crashed. The stuff that is coming out of London, for example ... I can put it very briefly - people who talk about the 'Brit Pack' always say the name should simply be changed to 'Shit Pack,' because it's a pack of shit. It is exploitive, superficial, opportunistic, hip, laconic, sarcastic, sardonic, everything I don't like; it's full of cynicism and opportunism. They work in a gang, which is another thing I don't like. So I am happy to stand against that as an individual without feeling outnumbered.

Davis: There is no individual identity in that work because of the cohesiveness of them as a group?

Scully: Precisely. It is a marketed package.

Davis: In that case, have the artists gone too far?

Scully: When you say 'too far,' I'm not sure what you mean.

Davis: With people like Damien Hirst, is what he is doing in the name of art, or does it take on some other identity?

Scully: Well, a lot of these people learned their lesson from Andy Warhol. Andy Warhol is not an artist whose work I like. In a sense, Andy Warhol was the visual artist equivalent of the method actor who becomes the subject. I do the same thing. My work is based on immersion. I am immersed in a very different set of parameters and aspirations. I am taking on the history of art, I'm immersed in it and I'm immersed in what I make. I am what I make in other words; there is no difference. He was the same way, but he was really a television ad, or a billboard. He had as much depth as a billboard. To talk about him as a profound person is ridiculous.

It might be argued, however, that he was profound in his emptiness and he was profoundly attached to something in the culture that drives out all content and all hope. He was profoundly attached to the dehumanization of the culture and embraced it and really became a part of it. He is like a blinking sign that says nothing except I want to be famous. The emptiness of it is stunning. It is that emptiness and the slickness of it that has appealed to so many other artists who followed him. In that sense, he is like Duchamp. Duchamp made it possible for people who couldn't compete with the Van Goghs of this world, and the Matisses, and the Brancusis, and the other great masters, he made it possible for them to be in the game as spoilers. Andy Warhol paraphrased this possibility in the Sixties and made it possible for people who understand the mechanisms of the media and the advertising world, and whose only ambition is to be famous, to do that. He offered a model upon which they can base their actions. He made it possible for a whole generation, and many generations of artists who follow him, to be unburdened. To my mind, it is the burden of art making that is so interesting. So I am absolutely the polar opposite of Warhol.

Davis: For Warhol and this current generation of British artists it is more about product than process, whereas for you it is both process and product.

Scully: It is process and product in relation to the weight and continuum of history. That's a huge burden to take on, but it's a burden that is interesting and can make our culture so interesting. To try to make a culture where people are detached from history is not

only unrewarding, but is potentially dangerous. It is like knowing nothing about the Parthenon, nothing about the birth of Democracy, knowing nothing about the Age of Reason, knowing nothing about the Industrial Revolution, knowing nothing about the Holocaust. It makes for an empty life and for an empty culture. I think they are not even particularly concerned with product. What they're concerned with is the effect that something can have, and only that. It is a pure and unbridled form of capitalism. It is pure exploitation. To give one example, it is exactly the equivalent, in the political sense, as taking out as much as possible from the rain forest. Without any idea of what happened before and what could happen afterwards, it is like making art that has no sense of consequentiality. It is not only a question of its relation to history; I'm talking about history as something that is going to be in the future too. We're going to have more history in the future. What these guys are doing is trying to make five-year careers. It is pure capitalism.

Davis: Whom should we fault for this? Should we fault the artist for doing this and getting away with it, or the viewer and collector for propagating a myth?

Scully: I think one of the problems with democracy, which is generally good, I think we would all agree, is that you need more art to reach more people more easily. Now, if you take more art, to more people, more easily, that points towards the impossibility of maintaining its extraordinarily entry into the culture, or its extraordinary place and position. With a genuine democratization of art, you cannot just have incredibly authentic art works because the demand is so enormous and the machinery for it is so great. There are so many kunsthalles in the world now, and there are so many people running around trying to fill them up with stuff that is attention grabbing, without any thought about whether they are going to be interesting in six months let alone sixty years. So, what you've got is a dangerous axis developing between the popularization of culture, which is called Pop Culture, and how that can get into the art world and get into the whole art structure.

If that happens, as it has happened in England for very good reasons, to take a particular example, there is no true support for art. There is none. There aren't any collections being made in England. There aren't any museums being built. It's an image. It's like a confidence trick; it's an advertising campaign. There's nothing behind it. It's like having a mail order catalog or an image on a TV screen, but when you go to order it, there isn't anything there, because there's nothing behind it.

That is one of the main reasons art has gone the way it has gone in England. In a sense, that is the only way it can go. If you have no museum structure, real authentic museum structure in a national sense, that energy has to go somewhere. It has to become simply an image of art and of an art culture. It is actually virtual over there. London is a great city that is a giant billboard for the country. London is bigger than England.

I think you have different problems in different countries. I travel a lot, so I have a lot of experience in this. It seems to me that in Germany, Spain and Italy, it is a very different situation from England, or from London and New York. I see a great correspondence between London and New York, but I don't see a great correspondence between London and the U.S. I think the U.S. has within it a lot of resistance because the culture is different and is based on a more authentic fabric that can actually back up and support financially, and physically, a place like New York. The U.S. is a country with a much greater resource base for a start, a much greater industrial base, a much greater nature base, and it can back it up and support it. There are museums being built here, as we know, we're sitting in one that's being expanded. There is a belief in art. There are enough people to support that. It is a very different situation.

Davis: Have these younger artists become oppressors, within the public at large, by creating art that is so highly personal, and eventually impersonal, and nonsensical? It seems they are foiling themselves by becoming rather elitist and that it defeats art and continues a fear of art.

Scully: I certainly agree they are defeating themselves. I certainly agree that they represent, to a degree, the death of art. Not just the death of painting or sculpture, but the death of art as I understand it. And this has a strong relationship to all the things being said by Peter Plagens in the recent conference. [Peter Plagens, artist and critic, was a speaker at the 24th Annual Ruth K. Shartle Memorial Symposium "Writing About Art: A Closer Look at Art Criticism" held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston on October 31, 1998. Other speakers were Arthur C. Danto, Libby Lumpkin, and Frances Colpitt.] What has happened in one branch of culture, is that you have a debasement of what I would call quality and authenticity. The success of that debasement sets an example, for other people who follow, to look at. It is a salutary lesson for them. They have to ask themselves a very tough question: do I want to be an artist?

When you have, for example, the blues singers in the United States being shamelessly ripped off by British rock and roll stars, like Elton John and the Rolling Stones, and watching these guys become zillionaires, and not only zillionaires, but cultural icons, then you have got to ask yourself what is going on and what is it that the culture really wants. In the visual arts they borrowed a lot from the theatricality of movie sets and they've tried to make art into 'kunsthalle as adult fun house' so people can walk around and get a hit.

I saw an ad on TV in New York that impressed me greatly. A woman comes out of a show called 'The New York Experience.' I think it is a series of images and light effects and strobe lights and sounds. She comes out with a dazed, and ecstatically bedazzled, expression on her face saying 'It was fantastic. It was all those lights and sounds and everything.' However, when you have all those lights and sounds and everything, serving nothing except the desire to impact another human being, what you have is a series of empty experiences. This is the same as advertising, which is a deadening accumulation of information, sound bites, and visual bites that, in a sense, disenfranchises and immobilizes and pacifies the population that leaves the television on all day. But they like it because it impacts on them. They don't make any judgement at all about what it does, whether it transforms their life, whether it enriches their life, whether it is dimensional, and whether it is humanistic, whether it calls to us or moves us in some way. That is not of importance, it is simply a question of whether it impacts. These are what I would call publicity bites. They want to be famous for a short while. They frankly don't care about making a body of work that they leave behind. I think that concept is under tremendous threat, but so is the concept of culture, unless we live in a world of TV culture.

To give you another example, if you see an early film by Tarrantino, let's say *Pulp Fiction,* it is full of violence and the violence is stylized. The violence is, in fact, emptied out of all its horror. It becomes amusing and entertaining. It's aestheticized. There's a certain kind of amoral pleasure, I guess, that can be gleaned from that. Not by me I might add. But when he makes another film - *Jackie Brown* - without violence, you see what a load of crap it is. You see the characters in it are cardboard cutouts. The acting in it is nothing; it is banal and flat. Without all the shock, the impacting part of it, it carries nothing. It's like a little piece of paper you could flick off the table and it's gone. And that is how substantial his films are without all the violence.

If you put shock into art, and you make shock the point, and you've gone to art school and have some kind of visual education, I imagine you will achieve shock. But that is the same as looking at ads all day. You go to the kunsthalle in order to be impacted upon, not to be lit up as a human being, not to be engaged as a human being. It is extraordinarily short sighted and hopelessly inadequate in relation to the subject of cultural history and how to add to it and make it better and bigger.

Davis: It is like certain movies that are about the special effects and not telling a story.

Scully: Right.

Davis: How easy should art be? How much does one need to bring to it to gain an understanding? Do we need to know about its creation, it background? My feeling is what we need now is much different than what we needed even ten years ago; that the viewer must be more sophisticated.

Scully: I think that's correct. There is probably a lot more manipulation going on now which is to the detriment of the viewer. The viewer, with the cooperation of the art establishment, is being assaulted and in a sense disenfranchised. The viewer is being bombarded and turned into a kind of passive target. As a viewer you have to be more aggressive and you have to fight back. You have to in fact fight for your own ground in an area, where formally, you did not. The viewer cannot come to the museum with as much trust as they could formally.

The values of the advertising world, the virtual media world, the world that assaults, have infiltrated the quality of the human personality. It is colluding with that. It is borrowing the same techniques, and using those techniques, because they have been proven to be successful in the world of advertising or motion pictures, of a certain kind, where special effects and violence are the order of the day; squeezing out everything else that is more reflective and thoughtful. These films, the ones that are more reflective and thoughtful and beautiful at times, generally win the awards, but hardly anyone goes to see them anymore. So, the viewer now has to fight for his own humanism in an area where formally it wasn't as necessary; which is quite a devastating thing to have to admit. Art no longer offers the sanctuary that it once did. It can, but you have to fight for it more because the enemy is already inside the walls.

Davis: The viewer's response is even more important now than it ever was.

Scully: With the advent of the avant-garde, the stakes were raised. That happened, obviously as we all know, at the beginning of the twentieth century with André Breton making poems by throwing words up in the air; putting it all on you. Or Ad Reinhardt saying well what are you. Now, the mechanisms of the world of greed and exploitation in art have polluted art. This is why Warhol is such an interestingly negative figure.

Davis: Did Warhol ruin art?

Scully: No, I don't think Warhol ruined art because I don't find Warhol that important. You have to be very important to be able to ruin art.

Davis: Even though he was so set on bringing the everyday, the commercial, into the realm of art, that we now seemingly judge things only as being relevant by an immediate audience response? I feel such art is tied to a sense of commercialism and immediacy. It is all snippets and sound bites and special effects. It has become this very commercial thing.

Scully: Well, it has all come out of advertising and the techniques of advertising.

Davis: Which is something he took and ran with.

Scully: Yeah, but before him we had the Dada artists who were all spoilers. This isn't just Duchamp. André Breton was a huge influence. They certainly tried to bring down the house of art. To be perfectly frank, there's no way in the world that any of those people could live with Picasso, Matisse, Miró; they couldn't be in the same room with them. They had to invent another game. They had to become spoilers. They invented a way to be purely famous. That's the key issue - to be purely famous, devoid of work. The name André Breton is enormous in relation to what he gave us. It's as big as the name Brancusi, who left a magnificent body of work. That's the mechanism at work already, you can see it. One left something quite minor; the other left something unreservedly major. But they're almost equally as famous as each other as names. That's very interesting. It's kind of like the difference between something that is solid and something that is inflated and they are both the same size. But one has density and the other one has not.

Davis: The difference between one of Brancusi's stone columns and Warhol's floating pillows. One has substance and one is full of hot air.

Scully: Yeah, yeah, it's just full of air.

Davis: Does art have an obligation to inform about social issues? A moral or social responsibility?

Scully: No, not in that way. If you want to inform about social issues, you should fight for those issues on a social issue platform. That's the medium and I don't think that has anything to do with art. That's not the job of art. But one could say, for example, that some art has in it a moral character, a kind of morality. But that's not talking about specific moral issues. It's just full of rightness, not righteousness, but rightness. Which could also be called beauty, depending on how right it is.

Davis: I am interested in the concept of what makes art powerful and successful. Sometimes art, as we've seen in the current generation of artists, can be very powerful in its immediate impact, but it is not necessarily successful art. Is successful, powerful art then simply a melding of what one desires with what one wants to see represented?

Scully: That's an interesting way of putting it. The question is is art something that meets your desire at some point in space and time?

Davis: Is this current generation filling some unspoken desire?

Scully: Without question. You see that begs the question what is the desire? Culture is a very fragile thing. We could easily go into the dark ages where we don't have any art. Why not, it happened before. That's why you need to know about history. It can easily happen if people's horizons are so low and so flat, and become pacified and desensitized, that they can't work anymore for something deeper, they will end up with that kind of work masquerading as an art experience. That will be a very, very bad period in art.

My own work has gained an audience as I've gotten older. I've become more able to take for granted that my work is going to be shown all over the place. This implies it meets the desire of a rather large number of people. So, of course, in the culture, in a true democracy, as is right, there are a large variety of desires out there. To give you a crude example, if the desire for pornography were to meet with an overwhelming and positive response, then the only films we would

ever have would be pornographic films. The people that didn't make pornographic films would be people who subsidize themselves and found ways to do it and were offering the voice of resistance; and those films might never get distributed, but they would get made I am sure. At least that is what has happened so far in our history except with the dark ages. I'm not saying that what I do will become the majority voice, but I'm not saying it won't either. I don't really know how the game is going to play out. I will do it anyway because that is what I believe in and I will fight for what I believe in.

Davis: You would then consider yourself one of the resistors to the latest generation's "pornography."

Scully: Yeah, but they could also say they are resisting the kind of work I make which supports a certain view of history that they don't agree with. So they could see themselves as the resistors.

Davis: Is it the beginning of the Sixties all over again? Are you now the establishment?

Scully: Well, it depends what you mean by establishment, because we've all got our different ideas about it. I think they're the establishment.

Davis: Because of the capitalism of it?

Scully: Yeah, and the kind of tidiness of it, the way it is all marketed. That's a real conspiracy involving money, advertising techniques, the buying and selling of work, using auction houses in order to pump up prices, the bullying of minor institutions to show it. It seems like the establishment to me. What I do I tend to do as an individual. I have friends and other artists that I admire, but then I'm supported by a lot of people, there's no question about that. And I'm supported by a lot of museums. So then they could say you're supported by all these museums, so you're the establishment. In the end, what matters really, are the values you believe in, or to put it another way, the way you put it earlier, what is the desire? What is the desire searching for?

Now, to talk about something more positive, instead of talking about these negative influences, like Warhol, let's talk about Rothko. Rothko obviously satisfies another desire in the culture, a desire for beauty and a sense of spirituality and a sense of precariously tragic drama. And Ad Reinhardt satisfies another desire. Sam Hunter, the art historian, once told me he had been very supportive of the Abstract

Expressionists, but when the Pop Artists came along he supported them. He was walking down the street one day and he met Rothko and Rothko refused to be friendly with him and was angry with him and said he had betrayed everything they had been working for to transform American art.

Davis: Transcendental ...

Scully: Yes, transcendental ... that could stand alongside the Italian painters at the Quattro ciento. Sam Hunter couldn't understand his anger and he was talking to me when he said this. He said, 'You know, you always have to go with the new thing.' As a critic, there is an example of someone, who like Warhol offers no resistance. You can just roll over him without consequence and he will collaborate. To me, this is a little bit like living in France in 1940 and saying 'okay, this is the way the situation is now, let's see what we can make out of it.' I think resistance is a very important component of culture. Without this human capacity to resist, to have the mental strength to be in the minority, you can't bring it back again. It's always being brutalized. It's always being attacked, assaulted. The assault comes in many different forms, shapes, colors, and sizes. It's often subtle.

Davis: And say I am an individual.

Scully: It's not a question of being fashionable. As an artist you have got your whole life to work and you can't worry about whether or not you're in fashion. Fashion is nothing - it's transitory. If I wanted to be in fashion I would be designing clothes. Or I would be making a certain kind of art. Then, of course, there are other artists who have a problem with being ... let's say, older. As you go through life you're presented with different possibilities at different points in your life and you have to realize what those possibilities are. When you're fifty, you don't have the possibility to be twenty, but you do have the possibility to be fifty and everything that that means; all the accumulated power that you have and the vitality that you still have. That's a pretty good time to put things together. And whether you're in fashion or out of fashion is not so important.

Davis: You mentioned Rothko and spirituality. You have said art is a non-denominational religion ...

Scully: It can be.

Davis: Art has served religion, but when did art embody religion? Was there a certain point in modern history that art attained its own religious state?

Scully: I think that point is Malevich. When he put a figure on a ground with all the severity of a Russian icon painting, but with none of the descriptive and authoritarianism of one, in that moment it was liberated.

Davis: It went to a higher level.

Scully: It went to a level that could be, I'm not going to say higher, but it went to a level that was more inclusive. A painting by Malevich is not excluding anybody, whereas a Russian Orthodox icon painting is excluding a lot of people. It is excluding a Jew, for instance, or an American Indian or a Gypsy. They are all excluded to one degree or another. They are included in other ways. They can appreciate the beauty of the line and the colors, and the shapes and the context of where it is, but they cannot indulge in a complete relationship with that artwork. With the advent of abstraction that became possible and that moment is Malevich, a very important artist of course.

Davis: This created a worshiping of art in relation to the world in general, whereas the Russian icon stands alone and becomes exclusionary ...

Scully: It's also very authoritarian and doctrinaire. But I don't think an abstract painting is something you worship. It is something that is part of the world. It is as if the spirituality in art stepped off a pedestal, or from behind a sheet of glass, and has joined the world of the living. That, of course, is the contradiction with it because many people find it more exclusionary than an icon painting. That is the contradiction with art. With intention and result there is very often conflict. That is one of the issues in abstraction I have tried to address; to use abstraction, I'm not fighting for abstraction. Those battles have already been fought. I'm using those victories to make an abstraction that is, in fact, more relaxed, more open, and more confident. I take it for granted I don't need to abstract reality anymore; that has already been done. That would be the equivalent of reinventing the wheel. What I am doing is using all the ground that has already been gained; I'm occupying it to try to make something that is more expressive and that relates to the world in which we live. In that sense my abstraction is quite figurative. It is not very remote.

Davis: It is deeply connected to life.

Scully: Yeah, it's deeply connected to life; many aspects of it connect it to life.

Davis: For me, that guides your work and provides it with a broad humanity that isn't found in a lot of abstract painting.

Scully: No, that marks it out I think. That separates what I do and that is comfortable and uncomfortable for me. For example, I was in a show in New York called 'New Abstract Painting.' The show was written about by David Carrier. He talked about all of the work and then said 'Sean Scully's work separates itself. It has more in common with Richard Serra's weight and density of material than anything else in the exhibition.' My work also does not dialogue with some of the concerns of the other abstractionists. With the show across the street I know that what those people are trying to do is dialogue with video art, with the kind of images, the kind of color you see on the screens at the cinema. [Scully is referring to *Abstract Painting Once Removed* held at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, October 3 to December 6, 1998.] I believe that is absolutely the wrong way to go about making a painting. The whole point of painting is that it has the potential to be so humanistic, so expressive. To give that up is a tremendous mistake because then what you are doing is imitating forms of technological expression which can be manifested more directly, more efficiently, and frankly, more beautifully, in their original form. It's quite sad; artists, who are trying to, let's say, de-express the brushstroke. It is the opposite of what I am trying to do. I want my brushstrokes to be full of feeling; material feeling manifested in form and color.

Davis: There again, your work is about the process and the end product, whereas the work in that show is quite often just about craft.

Scully: You see, there you have hit the nail on the head. What has happened to painting, a lot of painting ... I wouldn't say what has happened to painters, there a lot of very good painters out there - Terry Winters is a very good painter - is that it has been reduced to the level of craft. It has turned into craft. I see so many paintings around now where people are using this technique of overlapping transparency that the Italian wall painters use, that the house painters use and have been for the last hundred years. There is nothing special about it. The fact that you put it on canvas does not make it more interesting. There is a strange detachment in that and it is very second

rate. And frankly, it is a form of cowardice. It is so lacking in any kind of guts to take the medium of painting and make it so limp and to exchange feeling for irony is not a very interesting trade off.

Davis: Where must art first touch an individual - the intellect or the soul?
Scully: For me it is very easy to say the soul. It is the attachment to the soul that we deeply need. It is what moves us. It is not simply a question of what makes sense; it is deeper than that. When that inner part of ourselves is engaged, we are truly alive.

Davis: Are you religious?

Scully: Religious? No. I would make a distinction between being religious and being spiritual. I think a person who is spiritual is somebody who is trying to exchange a religious belief for a spiritual search. I am against brand names basically. I think that is one of the most interesting things about going into the twenty-first century. I really believe the twenty-first century will be a very spiritual century. A lot of things are going to be dealt with in a way that is very different; a lot of the struggles of the twentieth century are over. I also hope a lot of the violence that accompanied those struggles in the twentieth century is over. In the way that the twentieth century took for granted and used the battles and the ground that was won in the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century. I think we are going to do the same thing with a lot of the discoveries that were made in the twentieth century and use them differently. Take them for granted, and use them with a greater effectiveness and a greater sense of responsibility about where we are in the planet and what kind of world we want to live in and how open that is to everybody. I'm basically against anything that is exclusionary. I try to make my work accessible if I can, as open as I can or certainly as honest as I can. I try and speak about it as directly as possible without, of course, making it simplistic.

Davis: Your paintings have a geometric center which implies a certain precision, rigidity, and construction. Yet the shapes within your work tend to have soft edges. For me, this lack of absolute precision and very clean lines suggests a sense of freedom, freedom from total authoritative order. This is something that seems to have held back a lot of the more formal abstract painters of our time. Does some of the humanity in your work stem from the basic tenet that, despite being considered abstract, it contains recognizable forms ... forms that

everyone can see, has seen, and therefore, on some level, connect with more quickly?

Scully: I recognize two questions in there. One of them is, I guess, you're asking me if I resist the closure of perfection, or do I associate perfection with some kind of authoritarianism? Which I do. One of the most interesting things I have ever heard was something that Albert Einstein said which is 'When I know what something is, I don't have to think about it anymore.' I don't want to present that kind of closure. I'm not very fond, for example, of Donald Judd's work. It represents a certain closure to me. I know it has a certain kind of ambiguity about it in relation to other objects in the world, and I know how it operates, but still it is too much like a lump of furniture. It is too inert.

Davis: Too finite.

Scully: Yes, it's too finite. I try to make paintings that everybody can relate to in terms of their drawing, it's a very simple kind of counting. It's based on rhythm or simple architectural structures. You can also relate it to music, rhythmical musical structures or mathematical structures. I'm not making them complicated. They are very simple. Within that the painting of them can be quite emotive. So, the emotive painting is, in effect, rendering something, it's attached to something that in fact takes the place of the object in figurative painting. That is why I believe people lock into my work so naturally. It has the same kind of dynamic in it as a Matisse painting. Matisse is painting a chair and you see the way it is painted in relation to what is being painted and what color it is.

What I am painting is a simple divisional structure, but you see the way it is painted, what color it is painted, and how many times it is painted in relation to that simple structure. So, in fact, the dynamic is the same. I've re-established something that I think had been broken - that the abstractionists kept building on abstraction and I think they forgot what it was originally based on. What I did, basically, was I went back to what it was originally based on. Then I just had something that I could compose with. So, in that sense, my painting is completely open. That is why I can make so many different compositional forms. It comes very naturally out of the way I draw and work and paint; one thing leads to another, which leads to another. I'm not really, in that sense, in a corner, which is what happens to a lot of abstract painters - they end up in a corner. People can kind of look at it and enjoy it because it has a kind of open vitality. I'm very free to paint them the way I want to paint them with many,

many layers. The paintings, in that sense, are not absolute. There is nothing authoritarian about them.

As one critic said, which I thought was interesting, they are like intimate paintings on a giant scale. They maintain the connection with painting; they don't give that up. At the same time, the language I use is the language of the contemporary world you can find anywhere, on computer screens, things are arranged in rows and lines; it's simple numerical order. If I stand in the subway in New York and I look down, everything is repeated. That's how we put the world together now. And that is how I put my paintings together. In that sense they are in complete accord with the contemporary world so people can enter them quite naturally.

Davis: They're not formula paintings.

Scully: No. No, they are abstract paintings and they are quite lyrical. But they remind you of things that exist in the world. They remind you of the way the world is ordered.

Davis: Would you consider them traditional?

Scully: They are traditional in the sense that they make a connection, certainly, with the history of painting. One can think about other painters when one is looking at my paintings. If you want to you can think about Velazquez and you can think about Rothko, but you can also think about Cimabue when you think about Rothko, that is part of Rothko's greatness.

Davis: A few years ago, in his essay on the Catherine paintings, Carter Ratcliff said you want to be "a painter who proposes amendments to painting's constitution." [Ratcliff, Carter. "Sean Scully: The Constitutive Stripe," *Sean Scully: The Catherine Paintings.* Fort Worth: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 1993, p. 23. Arthur C. Danto and Stephen Henry Madoff also wrote essays for the exhibition catalogue.] What is the state of that constitution now, almost four years later?

Scully: At this moment in time, and one has to remember it is only a moment in time which will pass, and then it will be followed by another moment in time. And without in any way implying what the next moment will be like, I would say the constitution of painting is a little insecure. That is really because it has been told that it is insecure. It is like a rumor.

Davis: Is that particular to the United States or the U.S. and European art communities, which are generally, considered the leaders?

Scully: In Germany and Spain, and France perhaps, and Italy, it is a little bit different from the United States. There is a more balanced view at the moment between painting and sculpture and other forms of visual expression. But then they have a greater achievement in painting to refer to. So, of course, they are working from a very different cultural background, in fact, a stronger cultural background.

At the moment, the question for painting is whether or not ... it is a little bit like the question for painting at the end of the nineteenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century the question was should all painting imitate photography? Should all painters paint like Georges Seurat; and hundreds of them did much to the disapproval of Georges Seurat, who turns out to be a great painter, but not the greatest painter; the painter probably most in tune with the medium of photography, but not the greatest painter. Now that is an interesting lesson that we can learn from, certainly a lesson I learned something from as a painter.

I would say the constitution of painting at the moment is fragile because a lot of painters believe they have to correspond with something that they see as inevitable - the demise of the authentic hand-made surface that is representing the work of art made by a human being directly. I don't necessarily see that as the case ... well, obviously, because I fight for it so emphatically. I see the constitution of painting is being somewhat rejigged in favor of some kind of truce. It is a little like the American Indians having to give up a little more land, then a little more and a little more. I think the painters believe that they have to give up a little more land and then everything will be all right. But as we know from the history of the United States, that is not going to make it all right. Appeasement is a process that becomes a thing in itself; more appeasement requires, in fact, more appeasement, which is then followed by more appeasement, which is, of course, not what I'm doing. I would like to assert even more strongly than I did when I was showing at the time of that essay by Carter - the building aspect of it - that I'm going to try and emphasize more of the painting aspect of it. I think that is what is needed: is for somebody to be able to make painting that is convincing and which sets an example. That cuts out a position, without having to collude with the virtual.

Davis: Is there room in the realm of art for technology? You are fighting the good fight by keeping the human touch in painting, but is there room for technologically based art, whether it is purely about the technology or used to create the image?

Scully: Is there room for technology in art? Yes, I'm sure there is. We had another age of technology in art in the Sixties when we had all the kinetic art. There isn't that much of it around anymore is there? At the time it was red hot, it was almost impossible to say art without using the word kinetic. It is a bit like saying donut without saying Dunkin', the correspondence was that close. But, yeah, sure, I made a reference to Bill Viola whose work I like a lot. There are one or two other video artists I like a lot. If they can find a poetic language for what they are doing using that medium that is fine. One of my favorite mediums in the world is film, so obviously I believe that you can use technology. If I wasn't a painter I would definitely be a filmmaker, but I would not be a video artist. To generalize, which I know is unfair, I think video is like stunted film. A fully rounded expression of what you can do with a camera and sound and people inside the little box is actually film. It's called film; we've had it around for quite some time. There have been some great films made, but can you use all this to make installation art? Yeah, I'm sure you can. I think Joseph Beuys, for example, is a great artist. I love Joseph Beuys' work. That's not technological, but it is uses a lot of Duchampian ideas. But it is not necessary for me to do that. I think it is not interesting to do that if you are a painter.

To invoke Clement Greenburg's words again, what one has to do is realize the full potential of the medium within which one is working. It is not to the advantage of painting to imitate another art form. It's ridiculous. A painting is not plugged into the wall. It cannot compete on those terms. It's a little bit like black people trying to be like white people back in the Fifties. They were on a beating to nothing. They were using the wrong terms. They were all trying to straighten their hair. What is the point of trying to straighten your hair if your hair is not straight in the first place? You are working against yourself when you do that. There is room for everything. I'm not telling anyone else what to do; I'm not boss of the art world. But I believe that in order to make a case for painting, one has to use the natural advantages of painting and not confuse it with something else. You can't get hoodwinked into a position of weakness. You cannot be apologetic. If you are apologetic you are lost before you start. If you are going to make installation art, then you have to do it without being sorry or having to apologize that you are not making a painting. But the

converse also applies. You can do certain things with painting that are unique to painting that you cannot do with anything else. With a painting you can contain within borders a lot of experience, narrative, emotion, poetry, idea, thought, time, references, and so on, all within a frame. You can't do that with installation art. But you can do something else. In other words, everything has its own set of rules and opportunities. Painting has a unique potential to stop time and compact feelings and experience.

You have to realize yourself where your own strengths are, where your own weaknesses are, what you can do and what you can't do. Picasso couldn't be an abstract painter; that wasn't his strength. His strength was that he was a great figurative painter. That is why he could never convert to abstraction. The fact that Picasso recognized that about himself and realized that and was prepared to be old-fashioned at a certain point in his life is a great power.

Davis: It goes along with the line from the blues song we've talked about.

Scully: "Whatever you is, be it." That is it, you have got to be that, and not be something else. You have to work to your own advantages, not disadvantages.

Davis: It also goes back to the idea of resistance and not caving in.

Scully: Greenburg generally is not a person I agreed with. But that doesn't matter, that isn't the point. Greenburg had the personal power to be in the minority and he ended up in the minority, but he still defended his position very eloquently. That is why he is a great critic, even though, in a certain sense, he was defeated in his own lifetime. In another sense, though, he is still greater than the people that defeated him are. It is not a question of being right or wrong, there isn't any right or wrong. That's a good point to end on.

Illustrations:

Sean Scully, *Chelsea Wall #1,* 1999.
Oil on linen, 279.4 x 335.3 cm.

Sean Scully, *Small Blue Window,* 1999.
Oil on linen, 48.3 x 38.1 cm.

Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Blue,* 1999.
Oil on linen, 274.3 x 335.2 cm.