

Sean Scully: Paintings and Watercolors

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When Sean Scully was a young boy living in London in the 1950s, he loved fireworks and saved his pocket money each year to buy as many as he could—bottle rockets and Roman candles, sparklers and Catherine Wheels—stashing his horde in a huge cardboard box. One November, on bonfire night, a stray spark triggered a chain reaction among the tangle of wicks and gunpowder he had crammed together. Suddenly the boy's box was juddering with rapid bursts of sulphur, phosphorus, and fire—"one went off, which set off another ... and another ... exploding like crazy"—staggering around the garden "like a living being", annihilating itself spectacularly from inside; the whole thing gone in seconds. What seemed like a great loss, a tragedy at the time through the eyes of a child, is telling in hindsight. Sixty years on, the incident serves as a metaphor for the intensity and achievement of Scully's art—of angular shapes ignited unexpectedly from below the surface of his work, of power packed so tightly that any second now it could go.

Since his first solo exhibition in 1973, Scully has built a reputation on repetition—on canvases of congested stripes and abutting blocks of layered colour. But beneath these shouldered planks of filthy ochres, slate clays, and scabbing reds, stirs an unexpected warmth of vision which align Scully's work more to the humid golds of Byzantine icons than to Mark Rothko's vaporous saturations, more to the muscular light of W J M Turner than to the frenetic flinging of Jackson Pollock.

The works summoned for the Chazen Museum's exhibition *Sean Scully: Paintings and Watercolors* turn back the artist's clock nearly thirty years, for a selection of five large oil compositions and three dozen watercolours, undertaken between 1982 and the present. But Scully's career-long preoccupation with adjoining lines can be traced back even further, to the early 1970s, when after a stint studying at Harvard University, the Irish-born painter began complicating the cold mathematics of Piet Mondrian and Op Artists such as Bridget Riley by twisting and stacking their inert grids to create illusions of infinite depth. By then in his late twenties, Scully had installed himself in a shabby artist's garret beside the rumble of

London Bridge station, while the tightening mesh of his canvases served symbolically to stem the seepage that a leak in the ceilings above his apartment had opened in his rotting floor. Art had become salvation—a safety net for the soul.

By featuring work from the early 1980s through to paintings finished as recently as spring of this year, Chazen has chosen to highlight works from Scully's *oeuvre* that no longer wrestle overtly with such earlier influences, and to celebrate instead what has followed—three decades of the most authentic, original, and influential of contemporary imaginations. The breakthrough, which came in 1981, after a trip to Morocco, is famously embodied in two colossal oils from the era—*Backs and Fronts* and *Araby*—whose disjointed fields of vibrating stripes packed perpendicularly capture not only the bustle of crowded bazaars, but the way one's own body buzzes amid such intensity. *Araby* takes its name from a short story in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and there is a sense in which the novelist's description of adolescent bodies, which played until they “glowed”, is subsumed in the rippling of Scully's strips.

The blurring of boundaries between line and body, where the former swells to become the latter, is no less apparent in the watercolor *Study for Adoration*, the earliest work in the Chazen exhibition, which likewise resuscitates, in delicate diaphanous wash, a disused Expressionism the artist had begun rehabilitating in *Araby* and *Backs and Fronts*— amplifying in Scully's painting the first hints of a distinctive, abstract visual grammar.

A significant step towards that vocabulary's refinement can be found in a massive oil painting not in the exhibition, *The Bather* (1983)—a reinvention of Matisse's *Bathers by the River* (1913)—and more intimately in two smaller watercolors executed in the same year which are on display: *Mexico Chinapa* and *Mexico 12.23.83*. In Matisse's mural-sized oil, four statuesque nudes, chiselled with sharp Cubist edges, stretch like marble columns, canvas-height, against an insinuation of river bank. Also undertaken after a visit to Morocco, Matisse's *Bathers* reveal a new attitude to the relationship between a figure's size and the picture space it occupies—an attitude which Scully pushes to an absurd extreme in his homage. In Scully's work, a pun on his own stark “strip” now overwhelms the massive linen in wide vertical navys and ficus greens—trunk-like lines which replace any semblance of real body with pure feeling. To amplify a sense of human weight and depth, Scully has

constructed boxy protrusions from the canvas's surface which invest the work with an air of carpentry and craftsmanship, of things concealed in built cupboards.

That same sense of impending compositional swell, as though some force from below the paint were at any moment about to burst through, can be felt in *Mexico Chinapa* and *Mexico 12.23.83*, whose baked hues and high-desert reds were inspired by formative trips south of the U.S. border. The nudged right edge of the latter work, awkwardly elbowing the margin, and the bulging central furrow of the former, rescue these pieces from any stasis into which the traditional stripe might be inclined to settle. Where Op Art frequently relies on ophthalmological tricks of the line, Scully's stripe has begun to plumb something deeper in the mind's eye, something more emotional, mystical—a line that goes beyond line. Though he is best-known for his industrial-sized oils which sprawl like blueprints of lost cathedrals across museum walls throughout the world, the artist's yearning after a transcendence of bodily line is suited to the ghostly translucence of the more intimate watercolors which he will continue to create alongside the larger canvases throughout his career.

A sense of embedded architecture and hidden compartments, of paintings inviting access to spaces which they simultaneously obstruct, becomes crucial in the work produced after Scully settled in New York (and became an American citizen) in the mid 1980s. Many of the most affecting pieces from this phase of his career involve removable insertions—canvases within canvases—leaving the observer with the feeling of standing before a sealed door or window, from which only echoes of paint, whispering around the edges, suggest the drama unfolding inside. In the watercolour *2.24.88 #1* (1988) small squares of kitty-corner red-and-white stripes, inserted into a pair of facing gold-and-green layered portraits, communicate across the paper's white divide. The effect is strangely reflective, mirroring. Pulsing back and forth, the inserts assume a synchronized frequency in the foreign substance into they have been submerged—like light filtering through a flagstone pond, as sinking coins glitter in the water around them.

By the mid-1990s, Scully was dividing his time between New York and the workshop he had established in Barcelona, as Catalunan light begins to seep deep into his imagination and painting. To appreciate the evanescence, one needs merely to compare the earthy quadrate

puzzle of 8.29.89, undertaken before the move—its slate grays and brooding corrugated blues squatting bleakly on the wall—with the warmth of Scully’s sun-soaked sandstone stripes in the years following the shift. It is tempting to attempt to resituate Scully in the context of twentieth-century Catalan art—to project a whimsicality on to the continued repetition of stripes that might make the work sit more comfortably alongside the exuberance of Joan Miró balletic amoebae or Antonio Gaudí’s melting terraces.

But the spare foundations of Scully’s art are in truth closer to the simplicity of medieval Catalan symbolism than they are to twentieth-century surrealism. In one of the artist’s most powerful full-scale works, the large oil painting *Uriel* (1997), nine horizontal stripes of the Senyera—the gold-and-red bands of the coat of arms of the crown of Aragon, on which the Catalan flag is based—have been transformed into an insert of honeyed strips surrounded by wide blocks of black and white. That same sense of jarring tonal intervention, of territories in relentless tension, is replicated movingly in a smaller watercolor from the same year selected for display in the present exhibition, 3.27.97. With its raked insistence on uncompromising horizontality, unusual in Scully’s work, 3.27.97 reiterates line after watery line in the troubled dirt—borders upon borders erasing and re-inscribing borders—offering itself as one of the more unsettling examples in the show of the struggle for harmony, of the artist trying to live up to his assertion that “art is the opposite of war”. Once providing the coordinates of personal salvation, the latitudes and longitudes of Scully’s work re-emerge as soulful maps of strange and undiscovered countries.

The earliest of the oil works on display is a quartet of large canvases collectively entitled *Four Dark Mirrors* (2002). Each constituent panel is split lengthwise to create a pair of parallel runners or facing vertical fields of clashing horizontal stripes. As a significant subgenre of Scully’s work, *mirrors* are first discernible as far back as 1983, and while one’s instinct is to read into the collision of different widths and colours a playful philosophical statement on the very enterprise of creative imitation of the physical world, a more intriguing alternative niggles from the atlas of the painter’s biography. The coloration of *Four Dark Mirrors* is most conspicuously in accord with the watercolour discussed above, *Mexico* 12.23.83, undertaken the same year as Scully’s first so-called *mirror*. All three works excavate dense obsidian blacks and warm desert golds which glint mysteriously beside drenched rectangular rags of

coagulating red. The scheme is strikingly similar to depictions of an extraordinary incarnation of “mirror” that Scully may well have encountered in his excursions to Mexico—the central deity in the ancient Aztec religion, Tezcatlipoca—whose name is commonly translated as “Smoking Mirror”. In honour of Tezcatlipoca (who was typically depicted in folk art with gold and black stripes across his face), each year an Aztec man was chosen to marry four brides before ascending the steep Templo Mayor, where he was sacrificed by priests and his body was eaten. Seen in this brutally mystical context, the four stark marriages of Scully’s strata are less helpfully compared to reflective cosmetic surfaces, and begin to conjure instead the endlessly eroding steps to Smoking Mirror’s legendary sacrificial temple in Tenochtitlan, as the painter’s work aspires to something beyond the inert mimesis of conventional representationalism to a primitive alchemy capable of transforming the perishable substances of this world into the eternal.

The stakes are just as high in the only other four-panel composition on display in the exhibition, *4 Towers* (2009). The work’s title feels at once mythic and architectural, as if alluding to the impenetrable perpendicularity of the medieval Bunratty Castle, whose four broad stone towers still stand formidably in the artist’s native Ireland, or to the two pairs of thinning spires that rise above the Nativity façade of Gaudi’s fragmented Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona—the only four towers of a projected twelve to be completed before the death of the Catalan architect. Scully’s wide totems, each stacking four geometrically precise blocks of rich uninterrupted color (recalling the commercial color chart phases of Ellsworth Kelly or Gerhard Richter), perfect a process—oil on aluminium—that the artist first experimented with in the mid 1990s with a series of ‘floating’ works, which he affixed to the wall at jutting right angles along each panel’s side. Unlike canvas, aluminium resists the easy respiration of color, the breathing between layers of paint—its rigidity serving only to buttress the sense of sturdy aesthetic carpentry. The metallic opacity of the style conducts an entirely different energy through these works, converting them, materially, into panes which reflect back far more than they absorb, like stained glass windows in an abandoned cathedral when a cloud-scarfed moon has turned the sky outside to stone.

Scully returns to the style in the moving, multi-panel *Liliane* (2010), a series of seven pieces dedicated to his wife, the Swiss-born artist Liliane Tomasko. Tomasko is a painter whose

work is frequently devoted to capturing the complex textures, intimate and mysterious, of folded textiles—stacked rugs and the crumpled patterns of carpets—and one senses at times a poignant dialogue between her work and his. It is as though, by choosing the less yielding under-medium of aluminium, rather than canvas or linen, for a series dedicated to an artist fascinated by fabric, Scully has lovingly yielded to her. Where the artist's earlier *mirrors* split themselves lengthwise along a seam that runs from top to bottom, each of the works comprising the *Liliane* sequence is cut in half horizontally through the middle—the top halves dominated by a field of black, the bottom by fields of burnished white. Embedded into each half of each panel are parallelograms of colored stripes or abutting blocks, amplifying the endlessly reversible reflexivity of the composition, creating what feel like curious playing cards from another world. Seen sequentially, the constituent works of *Liliane* seem like varying moods of conjoined souls, each panel pregnant with the next.

For the past decade, Scully been working on a series of expansive works collectively entitled *Wall of Light*. Though the signature stripe survives in these later pieces, the surface consciousness of paint seems more willing to admit of underlying layers of colour. The result is works of dense translucence, like blocks of amber elbowing bricks of peat. An allied genre is the *Cut Ground* series, going since 2006, represented here by the two most recent works in the exhibition—*Manhattan Cut Ground* and *Cut Ground Blue Pink Red*—both from earlier this year. These works continue to move shapes horizontally across their cramped surface, but their power, as with *Wall of Light* generally, builds geologically from below, from the compressed strata of texture and colour. In a sense, the artist has returned to the illusion of depth that fascinated his earliest pieces. But the effect, now, is achieved not through optical tricks but rather an appeal to something emotionally grounded; to a more sophisticated absorption of artistic indebtedness.

The sense of voices buried beneath the complicated turf of Scully's work, send one riffling through the pages of his native tradition for cultural companions. Indeed his own rich rubric of "cut ground" feels uncannily compatible with the title of Seamus Heaney's selected writings, *Opened Ground*, as fragments from the poet's unsettling bog poem "Grauballe Man" squeeze suggestively through the grout of Scully's puzzled earth: "under a glisten of mud ... tanned and toughened. / The cured wound / opens inwards to a dark / elderberry place ...

his opaque repose ... perfected in memory". Here the poet and the painter find themselves as unexpected Resurrection Men, heeling in the grubby ground of their extraordinary work in order to clear a sacred place in which the living and the dead can commune.

While the peat bogs of Jutland, Denmark, where the crumpled remains of the Grauballe Man were discovered in 1952—a victim of Iron Age sacrifice some twenty-three centuries earlier—may seem a sodden terrain at furthest possible remove from the contemporary urban landscape summoned by a title such as *Manhattan Cut Ground*, to resist such connections is to risk missing a significant dimension of both Scully's and Heaney's achievement. For both, artistic enunciation is fundamentally palimpsestic, archaeological, involving at once an excavation of material and immaterial strata and an endless covering over of the raw opened ground. Heaney paints with the tragic syllables of a nation's excruciating history, echoing across centuries to a pre-Christian era, while for Scully the poetry disinters itself slowly from beneath a jigsaw of archetypal slabs the size of gravestones, the last vestiges of whose outmoded epitaphs—superstitious, sectarian—have long-since been erased. The "Manhattan" of Scully's title no more restricts the real resonance of these troubled and troubling plots ("dark", "elderberry", and "opaque") to a borough of New York City than Heaney's own titles "Tollund Man" or "Grauballe Man" delimit the meaning of his poems to the drudge and fossick of Danish wetlands.

But in the ever unfolding narrative of art history, where does Sean Scully fit? Critics have seized on the all-over aspect of his work in a bid to declare him heir to Jackson Pollock or Helen Frankenthaler, but in the contemplative solidity of pieces such as *Cut Ground Blue Pink Red* we see instead an artist who harks back to an older tradition of painters who found substance in light and ghostliness in the earth. The planks of pink in this singularly spiritual work could have been prised loose from the triptychs of Fra Angelico, while the shingles of unreal blue feel as if they have been scraped fresh from the frescoes of Giotto. In the centre of the work, a block of earth-tone tan shoulders almost self-consciously among these rich adorational hues, unmatched elsewhere in the work, as though a small contemplative Rembrandt interior—empty, candlelit—had been mysteriously hung in a gallery reserved for Renaissance annunciations and nativities. For me, this is where the soul of the artist resides, opening a raw and undoctrinal altar at the heart of an endlessly accumulating history. As

Sean Scully moves forward he also moves back, and the Chazen Museum's exhibition allows us an exceptional opportunity to appreciate the power the painter still packs into his boxes.