Sequences and Reflections

Best known as a creator of bold, monumental paintings, Sean Scully emphatically claims printmaking as integral to his art. He has made prints since his student days at the Croyden College of Art in London in the 1960s and has created a significant body of work since 1984. Few people, however, were aware of this strong commitment to printmaking before the Albertina Museum organized a retrospective of his prints in 1999.[1]

Scully is one of very few painters whose understanding and appreciation of printmaking stems from personal experience with printing, rather than collaborative printmaking in a professional workshop. While the proliferation of workshops in the United States and Europe since the 1970s has enabled many artists to make prints, few of them have actually inked a plate or stone or block or screen themselves, adjusted the press, prepared the paper, and pulled the proofs. Scully's direct involvement with the craft of printmaking instilled in him an exceptional respect for and sensitivity to its expressive possibilities. He proudly insists: "I am a printer.   I am an artist who's a printer. I am not an artist who is making prints."[2]

At the age of fifteen, he began work as an apprentice typesetter at Weatherby & Sons, a London printing shop that produced horseracing calendars. Each apprentice was assigned to a master printer and had to proofread the text as well as work at the press. Scully internalized the physical experience of working with ink, paper, and metal, while learning to read backward. Although he was printing type rather than images, the feel for the process he learned allowed

him to create his first print, <u>Jan 1968</u> (1968). While the objective of printing type was legibility, Scully sought the expressive qualities of printmaking by using softground etching and aquatint to create tone and texture. Characteristics that anticipated many of his later prints, and indeed many of his later paintings, are already evident at this early stage: subtlety of tone, fluidity of line, tactile surface texture, the blurring of edges, and exploitation of the white paper as a source of light within the image. The rectangular form in <u>Jan 1968</u> suggests the window-like inserts that began to appear in both his paintings and prints in the 1980s.

Scully spent his early career learning to paint and developing the vocabulary that would distinguish his mature style. Between 1968 and 1982, he made only one print, a silkscreen and watercolor of 1972 titled <u>Ceolfrith</u>, which he printed himself. Despite this early screenprint, Scully has not returned to the medium. The flatness and opacity of color that usually characterizes silkscreen prints does not interest him; he prefers a surface that reveals the artist's touch. In <u>Ceolfrith </u>he added watercolor to modulate the background, thus relieving the geometric severity of the precise horizontal and vertical lines.

Ten years later, near the end of a part-time teaching appointment at Princeton University, he created <u>Princeton</u> (1982), a small, stark line etching that announced his return to printmaking. The simple horizontal and vertical lines that organize the space into stripes and rectangles are emphatically hand-drawn. Speaking of his early etchings, Scully reveals his fascination with the process: "I find them quite charming because they are so simple. There is something very elemental about taking a plate, covering it with black material, hard ground, and

then just scratching out a drawing. . . . And when the acid bites into the metal and the ink sits in the metal and then it is transferred to the paper, it stands up on the paper and there is an indentation. And then what you have is the result of something that is quite mysterious as a process."[3] The bold initials and date at the top center of the plate signal a manifesto of sorts, a determination to continue making prints. He acknowledged that size is secondary to expression, that a small work such as this can be as intense and meaningful as a larger one. Printmaking offered him an expressive counterpoint to the monumental paintings such as Backs and Fronts (1981) and Heart of Darkness (1982) that he had recently completed.

In 1983, Scully began to collaborate with master printers. He continued to work directly on the plate, while the printers made proofs and printed the editions. In contrast to many other painters who worked with master printers, however, Scully's experience with printmaking enabled him to maintain greater control over the creative process, even though each printer, each shop, has a distinctive personality. "The thing about the printing for me is that even though it's collaborative, it's not really necessary to tell me that much. . . . It's in me. I can look at it and know how it's going to print. I can feel it."[4]

He met the printer Mohammad Khalil and made his first prints with him when both artists were teaching at Parsons. No one wanted to publish these prints, so Scully published them himself, in small editions. In contrast to the stark directness of Princeton, he began to explore the evocative possibilities of texture, tone, and color. A well-read artist, Scully called upon literary sources in his

earliest collaborations with Khalil. His print The Fall (1983) refers to the existentialist novel by Albert Camus in which the protagonist delivers a despairing monologue about his own guilt and hypocrisy, and by extension a condemnation of all humanity for its failure to bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust. The image makes no reference to the primary incident of the book – the protagonist's failure to heed a drowning woman's cry for help – but conveys the sense of guilt and hopelessness that permeates the narration. The print's strong horizontal lines seem to deny redemption, and the dark blacks and grays suggest an oppressive self-consciousness.

The three Burnt Norton prints (1984) refer to T. S. Eliot's poem of that title, a meditation on the meaning of time, its relationship to eternity, and the Christian meaning of redemption.[5] Scully's prints, also made with Khalil, make no reference to the imagery of the poem, set in a rose garden, but instead suggest the more abstract concepts of time and eternity through a steady progression of horizontal lines of the left-hand rectangle contrasting with the denser, more complex patterns of cross-hatchings and stripes to the right. Although the addition of aquatint in Burnt Norton 2 and 3 appears to obliterate the patterns of the cross-hatched rectangle, close inspection reveals that the lines remain beneath the black ink, ghostly reminiscences of the original design. Similarly, what appears to be a solid black area in the bottom half of The Fall is actually a subtle sequence of vertical bars created by alternating areas of aquatint and diagonal cross-hatchings. These simple, bold compositions, readily perceived

from a distance, further reward the careful viewer who takes the time to look closely at the layers of meaning, suggestive of a complex literary text.

By the early 1990s, when Scully was commissioned by the Limited Editions Club to create prints for a portfolio based on one of his favorite books, Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, he had worked with several other printers. He made large, colorful woodcuts with Garner Tullis and various assistants, delicate Ukiyo-e woodblocks with Keiji Shinohara, and highly refined mixed intaglio prints with Jennifer Melby. For Heart of Darkness, a powerful novel that explores moral conflict, the vast range of human emotions, and eternal truths, Scully chose to work with Khalil. "Muhammad's prints are not very refined. He's kind of a rough slugger as a printer. He etches really hard. Everything is very rough, and that suited the subject."[6] In contrast to his earlier prints based on literary subjects, the images in Heart of Darkness (1992) relate more closely to specific passages in the book. The abstract nature of Scully's imagery, however, conveys emotion and atmosphere rather than narrative or incident. He described the process of making prints inspired by literary works as a "loose collaboration" rather than illustration, achieved by immersing himself in the text and creating the images while in its thrall.

Scully considers his painting Heart of Darkness (1982) to be one of his most important works, a major statement of his artistic concerns and a touchstone for his future development as a painter. He relished the opportunity in the set of prints to return to this book and explore its implications further. He reread the book while he was creating these eight plates, and sought to capture

the sense of primal forms, dark rooms, dark spaces, primitive ritual, violence, and claustrophobia that pervade the narrative. The first print repeats the colors and composition of the painting, with the edges of the stripes even more obviously hand-drawn and irregular, instilling the image with concentrated nervous energy. The final print repeats the same basic composition, but with much darker tones and denser vertical stripes that allow only the slightest glow of yellow to appear in the constricted spaces between them. Within the fourth print with its dramatic blood-red tones and the dense, dark atmosphere of the seventh, a rectangle with vertical bars suggests the window of a prison cell. While the startling, intense yellow in three of the images momentarily relieves the brooding atmosphere, it heightens the energy and sense of impending violence.[7] Despite many similarities in form, color, and expression to the earlier painting, Scully employed the distinctive possibilities of the prints. The format of successive prints captures the narrative sense of a beginning and an end, while the painting encapsulates all the emotion in a single, dramatic statement.

The following year, when Scully made prints for Pomes Penyeach (1993), a book of poems by James Joyce, he wanted to make something more feminine and sensitive. He chose to make these prints with Jennifer Melby, whose printing he knew to be more refined. He made five prints with her in 1991, using sugarlift and spitbite techniques to create subtle tones and textures. Prints such as Durango 1 (1991) and Tetuan (1991) achieve a more gentle luminosity than his earlier etchings. Joyce wrote the individual poems in Pomes Penyeach over several years. They comprise an array of subjects united by a forlorn mood and

longing for youth and love. The prints in their variety of compositions and plate

sizes are a compendium of images brought together like individual poems in a

collection. Acknowledging the Irish heritage he shared with the poet, Scully

included a "tilly," or extra print, as a frontispiece, just as Joyce included a

thirteenth poem where one might have expected twelve.[8]

      At times the artist took his cue not from a literary work but from the nature

of the printer and the workshop itself. When Scully was establishing a studio in

Barcelona in 1996 and wanted to make prints, the Spanish printer Magí Baleta

was recommended to him as the printer who had worked with Antoni Tàpies. He

entered the workshop to find a dark, rough room and a very sad printer whose

marriage had recently fallen apart. To capture the grit of the workshop, the

messiness of rags lying around, ink, and the smell of acid, Scully worked on the

backs of plates as well as the fronts, incorporating their random scratches and

scrapes into his imagery.   He took advantage of the coarser grain of aquatint

that Baleta used to enhance the vitality of his surfaces. The warm ochres and

creams in the <u>Barcelona Diptychs </u>(1996) and several of the <u>Raval</u> (1996) prints

capture the glow of copper in the soft light of the small, dark room. Although

Scully got along well with Baleta, he had to reject many of the proofs that were

not up to his standards. In the end, however, the <u>Barcelona Diptychs</u> and <u>Raval</u>

prints are among his most powerful and evocative, at once physically expressive

and romantically atmospheric.

      For his recent portfolio, <u>Etchings for Federico Garcia Lorca</u> (2003), Scully

wanted to capture the smoky, sensual quality of the poems. He chose to work

with Gregory Burnet, whom he trusted to understand and convey the qualities he desired. He made his first prints with Burnet shortly after he returned from Barcelona to New York in 1996, and has made the majority of his prints with Burnet since then. They hit it off immediately, and Scully acknowledges the intense nature of their collaboration: "The thing that interests me particularly working with Greg is that he's got a kind of nervous energy where he's equal to me, so he keeps up with me. . . . Greg will ride as high as I ride."[9]

Scully trusts Burnet's intuitive understanding of what he wants to express in each print. He feels free to give him general directions for proofing the plates – colors, sequences, arrangements.   When he returns to the workshop days later, he sees not only what he imagined but variations that Burnet has conceived as well. To create his Wall of Light prints of 2002, Scully began working loosely on various plates. He left Burnet with the plates and instructions for different color combinations and color situations, such as a pale, delicate image or something dark. Instructions for the palette were explicit – such as a particular shade of gray or black, or a bright yellow and a yellow ochre in the same print. He trusted Burnet to pull numerous proofs, varying the order in which the colors were printed or shifting where the colors appeared. When Scully then viewed the proofs, he made changes. Sometimes he added another plate or took one away. Sometimes he specified another order in which to print the colors, or asked to lighten or darken a particular color.[10] He appreciates Burnet's physical and emotional commitment to the project as well as his skill and sensitivity as a printer, but Scully always remains in control.

For his part, Burnet admires Scully's knowledge of printmaking techniques, his direct physical involvement in making the images on the plates, as well as his intensity and concentration. To create an effect similar to a watercolor wash, Scully uses his own saliva, which he rubs around the surface with a paper towel, to make a spitbite aquatint.[11] He is sensitive to the distinctive characteristics of the copper plate, and often chooses to use the marred backs of plates as well as their highly polished fronts. Once the plate is completed to his satisfaction, Burnet steel-faces the printing surface to make sure that the pressure of the press does not change its subtleties from the first impression to the last.

The first works Scully made with Burnet were five mixed intaglio prints (1996) to accompany a text by the twentieth-century German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. In contrast to the bold, dynamic prints he had recently made in Barcelona (Barcelona Diptychs and Raval 1-7) with Baleta, these images have a quiet, meditative quality. Miniature in size, they convey a sense of physical intimacy. They are intended to be held in the hand rather than hung on a wall. So different from Scully's large, heavily painted, physically imposing canvases, these small images have a visionary quality and intensity that suggests the conceptual subtleties of a philosopher's mind. Scully relishes the opportunity to stretch himself and challenge expectations: "I would find it very irritating if my prints were just like my paintings."[12]

The relationship between Scully's prints and paintings over the years has been fluid. In the 1980s, when he began to make prints regularly, and through

the mid-1990s, the paintings more strongly influenced his prints. The compositions, colors, and surfaces of his paintings strongly affected the look of his prints. Around 1997, some of the preoccupations and relationships he had been exploring in his Mirror prints and other works on paper began to influence his paintings. Qualities such as transparency and the blurring of edges became more prominent in his paintings, and in many later paintings his more assertive brushstrokes and textures gave way to softer, more sensuous surfaces. While the earlier paintings were conceived independently of the others and stand alone, many of the paintings from the late 1990s on are part of a series. His preoccupation with luminosity in the magnificent Wall of Light paintings begun in 1998 recalls his fascination with light in his prints and watercolors.

Through the introduction of softground etching in some prints made in 1985 with Mohammad Khalil, such as Red Triptych and Desire, Scully created vigorous, autographic marks with the soft, crumbly texture of crayon or oil stick. Unlike the heavy impasto surfaces of his paintings, these marks nonetheless translate the same sensibility into a graphic vocabulary.

The large, bold woodcuts Scully made with Chip Elwell a year later approach the physicality and weighty presence of his paintings. The deep gouges and uneven surfaces of the wood in Standing 1 (1986) and Standing 2 (1986) recall the heavily textured, dynamic brushwork of his paintings, emphasizing the natural grain of wood rather than attempting to conceal it. The irregular perimeters and juxtaposed rectangles suggest multiple blocks and recall

the canvases of different sizes and depths butted together to form his paintings at that time.

Analogous to the multiple layers of paint with which Scully builds up his painted surfaces, he prints six or seven layers of different colored and transparent inks, sometimes wet into wet, to create a rich, textured surface in which the multiple colors assert themselves. He selects the colors and the order in which they are printed, sometimes varying them to create two distinct prints from a single block, as in <u>Standing 1</u> and <u>Standing 2</u> (1982). Scully works from structure toward emotion. Altering color relationships allows him to explore the multiple expressive possibilities of a single composition.

Despite the multiple layers of ink and rough cutting of the woodblock, the surfaces of these prints remain surprisingly delicate and transparent, in large part due to the masterful printing of Chip Elwell, who transferred the inks to paper by hand. Using an ordinary bamboo rice spoon, Elwell rubbed the back of the paper placed on the inked woodblock surface with less pressure but more control than a traditional press allows. The highly receptive surface of the Japanese Okawara paper, ordered specially for Scully's prints, absorbs much of the ink, but also allows some of it to sit on the surface, creating an actual texture in addition to the symbolic texture represented by the cuts in the woodblock. The thin, but very strong translucent paper absorbs so much of the ink that the image on the back can be seen almost as clearly as the image on the front. The exquisite delicacy and multilayered nuances of <u>Conversation</u> (1986) and <u>Stranger</u> (1987) allude to the intricacies of human relationships.

The prints Scully made at Crown Point Press in San Francisco in 1988 have a similar robust tactility achieved by a complex combination of intaglio techniques. Although he was familiar with the basic processes of hard and softground etching before he came to Crown Point, he experimented with a more complex mixture of processes that allowed him to create more varied and lively surface textures than he had attempted before in his intaglio prints. He applied soapground with stiff brushes to create textures that closely approximate the painted surfaces of his canvases. Master printer Brian Shure recalls that Scully knew exactly what he wanted to achieve, and pushed him harder than any other artist with whom he had worked, insisting on very deep etches and great amounts of ink.[13]   Yet the prints, such as Room (1988) and Wall (1988), express a subtle luminosity and softness that belie his vigorous working of the plate, demonstrating a fundamental difference between a printed image and a directly painted one.

When Scully made woodcuts at Garner Tullis's workshop in 1991, he pushed even further to create rough, bold textures and dense, opaque color that approached, but did not imitate, the surfaces of his paintings. Cutting the images in the large blocks was as physically demanding as was painting his large canvases. Tullis's hydraulic press exerted much greater force than a traditional relief printing press. A papermaker as well as a printer, Tullis prepared special, thick, soft paper that could withstand tremendous pressure without tearing, giving several of these prints a greater physical weight and substance than Scully's other prints. Dynamic compositions and bold color juxtapositions in prints such

as Passage (1991) and Planes of Light (1991) proclaim that these works of art, like his large paintings, are intended to be seen from a distance, to be hung on a wall.

Tullis suggested that Scully might also be interested in working with Keiji Shinohara, a master printmaker who could translate some of Scully's watercolors into woodblock prints in the traditional Japanese manner of Ukiyo-e prints.[14] Intrigued by the opportunity, Scully worked closely with Shinohara as he carved the blocks, selected the inks, and proofed them in sequence to replicate as closely as possible the artist's watercolor design. Scully was fascinated with the process and made three prints in this manner. He greatly admired Shinohara's craftsmanship and loved the results, but in the end he missed the direct involvement with the materials that cutting his own block entailed. He felt there was too much distance between him and the final print, and was uneasy with the degree to which the woodcut directly copied a work in another medium.

Pushing even further in the direction of his canvases, his largest print Backs Fronts Windows (1991-93), which he made with Tullis, reprises the theme and ambition of an earlier breakthrough painting, Backs and Fronts (1981). He expanded the spatial complexity of the painting by adding "windows" to the succession of vertical panels in the print, enhancing the baroque drama of the composition with more striking color contrasts and varied rhythms. Reusing one of the blocks from With Red (1993) and Without (1993) as the central panel of Backs Fronts Windows, Scully once again transformed the visual relationships of the parts by changing the colors and placing the block in another context. Like

the painting, this enormous print is a tour de force of size and visual complexity, and marks a turning point in Scully's approach to printmaking, much as Backs and Fronts had signaled a new expansiveness and dynamic energy in his paintings more than a decade earlier.

Shortly after his stint at Garner Tullis's workshop in 1993, when Scully returned to making intaglio prints with Jennifer Melby, the change in his approach becomes apparent. Black Red Blue (1994) and Yellow Red (1994) are still large and colorful enough to be read from a distance, but they are much smaller and more restrained than recent woodcuts. Moreover, the surfaces of the prints make no reference to brushstrokes or the forceful textures of his paintings. Instead, one sees the delicate modulations of the spitbite and sugarlift, the velvety richness of aquatint, and natural scratches in the plate. He returns to a sensibility he had expressed earlier in such works as Durango 1 and 2 (1991) and Tetuan (1991). Color becomes thinner and more transparent, edges become softer and more fluid, and luminosity becomes a much more important concern, first in his prints and then in his paintings. "As my works on paper became more sophisticated, I saw edges, colors, light that I wasn't putting into the more physically forceful paintings."[15]

The relationship between painting and printmaking shifted, imperceptibly at first, then more noticeably. He created Unions, Walls of Light, and Folds simultaneously in paint and in print, with preoccupations from one medium modifying the other. In 1997 Scully made a series of horizontal striped prints he called Mirrors, which led him to paint four large-scale paintings running along one

wall that create a single work[16]. While his early prints were strongly influenced

by his paintings, since the mid-1990s the relationship has become more of a

dialogue.

Many painters have been put off by the indirectness of printmaking, by the

necessity to create an image in reverse, by the time spent waiting for plates to

etch or dry, by the vagaries of inking and printing the image. Sean Scully, on the

other hand, is entirely at ease with the process, thanks to his early, hands-on

experience as a printer. He respects the physical labor and craftsmanship that go

into making a fine print. He considers the accidental effects that might occur

during the inking or printing process a gift, and is fascinated with the differences

that result from varying the order in which colors are printed. He delights in the

moment when the paper is lifted from a plate or block, and the image is revealed.

The reversal of image intrigues him, and he savors its implications.

This phenomenon of reversal suggests a reflected image, an important

concept for Scully, who began to consider its possibilities well before he made

his first Mirror prints.   In the mid-1980s, he made Union (1984) and Union 2

(1985) as reversed images of one another, and several years later he made

Square Light 1 (1988) and Square Light 2 (1988) that mirror each other's

compositions. A major painting (1984) and two prints (1985 and 1991) titled

Narcissus refer to the myth of a beautiful youth who fell in love with his own

reflection in a pool leading to his ultimate downfall. Pondering his current

fascination with mirror images, Scully mused: "The reflection is everything

except the weight of the body. That's why it's so powerful – the weight of

weightlessness. We see ourselves in a mirror outside our bodies."[17] A woodcut

or intaglio print is a reflection of the image on the block or plate. Scully

appreciates the transfer as a moment of revelation.

Yet it is important to note that the two panels that make up each of

Scully's Mirror prints are not mere reflections of one another. On the contrary,

the width of the horizontal stripes varies considerably, and the colors of the two

panels are often very different, just as the reflection in a mirror rarely matches

one's perception of oneself. The rough surface scratches in the left panel of

Large Mirror I (1997) make it seem more earthbound and physical, while the

delicate surface of the right panel suggests the spiritual. The quicker rhythm of

the narrower stripes on the left of Large Mirror II (1997) contrasts with the slower,

more deliberate progression of the right panel. The blue tonality in the left half of

Mirror Yellow (1998) evokes dusk, while the yellow glow of the right half suggests

dawn.   Or perhaps it is the blue of calm and the yellow of madness. Scully's

images do not have specific meanings, but operate in the realm of allusion,

intuition, and evocation -- feeling rather than fact.

These diptychs are not literal mirrors in which the reflection matches the

object reflected. Instead, they are pairs held together as if by magnetic force.

The proximity of the two panels endows each with meaning it would not have on

its own. The idea of coupling is fundamental to Scully's work; he believes that

the numerous diptychs he has created over the years represent an obsession

with relation, the relationship to ourselves in the mirror or ourselves with another.

"I paint relationships. I don't paint abstractions."[18]

The titles of Scully's paintings and prints reveal the centrality of relationships to his thinking about art. His Unions are composed of two checkerboard panels side by side, just as his Mirrors are two horizontal striped vertical panels butted together. The relationship explored in his Enter Six portfolio (1998) is that of a tall, vertical panel with broad, horizontal bands "entering" from the left a larger rectangle with narrower, horizontal stripes. When the tall vertical panels with broad horizontal bands appear individually in Ten Towers (1999), they evoke architectural relationships and play off one another.

More recently Scully has begun to explore Folds, which he describes as "The idea of wings. Folding in. Folding out. . . . It implies growth and expansiveness. . . . So the title Fold could lead to the title Wings. The folding of a book, out . . . gives us wings."[19] The "fold" format is distinguished by a vertical division down the center, with regular squares (Red Fold, 2003) or rectangles (Blue Fold, 2006) stacked on either side. Within this relatively simple format, the artist explores multiple relationships among the rectangles that express changing and distinctive relationships. In Red Fold (2003) the four black squares boldly anchor the composition in place. But the white square in the upper left seems to disappear, and the bleeding around the edges of the black squares make them seem to be superimposed onto areas of red beneath them. The black areas begin to hover just as the white square claims its distinctiveness from the surrounding white paper, and asserts its role in the rectangular composition. In the more recent prints, such as Grey Fold (2006), the central vertical line is no longer straight and fixed as the rectangles expand, contract, soften at the edges,

and move. The two black rectangles at the top and at the bottom create a diagonal tension within the rectilinear format. At first the format of the Folds and that of the Mirrors seem to be similar, but differences in how the two halves of the vertical rectangle relate to each other make each one a distinctive theme. Scully's compositions are deceptively simple. Only with careful attention do the changing relationships become apparent. Like all great art of the past, Scully's art demands time and rewards contemplation.

The importance of relationships in Scully's art can be appreciated further in the many dichotomies that characterize and energize his imagery. The horizontals, verticals, rectangles, and stripes of his compositions are coupled with soft edges, tactile surfaces, and sensuous colors. Structure and order are moderated by feeling and imagination. Clarity gives way to ambiguity, geometry to mystery. Rationality is paired with intuition, physicality with spirituality. Boldness and subtlety coexist.

Contradictions and tensions abound. Scully explains: "I'm not working toward harmony . . . . I always think about whether something has a resolution and an edge, something about it that's a little wild. That gives it its believability and then I find that moving."[20] He considers perfection to be a form of tyranny. Imperfection and inconsistency endow his images with a sense of humanity and fallibility. He wants his abstractions to remain in touch with the world around him. As pristine and carefully printed are his prints, he allows flaws and blemishes on the surface of the plate to become part of the final image. Scratches are visible

in <u>Mirror Yellow</u> (1998), and a blotch on the lower right of the plate in <u>Munich Mirror 5</u> (2003-04) suggests frailty and temporality.

It is revealing to look at Scully's photographs to glimpse details of the world that intrigue him: walls, floors, windows, doors, cracking foundations, uneven boards, modest buildings butted against one another, decorative tiles, stone fences, brick patterns, oozing mortar, mosaic tiles, decomposing stucco, rusty corrugated roofs and siding, peeling paint, and brilliant colors on humble buildings. They reveal the passage of time, the effects of the elements, the evidence of human intervention.

His imagery resonates with echoes from the world around him. One sees reminders of the world in the textures, colors, composition, and luminosity of his prints. The scratches and scrapes from the backs of plates and the mottled surfaces of spitbite etchings conjure up the texture of the timeworn facades captured in his photographs. The rough wood texture of <u>Block</u> (1986), for example, reveals not only the nature of the woodblock itself but also evokes the feeling of the crude boards of fences and doors in his photographs. He compares the inset image in <u>Sotto Voce </u>(1988) to a faded photograph, a memory. Recently while working at the Himmelblau workshop in Tampere, Finland, he was looking out the window at the river below, grabbed a plate, and created <u>Horizon </u>(2003) in an hour. Occasional glimpses of paper between areas of color, as in <u>Tampere Mirror</u> (2003), recall a sliver of sky through a broken fence or an open window. The artist is comfortable with these associations, as long as they do not become too literal.

When Scully was in Paris in 2004, he was invited to make some lithographs with two American printers. He had made lithographs at art school in Croyden, but not since then. He was intrigued by the association of Paris with Toulouse-Lautrec's lithographs, so he agreed to try the process again. But in contrast to the elegant refinement of late nineteenth-century French lithography, Scully chose to emphasize the "argumentative mixing of mediums" represented by the repulsion of oil and water that is the basis of the lithographic process. He did not clean his brushes carefully and water got mixed with turpentine and oily ink, creating a "brutal roughness" in direct opposition to the highly refined aquatints he was making around that time. Upon reflection he mused : "I returned to a kind of brutality. If art becomes too refined, it must break itself to breathe again."[21]

Although Scully is well-read and articulate, a tenacious thinker who can analyze and synthesize ideas on a high level, in his art he seeks to express feelings above all.   He has developed a vocabulary of abstract form and color that allows him to communicate a broad range of emotions and relationships. Best known as a painter, his watercolors, pastels, photographs, sculpture, and prints expand the scope of his expression. He recognizes that each medium offers him a type of expression distinct from the others. He moves easily among them, intuitively understanding the strengths and potential of each.

The Wall of Light series of aquatints that Scully created in 2000-03 is part of a larger group of paintings, watercolors, and pastels on the same theme. Generated by a group of watercolors the artist made in 1983 and 1984 during

travel in Mexico, this series represents Scully's largest and most sustained exploration of a single theme. He painted the first of the watercolors when he was in Zihuatanejo, on Mexico's Pacific coast. He then became fascinated with the play of light on the stone walls of Mayan ruins in the Yucatan, recognizing that the quality of these surfaces had been created over time. By the end of 2004, Scully made eleven trips to Mexico, creating additional watercolors during each of them.

He began making his Wall of Light paintings in 1998, referring to ideas he had explored in the watercolors as well as earlier paintings, such as Durango (1990). His canvases have been described as "provocative and confrontational, sensual and big-hearted; they are painted with large brushes and melancholic colors, with references to earlier painters and periods in art. . . ."[22] Like his oil paintings, the Wall of Light pastels are very dense and physical, simultaneously opaque and glowing. While the large size of the paintings engulfs the viewer in the mood of the piece, the smaller size of the pastels brings the experience to a more human scale, emphasizing the dry, tactile surface of the composition.

By contrast, his watercolors are more poetic and luminous, and take advantage of the transparency of watercolor allowing the whiteness of the paper to express a sense of light emanating from within. Like the watercolors, the Wall of Light prints emphasize luminosity, transparency, and fragility. Even more than the watercolors, however, the prints suggest transience and spirituality. The rectangular forms seem to float and overlap, softening edges and creating delicate lines of indeterminate shape between them. Created as aquatints with

sugarlift and spitbite, all the Wall of Light prints call attention to the irregular edges of hand-drawn forms, to the subtle touch of the artist's hand, humanizing the otherwise abstract shapes.

"What I do with my prints is I try to make a world that's an accompaniment to the more aggressive paintings – that has another quality, another kind of light. The light of paper."[23] The transparency of inks, the new forms they create when edges overlap, the variations that result from changing the order in which the colors are printed all intrigue the artist. The covering of a plate with black ground, drawing into it, allowing the acid to eat away at the metal, cutting with and against the grain of wood, and pressing the paper into metal or wood evoke for him the magic of alchemy. Scully marvels at the "mystery of transference" that is unique to printmaking.

Joann Moser, Senior Curator

Smithsonian American Art Museum

[1] Organized by the Graphische Sammlung Albertina in Vienna, the exhibition traveled to the Musée du Dessin et de L'Estampe Originale, Gravelines, and the Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal in 1999.

[2] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003.

[3] "Interview with Julia Kluser," in Sean Scully: Prints – Catalogue Raisonné 1968-1999 (Vienna: Graphische Sammlung Albertina, 1999) 143.

[4] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003.

[5] Burnt Norton is a country house in the Cotswold hills of Gloucestershire that Eliot visited during the summer of 1934 when he was writing Four Quartets, of which Burnt Norton is the first poem.

[6] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003.

[7] Scully thinks of yellow as the color of madness, jealousy, and sex. "The Beauty of the Real," Hans-Michael Herzog interview with Sean Scully, Sean Scully: The Catherine Paintings (Kunsthalle Bielefeld, 1995) 79.

[8] "Tilly" derives from the Irish *tuilleadh*, an added measure. It was the custom of Dublin milkmen and milkwomen to pour an extra amount of milk into the purchaser's receptacle from the small, usually pint-sized, tilly can that accompanied a larger can or churn.
The frontispiece appears as a halftone reproduction on the front of the book portfolio and as the first image in the book. The actual print appears only in the set of exhibition prints. The bright green color of the portfolio box and the box for the book also refers to their shared Irish heritage.

[9] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003.

[10] Sixteen trial proofs for the three Wall of Light prints from 2002 are in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Several proofs have instructions in the margins about changes the artist would like to make.

[11] Author's interview with Greg Burnet, New York, December 12, 2003. According to Burnet, most artists prefer to use the somewhat less direct technique of rubbing soap or gum arabic on the surface to achieve a similar effect.

[12] Interview with Sean Scully by Constance Lewallen at Crown Point Press, San Francisco, California, 1988, View 5, 4 (Fall 1988): 18.

[13] Author's telephone conversation with Brian Shure, March 23, 2004.

[14] In traditional Japanese printmaking, the artist creates the design, a professional carver makes the woodblocks, one for each color, and a professional printer inks and prints the sequence of woodblocks by hand with a baren, a disc-shaped tool of braided bamboo that is rubbed across the back of the paper to transfer ink from the woodblock below. While working with Scully, Shinohara both carved the blocks and printed the images.

[15] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003. His fascination with mirror images is apparent in his choice of a photograph for the cover of a recent catalogue, Sean Scully (Barcelona, Galeria Carles Taché, 2003) that shows the artist's reflection in a simple, shabby mirror hung by a single nail on a ceramic tile wall.

[16] Both <u>Four Large Mirrors</u> (2000) and <u>Four Dark Mirrors</u> (2002) were inspired by the <u>Mirror</u> prints.

[17] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003.

[18] "Kevin Power: Questions for Sean Scully," in <u>Sean Scully: Wall of Light, Figures</u> (London: Timothy Taylor Gallery, 2003), 11. The interview was conducted in Barcelona in October 2001.

[19] Sean Scully, in letter to the author, January 12, 2004.

[20] R. Eric Davis, "Sean Scully's Preoccupations: An Interview," <u>On Paper</u> 2, no. 6 (July/August 1998): 29.

[21] Author's interview with Sean Scully, Washington, D.C. , October 12, 2006.
[22] Anne L. Strauss, "Complements and Antidotes: Works on Paper," in <u>Sean Scully: Wall of Light</u>. (Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 2005) 111.
[23] Author's interview with Sean Scully, New York, December 11, 2003.