

# Sean Scully's art helps complete 10-year restoration of Spanish monastery

[Hannah Ellis-Petersen](#) in [Montserrat](#)

Wednesday 1 July 2015 13.56 EDT

Santa Cecilia de Montserrat, a thousand-year-old monastery on the hills above Barcelona, hosts 22 works by Turner prize-nominated Irish artist



Irish artist Sean Scully has created 22 works for the Santa Cecilia de Montserrat monastery, from the paintings for which he is famed to stained glass and candlesticks. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

In the thousand years that the [Santa Cecilia de Montserrat](#) monastery has stood on the hills overlooking Barcelona, set against jagged towering rocks that rise like giant's fingers pointing to the sky, history has continually come knocking at its door. It was a sanctuary for early pilgrims, a symbol of resistance in the Napoleonic invasion, and a protector of Catalan culture and language during the regime of Franco.

Now this tiny chapel, still home to Benedictine monks, has once again found itself on the map. A 10 year-long project of restoration has seen the celebrated Irish painter [Sean Scully](#) transform the chapel with 22 of his works, from the vast abstract paintings for which he is famed, to frescoes, stained glass and metal candlesticks. They will hang in the

chapel permanently, establishing the church as a unique cultural sanctum that will draw visitors from across the world.

Scully, who has been nominated for the Turner prize twice and whose paintings now fetch upwards of £1m, described the chapel as one of the most “significant and important” works of his career.

Scully, who was born in Dublin but moved to London when he was five, has had a studio in Barcelona since 1994 and the [Santa Cecilia project](#) was conceived after a chance meeting with Father Josep M. Soler, director of the nearby museum of Montserrat nearly 10 years ago. Standing in the middle of the chapel, which opens to the public on 2 July, Scully said he had no idea it would become so important.

“I’m very passive,” said the artist, who opened the chapel on the day of his 70th birthday. “They gave me no instructions about what I could do with the space, just gave me complete liberty so originally I thought I would put one big painting in it and then a couple of other things and that would be it. But bit by bit it grew in importance and became more and more beautiful with every artwork. It’s like everything with me, I never really make decisions, I just sail through life.

Certainly Scully’s popularity speaks for itself. Having lived in New York since 1975, his work is held in most major museum collections of the United States as well as the Tate and the Royal Academy in London, and he is one of the most successful Western artists in China. He counts Bono among his collectors and guests at the opening of the chapel included former world champion boxer Barry McGuigan, who travelled from Ireland.

“Look at the brutal beauty of all these things,” marvels McGuigan, walking into the monastery. “This is one of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen.”

Walking into the modest chapel, which has been restored for the first time since the 1920s, the viewer is first greeted with one of Scully’s vast, grey and black Doric paintings, which he chose specifically for the space,

while a small fresco made up of abstract squares of brown, black and yellow pigment is painted beneath a window filled with stained yellow glass. Candlesticks and candelabras also designed by Scully frame the altar.



Santa Cecilia de Montserrat, a thousand-year-old monastery on the hills above Barcelona.

The final wing of the monastery is dominated by the largest work, a series of 14 panels embedded in dark steel. None of the works are overtly religious, and while the 14 panels make a vague reference to the stations of the cross, the work is more of a homage to Scully's mother, Ivy, to whom the piece is dedicated.

Indeed, despite agreeing to create works for a Catholic church and creating three crosses from glass – two of which hang on the wall and one which stands on the altar – Scully says he has a complex relationship with religion.

“When it comes to religion I sleep with anybody,” he said. “If they wanted me to do a synagogue, I’ll do a synagogue. It’s about the spirituality for me, I’m not promoting a brand.”

He continues: “The Catholicism did not feed into the work. My work is concerned with spirituality and with a belief that human beings are sacred – I think we all are – but I wouldn’t say that it’s particularly bound up with Catholicism. For me it’s bound up with something more universal rather than belief or non-belief.”

Instead of religious imagery, it is his mother, who died in 2001, who is a strong presence throughout the chapel. Her musical background is felt particularly strongly in his painting Cecilia, which hangs in the heart of the chapel, with two insets that recall a musical score.



Sean Scully works on his art

“Cecilia is the patron saint of music and my mother was a singer,” Scully said. “When we were little kids we would go to the Vaudeville and my mother would sing Unchained Melody and she would always bring the house down. So I was very struck by that musical connection when I was choosing works.”

The thought behind the bright frescoes, he added, was to “to add a little joy to the chapel”. “I didn’t want it to get too heavy, because people always associate spirituality with great austerity and great deprivation and it doesn’t have to be like that.”

Having first viewed the chapel when it was in a state of decay, Scully also decided to make works that were “indestructible”, meaning most of the paintings are done on metal and steel, and the artist is firm in his belief that the works will “still be here in a thousand years”.

With shows currently at the Venice Biennale, the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, in China and across Asia and with a new sculpture exhibition about to open at the estate of Chateau La Coste in Provence, his success is almost unparalleled in contemporary art. Indeed, the Montserrat chapel has already been compared to the Matisse Chapel in the French Riviera and the Rothko Chapel in Texas, though Scully has mixed feelings about the Rothko comparison.

“That Rothko Chapel is very depressing and bleak and you have to really wring the paintings out to get anything out of them, it is like sucking on a stone,” he said. “It is really interesting how the myth of Rothko is bigger than the work, which is obviously assisted by suicide and the symbolism of that red colour of his works.



Sean Scully

“But I think one can get to a better position than that without killing yourself – at least that’s my intention.”