

## *Change and Horizontals*

By Joanna Kleinberg and Brett Littman

*People tend to think of abstraction as abstract. But nothing is abstract: it's a self-portrait. A portrait of one's condition.*

--Sean Scully, Zurich, March 2006<sup>1</sup>

Sean Scully re-imagines the history of abstraction as an art rooted in experience, one that seeks to purify how we encounter the world—"something felt and something seen," as he has said.<sup>2</sup> To this end, his work stages an intense dialogue between color and form, but color that is always rooted in a particular place, and form that manifests the self.

In addition to painting, Scully has produced a number of works on paper that both paraphrase and diversify the ideas in his canvases. After a fateful trip to Morocco in 1969 he became enthralled with the sensual and tactile appeal of that city's striped textiles, Islamic architecture, and the way that the Mediterranean light reflected off the buildings' facades. He began exploring the possibilities and limits of grid structures and surface textures through the use of household masking tape, acrylic paint, and ink on paper. Combining the rigorous structural control of the grid with the expressiveness of color, Scully's self-described "paintings on paper" are inspired by the profiles, hues, and vistas that he happens upon.

Scully's drawings clarify his relationship to the high Modernists and how he has been influenced by the self-sufficiency of their formalism. He credits Piet Mondrian with "trying to make work that [was] spiritual and profound through the use of the horizontal and the vertical,"<sup>3</sup> and he traces this line of thinking back to the observed world, through details of landscapes, street plans, subway maps, and architectural structures. Mondrian's penultimate work, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), takes an uncharacteristic stab at illustrating piano boogie by replacing the black grid that had long governed his canvases with predominantly yellow lines that intersect at points marked by squares of blue and red. These atomized bands of stuttering color create paths across the canvas that suggest the city's grid, the movement of traffic, blinking lights, and jazz's

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<sup>1</sup> Florence Ingleby, ed., *Sean Scully: Resistance and Persistence: Selected Writings* (London & New York: Merrell, 2006), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 18.

syncopated beat. At the same time, the image is carefully calibrated, its colors interspersed with gray and white blocks in an extraordinary balancing act. It is a composition of likeness, one that uses varied and similar forms in equivalent opposition to create a single, active texture. Mondrian's use of non-modular repetition in these late works marks a substantial victory over the idealism of geometry and a turning outwards toward the world itself.

Another striking precedent to Scully's approach can be found in Ellsworth Kelly's multi-paneled painting, *Window, Museum of Modern Art Paris* (1949), which was modeled on the large exterior windows of that museum. Kelly's desire to pursue elementary forms drawn from the careful observation of his surroundings became ever more present after this encounter:

"Everywhere I looked, everything I saw became something to be made, and it had to be made exactly as it was, with nothing added. [...]I could take from everything; it all belonged to me: a glass roof of a factory with its broken and patched panes, lines of a roadmap, the shape of a scarf on a woman's head, a fragment of Le Corbusier's *Swiss Pavilion*...paper fragments in the street."<sup>4</sup> While High Modernism withdrew from mimetic representation, its later variants, such as Mondrian's New York works, and Kelly's abstractions, abound with resemblances.

Scully shares Kelly's sensibility and similarly defines the parameters of his own visual world through a radical reduction of existing structures and sites. Take, for instance, *Change #24*, one of the artist's earliest drawings of a densely pigmented and tightly-bound lattice that evokes the train tracks of industrial England. Recognizing that our perceptual experience is achieved through a practical familiarity with the world, Scully conceives of an abstraction that juxtaposes the purity of geometry with the associations implicated in one's memory and visual perception.

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Irish-born and London-raised, Scully grew up in what he describes as the "gray, hard, spiritually empty"<sup>5</sup> city of Newcastle, a ship-building town bisected by the River Tyne and crossed by nine bridges of overlapping steel girders, structures that would define his artistic idiom. After receiving a B.A. in Fine Arts from Newcastle University in 1972, Scully was awarded a fellowship to Harvard University where he worked through a period of Minimalist-inspired abstraction, limiting himself to the vertical and horizontal line (diagonals feature only occasionally as a contrasting element). There, binding canvases and papers with masking tape, Scully focused on creating geometrically precise forms with reductive color palettes. The process of rubbing and fixing the tape was different from other picture-making techniques: color was applied by pushing it directly onto the surface with a spoon or with the fingers. For Scully, the procedure, in which discernible fluctuations in the hand, color order, and ruled gestures exhibit a real sensitivity to material, involved a greater degree of tactility than painting ever had. With a

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948-1954* (New York: Prestel & Washington, DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1992) 14.

<sup>5</sup> David Carrier, *Sean Scully* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 41.

renewed belief that the “surface [should] constantly affirm and insist on the human presence,”<sup>6</sup> he developed an atavistic and highly-personalized approach to mark making.

Though he eventually returned to London, Scully continued to hone this ascetic vocabulary in the series of drawings and paintings titled *Change* (1975). In well over fifty works completed in a single month and executed in a small, cramped kitchen, he experimented with brooding blacks, greens, blues, and other earthy acrylics applied to the ubiquitous, hard-edged tape grid. In one small-format drawing, *Change #8*, firmly-laid tape outlines, ruled gestures, and dark tonalities are eerily redolent of the city’s smoldering gray haze and built-up horizons. Similarly, in *Change #5* and *Change #7*, somber verticals and cross-hatched tiles suggest a three dimensional infrastructure. Although in the arrangement of interlocking bars there is a certain sameness to the drawn abstractions, the layered matrices of lines and exaggerated right angles gradually reveal infinitesimal shifts in format, palette, and patterning. Like his artistic predecessors, Scully recognized that using the same motif again and again opened up emotional depth and interpretative range. This short yet productive period illustrates the artist’s confident evolution as he pushed his gestural architectonics in new directions.

While in London, the work underwent a stylistic rupture with what Scully has identified as a “transitional” drawing, *Untitled* (1975), an image of loosely intersecting bands of burnt sienna and rust-colored tape arranged in four even quadrants. The visual effect becomes fully manifest in the *Horizontals* series, which was completed later that year upon Scully’s arrival in New York City, where he lived in the painter Robert Natkin’s apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Though similar in scale and orientation to the *Change* drawings, these works exhibit lighter, luminous tones with more intricately layered strokes of ink, graphite, and acrylic. Indurate forms give way to idiosyncratic delineations in both the drawings and paintings alike, including *Grey Red Grey* (1975), which is composed of delicate red lines of tape interlaced on a semi-unprimed canvas. In *Horizontals #6* and *Horizontals #8*, alternating, close-laid horizontal bands expand to reflect the city’s street grids, and the nuanced paper surfaces suggest architectural constructions and interplays of filtered light cast in between towering skyscrapers and surrounding bodies of water.

Manifestations of place are fundamental to these drawings, just as location plays a key role in the artist’s life and oeuvre. Scully’s move to New York City marks a breakthrough to a period when he became more keenly engaged with the tones and textures of the metropolis that surrounded him:

When I left London for New York, I also broke the grid...my grid...became uncrossed. It seems psychologically loaded. I left Europe and the order of Europe, and I went to New York where there were no stabilizing verticals in my work. They simply disappeared. I

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<sup>6</sup> Ingleby, 28

took out the vertical...what I was left with was the horizon. And so I could begin my journey along it.<sup>7</sup>

Though tension remains in the works' linear iterations, the austerity of the *Change* drawings mellows to become more expressive. Neutrals (fluctuating between transparency, translucency and opacity), in works such as *Horizontals #1* and *Horizontals #3*, replace the dark monochromes and clean-lined stripes of London. The softer edges are more easily susceptible to the imperfect movement of the artist's hand, a necessary extension of his state of mind and change in habitat. For Scully, the experiences of the landscape and travel have fueled a thinking-out-loud creativity that is recorded in his notebook pages from 1974-75. Each sketch in these more than fifty pages are suggestive of Scully's working method: he gets an idea, jots it down on any available surface, from newspapers to paper doilies to notepads, and then sees if it works before applying it to a larger scale. These pages reveal subtle, incremental changes, some of which directly correspond to elements in the works on paper.

Shown together for the first time in over thirty years, the exhibition of Scully's *Change* and *Horizontals* drawings offers The Drawing Center's audience a rare opportunity to reevaluate the artist's exceptionally singular aesthetic. Part drawing and part painting, these works ply a narrow course between the two mediums. They combine an intimate scale and handmade quality with an all-over surface and intensity of color that reflect more painterly concerns. These images appear unbound by stylistic restraint and hint at the fecund years of geometric abstraction that follow. His painting's development parallels that of the early drawings: it achieves a radical reduction of content and a refined repetition of geometries. By the 1980s, the familiar post-and-lintel arrangement overwhelms with subjectivity—lines appear more rough-edged and free-wheeling, and the juxtaposition of colors are much bolder and earthy, like freshly turned soil or rain-soaked clay.

In this display of sixteen works, Scully's core concern for line and color in relation to place, conveyed through and by his consistent use of acrylic, ink, graphite, and masking tape, confirm his status as one of the most discerning and inventive of abstraction's contemporary practitioners.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 78