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Sean Scully's hymn to high art in Spain

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An ancient, mountaintop church near Barcelona has been transformed by the painter into a place of pilgrimage for devotees of art as well as religion



Santa Cecilia

Close to the summit of Montserrat, the serrated mountain that rises 1,200m an hour's drive north-west of Barcelona, on a northern slope overlooking the majestic Marganell valley, stands a handsome Romanesque basilica of honey-coloured sandstone, dedicated to Santa Cecilia. It's been there more than 1,000 years (it was consecrated in AD957), won fame in Catalonia as a stronghold against the Napoleonic invasion in 1812, and again against the nationalists in the Spanish civil war, after which it became home to two communities of Benedictine nuns. Yet though walkers in the 3,600ha *parc natural*, as this area of brutal beauty is designated, might happen upon it, it did not welcome visitors. Rather they were directed to the huge 17th-century Benedictine abbey, 3km down the mountain, the site — perhaps unexpectedly — of a fine art museum containing works by Caravaggio, El Greco, Tiepolo, Chagall, Braque, Le Corbusier, Rouault, Miró, Dalí, Picasso, Tàpies and latterly the great Irish-born

artist [Sean Scully](#), who has had a studio in Barcelona since 1994 and whose name, in the words of the late philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto, “belongs [on] the shortest of the short list of major painters of our time”.

“One day,” says Scully, who knew the mountain well because he used to hike along its many footpaths, “I was invited in to see the library and I met one of the monks, Padre Laplana, who is very interested in contemporary art. We got talking, and he told me they were restoring Santa Cecilia and asked me if I wanted to do some paintings for it”. At the end of June, on the artist’s 70th birthday, the church, which had lain empty and disused since 2000, was reinaugurated by the abbot and stands finally to become a place of pilgrimage, not least for art lovers. For though churches have always commissioned contemporary art — even Renaissance artists were contemporary once — and continue to do so, not since the Rothko Chapel opened in Houston in 1971, and before that the Matisse chapel in Vence in 1951, has a single artist of this magnitude been given carte blanche to decorate an entire church. “They said I could do whatever I liked with it,” he says. In light of the age and monumental beauty of the building he had to work with, the result, I’d contend, is yet more captivating, more atmospheric, than its forebears.

Over the past five years Scully has made six substantial paintings for it, each instantly recognisable from his trademark horizontal and vertical stripes and stacks. “They’re about things that fit and don’t fit,” he says, “blocks pushing up against each other as if they’re coming together or competing for space and coming apart so they all have a sort of energy about them.”



One work is a substantial three-by-six metres, consisting of 14 panels of painted aluminium mounted on rusted Corten steel that had to be welded together in situ. “So

it'll have to stay there for another thousand years," he quips. Indeed all but one of the works have been painted on metal. "The brush moves a lot faster than it does on paper or canvas," he says. "Copper is the slipperiest. The surface is very responsive to every movement you make; it's like ice-skating as opposed to walking."

If the paintings are, for the most part, dark and sombre, there are also three small colourful frescoes, a medium he had never worked in, "to bring a little playfulness and joy to the chapel", and eight small stained-glass windows to filter the light. Behind the altar hangs a great curved panel, or retrochoir, of sheets of coloured glass, another material he had not worked with before. The altar itself, two rough-hewn slabs of stone, supports a cross of stacked blocks of ultramarine glass, flanked by a pair of almost constructivist wrought-iron candlesticks, again designed by Scully, as are a pair of matching torchères.

Aside from the altar cross, and two smaller glass crosses that hang either side of the apse, there is no overt Christian iconography in what he has created for the basilica, though the cobalt glass of the retrochoir alludes to the blue the Virgin Mary tends to wear in Renaissance paintings, and the 14 panels of what Scully calls the huge "kick-ass painting" refers to the 14 Stations of the Cross. One painting, "Cecília", also includes a panel of exposed aluminium painted to evoke a stave on a sheet of manuscript paper, a reference to the church's dedicatee, the patron saint of music. But there is, says Scully, who may have been raised a Catholic but espouses no religion now, "a very profound aspect of the spiritual in what I do. That's where abstraction dominates, I think. It expresses what cannot be described anecdotally."



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Some of Sean Scully's artworks inside the church

Even before the opening of Santa Cecília, Montserrat was a rewarding place to come, not just for the craggy, almost lunar beauty of its landscape. The mountain is a place of

miracles and legends. Some believe an icon of a Black Madonna, made by St Luke, was brought here by St Peter 50 years after Christ's birth. And it has been claimed that Montserrat was the model for Montsalvat, the domain of the castle of the Holy Grail in Wagner's *Parsifal*, a theory given credence by the 13 deserted and varyingly ruined hermitages that dot the landscape. These are less remote now than they once were because, conveniently for tourists, there are signposted footpaths to help find them. Despite all the visitors who flock here — Scully tells me proudly there are plans for every school in Barcelona to bring its pupils to see the reopened Santa Cecília — it retains the feeling of a sanctuary, calm and cool against the savage summer sun and the winds that can rage up here. With its immense walls, barrel-vaulted ceilings and ravaged stone floor (above which wooden walkways have been installed so visitors have a level surface on which to walk), the architecture is austere, ancient, permanent. If art is now a religion, then this is a perfect place to practise it and very much worth a pilgrimage.

Details

[Santa Cecilia de Montserrat](#) is open from 10am to 6.30pm daily, except Tuesdays. The only place to stay nearby is the three-star Hotel Abat Cisneros, next to the monastery (about £80 a night), but Montserrat is an easy day trip from Barcelona, especially if you have a car. Otherwise there are trains from Plaça d'Espanya to Montserrat Aeri, from which a cable car takes you to within a short walk of the monastery. For details visit [montserratvisita.com](#). Claire Wrathall was a guest of the new [Cotton House Hotel](#) in Barcelona

Photographs: Dani Rovira/Museu de Montserrat; Raül Maigí