

THE BATHER (1983)
by SEAN SCULLY

The Bather (1983)
Oil on canvas
243.8 x 304.8 cms.

Born in Dublin in 1945, Sean Scully is one of the most respected and well known artists of his generation. Educated in the UK and the USA, he had his first exhibition in London in 1973. His work is represented in most major international museums and has been the subject of an extraordinary number of retrospectives around the world, including Dublin, London, New York, Chicago, Washington, Paris, Brussels, Madrid, Barcelona, Lisbon, Munich, Frankfurt, Berlin, Dusseldorf, Vienna, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro and Canberra, among other cities. He occupies a unique place in the contemporary art scene, and is widely credited with having expanded the possibilities of abstract painting after Minimalism.

Scully's work, in fact, has its root in Minimalism, especially in its inquiry into formal purity. By the end of the 1970's, however, even if then he was still making black monochrome paintings, it was already clear that Scully was interested in exploring emotional, psychological and even transcendental issues. By 1981, he started building works by joining different panels, involving references to the human figure and to ideas dealing with relationships. The works Sean Scully created during the central years of the 1980s were the basis of his international recognition as a major artist. In those years he

developed what can be described his first mature style. These paintings were the subject of a critically acclaimed retrospective organized by the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, which travelled to Munich and Madrid.

Among the paintings included in this seminal exhibition – and most of them belong now to Museums - none has generated more literature than *The Bather* (1983), which is a work closely related to a similar later painting, *Molloy* (1984), now in the collection of the Metropolitan. *The Bather* is a clear homage to the great French painter Henri Matisse, and in particular to one of his most celebrated works *Bathers by a River*. This work by Matisse shows four naked human figures depicted with certain primitivism, in a composition which suggests several parallel vertical lines. These figures appear over a background of foliage in the left side and of monochrome vertical fields in the rest of the work. It is rather a sombre painting, impressive and stark.

Scully's work retains the structure of vertical stripes and the idea of figure on a ground, but the feel of his painting is joyful and hedonistic, which no doubt is a feeling we normally associate with Matisse. The colours of Scully's work are extremely reminiscent of nature. The blue and green refer to water and vegetation, and the orange and pink of the slightly off-centred vertical band refers to a human presence. One can guess this is the bather of the title.

Scully himself has said that this painting “has a kind of giddy craziness about it, an ecstatic quality. It's physical and highly structured, but not with the structure of reason. It

is the structure of feeling. The band with the orange and pink projects forward and is somehow cut off from its environment, very separated. So this is not a figure *in* a ground, it's a figure *on* a ground or *away* from a ground. A figure that is coming away from its environment and so assertive, so confident of itself that it –almost – cuts itself from its environment”.

Scully has also said that this work “has a very strong attempt to reintroduce not the figure, but the sense of the figure, it doesn't have a face or arms or legs but it has a sense of being figural”. The vertical band in oranges and pink has the width of the artist hips. The painting has a landscape format and the green vertical lines could also be seen as trees. Scully creates his characteristically rich colours by superimposing several coats of different other colours. His colours then seem to move and have broken edges. He has described them as having a complicated surface and light within them. “So the painting” – talking again about *The Bather* – “has a tension and brutality, and this corresponds with a rather tender title, and nostalgia for the figure”.

The Bather has been discussed in several articles by different critics and art historians including Brooks Adams, Judith Higgings, Lynn Cooke, David Carrier and Alistair Hicks. They have all emphasized the richness of its colours, the Matissian reference and the figurative echo. The work belonged to Charles Saatchi before it was acquired by the present owner.

To conclude, *The Bather* is one of the finest examples of the work by Sean Scully and from his most sought-after period, the one which gave him his first recognition. It is also possibly his best known work and widely considered one of his definitive masterpieces. It will complement in a very substantial way the already existing collection of his work in the Irish Museum of Modern Art