

**THIS IS A TRANSCRIPT OF THE LECTURE GIVEN BY SEAN SCULLY AT THE FORMAL OPENING OF THE "WALL OF LIGHT" SCULPTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK. THESE NOTES ARE TAKEN FROM A VIDEO OF THE LECTURE. THEY DO NOT REFELCT THE IDEAS OR ATTITUDES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK. REFERENCES TO ARTISTS, CRITICS AND CURATORS ARE MADE BY THE ARTIST. THESE NOTES CANNOT BE REPRODUCED IN THIS FORMAT. COPYRIGHT OF THE CONTENT OF THE LECTURE RESTS WITH THE ARTIST.**

Lecture by  
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on the occasion of  
the Inauguration of  
The Wall of Light  
at The University of Limerick  
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I am going to plunge right in. I must apologize in advance as this is not an art course for beginners; if it were I would be happy to tell you how much you owe me. We do not have much time, so please forgive me and please try in some way to enjoy the ride.

On the left is Giacometti, if not the greatest sculptor of the twentieth century in the top five greatest sculptors of the century -- obviously Italian. He made figures out of bronze and plaster, was a very obsessive artist like myself --not a particularly experimental artist, but an artist like another favorite of mine, Georgio Oretti, who experimented with the major modernist themes that began at the beginning of the twentieth century (such as Surrealism, Cubism and so on). He eventually ended up making his own obsessive figures that stand like ragged sentinels facing time and all the elements of nature and human history that are thrown at them. So they represent, in a sense, what remains.

On the right is a hut from the Aran Islands, Inis Meáin, a photograph taken by myself. I have been encouraged to lately assume the vanity of a photographer, and this photograph is in a book published very recently of my photographs. It also represents, in a sense,

what remains. It's a hostile environment, as you all know. Most people here being Irish, you will know about how the earth is made and how it is taken for granted. I won't bore you with that. But the issue of the wall on the Aran Island is of paramount importance. This is a hut for either staying in or keeping things in. It has a similar stoic personality to the sculpture on the left, which is of course an artwork and therefore much more strangely expressive. This is a functional object. However, in the walls of Aran you will notice that each wall has its own personality and was made -- made, in a sense, like a mountain, more vertical, more geometric, more round, more small, and so on. The wall itself is a question of placing stones so they don't come apart, using gravity to withstand the wind. Both of them in a way express a kind of loneliness. Both of them are in a sense a testament to what remains, even though one is art and the other is not particularly art.

Now, returning to my work, I'll show you a very important painting on the left called *Backs and Fronts*. I must say upfront, even though some of you less informed people in the audience may have trouble with this: my work is basically figurative. I was initially a figurative painter, a painter and drawer of figures in space, and I can do this with some degree of confidence. However, I was very much influenced by the mysticism of Eastern religions, of Islam, of Northern artworks, of the kind of artwork that comes from Finland, where the Japanese walked across ice to get to America. There are a lot of correspondences in the world that involve a kind of linear but emotional geometrical art - - not the kind of art that one associates with Western ideas of ordering. So therefore the brick in these cultures does not represent a form of domination in nature; it represents a kind of hypnotic rhythm. I tried to bring this into relationship with, say, **Alaska** or Rembrandt or whoever, this Western idea of the human touch. This is a picture made up of panels. Each panel has a weight, a size, a height, a figure, and they are meant to form a line -- hence the title, *Backs and Fronts*.

The work on the right is painted with a kind of surface we associate with our art, Western art. Our art and our touch try to somehow express light. This is obviously somehow related to a kind of religious aspiration. This is the kind of art I am interested in. I put

these things out like doors. In fact, I got the idea from two things. One was a door, half-opened and half-closed. I am very, very interested in the metaphor of the door and the threshold and how one space is divided and opened by the simple mechanism of the door. I find doors fascinating, the way they lead from one reality to another reality. By one reality I mean a room where space can be set up as whatever -- a hospital, a lecture room, a workshop. These panels project up the wall a little bit like double-sided drawings in a museum, where an artist's major drawings are on both sides of a piece of paper; and the only way to really exhibit this work is to have it at a right angle from the wall so you can see both sides. I love the idea of walking around looking at an artwork, looking at the fact that it's a painting. So I am talking about these works really to set the tone this evening for the subject of sculpture -- and to show that my work is in a sense very adaptable to the idea of sculpture.

On the left are separate panels bolted together and painted differently. You can't see it from the slide, of course; you would need to walk from one end to another. It has again the relationship with the decorative, although it is not decoration. It has a relationship with the exotic and the rhythm that one finds in African art, Islamic art, Japanese art, Indian art, Mexican art -- I like it all. Of course the rhythm is linear, repetitive of Irish music, which is part of the story. The painting on the left is called *Come In*; the one on the right is called *Murphy*. The paintings are in some way a homage -- to Beckett on the right and on the left to Joyce. Now I have the opportunity to tell you a story which is funny, interesting, and not a little sad at the end, but I know you will like it. This painting here, like a lot of mine I made in the eighties, is made up of a panel project, and what I was doing in a sense is painting around corners, trying to hold together what is coming apart. So the idea of the painting was to try to wrap these disparate parts in a skin that was poetic, emotional and in a way healing. They are painted very expressively; they have a lot of light in them, and obviously the colors are quite beautiful. They are heavily layered paintings referred to as pole tradition in European painting. When I painted *Come In*, I had a very important curator come to my studio to look at my work, and she carried with her all the rational baggage of a European curator with New York curatorial expertise. The reason I called this painting *Come In* is because when I finished

it I called a friend of mine to come and see it. (This part is drawn, by the way, and this part is painted. So it's about weight and lightness. Again it relates very much to the figure, to the body in art.) My friend came over and told me a very interesting story about Joyce and Beckett. Someone knocked on the door and Joyce said, "Come in." The next day Joyce was going over the manuscript, and Beckett had written "come in." Joyce asked Beckett why he had written "come in." Beckett replied, "You said 'come in,' so I wrote it down." It was a fascinating conversation, and in the end Joyce left it in, as an intervention. As you will see from my paintings, I am very interested in the idea of intervention -- things coming in from the top, the sides, bursting through the surface, violating the sanctity of the painted picture surface. I am extremely interested in intervention of all kinds, so naturally I took this as the title for the painting, this irrational title. The curator then said, "Ah yes, I understand why you called this *Come In*. Because it is like a portal and a doorway. This is the doorway and this could be two columns; this could be an entrance, so one could call and come in." I said, "Yes, that's certainly one way of looking at it." Then I told her the story. When I got to the end I knew that she would never show my work because she thought that I was crazy and that these were not rational paintings. This brings me to a very interesting point. The difference between my paintings and a lot of people that were around me in New York is that my paintings are not rational. I am using geometry for emotional results, to provoke emotion for mystical reasons.

I had another curator come from Boston during the time I was making these paintings, and he said to me that my works were perverse, that I was misusing the tradition of geometric abstraction that was, of course, invented to accompany the Russian revolution. It was meant to represent order and I was using it perversely. He, of course, did not buy one of my paintings. These have been some of the difficulties that I have had in America.

So again, this is a great weight pressing down on solid bands painted in rich, very confident colors -- in black and yellow and pressing down on something much more fragile.

The painting on the left is called *Africa*. The painting was painted in a Victorian bedroom in England, which illustrates that location is not really an issue. I don't need to go to Africa to make a painting or picture. It's not really a picture; it's really, in a sense, an attempt to embody something. What I wanted to do in this painting was to make a massive wall, eight-feet tall and twelve-feet wide, with a window in it. Windows occur in my paintings a lot; they happen in the wall we just built. The window is a way of puncturing the relentlessness of the façade. Another thing I do is make paintings with extremely complicated colors that represent different kinds of memories or provoke different kinds of light -- different light sources, different color sources that one might sense in one's memory, or in nature, or in paintings one might have seen. There is always a dullness to my colors, a sadness to the light in my work. In this particular painting, *Africa*, it is dry; it is the same color as the dirt of the earth. Oil-paper is made from dirt, more or less. The wall outside is made from dirt, the dirt that we walk around on. It's the same material re-jigged and then presented as poetry. This painting *Africa* is made up with many, many layers of color and was painted very heavily -- almost brutally -- like a lot of the paintings in the eighties. The window is much more delicate and expressive and has of course another possibility, the possibility of light and hope in this wall of darkness.

These two paintings are again, in their own ways, two paintings about insets. The painting on the left is called *Angelica*. Here, the inset comes in from the top and the paint was removed to leave a gap. I did a whole series of paintings that were done on the idea of weightlessness. The others I called *Angel*, *Angelina* and *Angelica*. Hanging on the right is a painting called *Catherine* (1994). One can see it as a wall with two windows or one can see it as a floor with two other figures on it. What is very important about paintings from this period is that the insets are real. So the paint is painted with certain urgency -- as in the paintings of Van Gogh or an Abstract Expressionist -- but it is also a model of love, love with the fact of concrete painting. So these are real windows and they are taken out of the painting. In one way it's a romantic painting, and in another it's a little vandalized by the fact that it's got a kind of brute inset going on inside of it. In a

lot of my painting there is oscillation between the ugly and the brutal, the confrontational and the romantic and the poetic. The problem I have with the romantic and the poetic is that if it's not checked, if it's not put into the same kind of critical correspondence with another impulse, it becomes the sentimental. And then of course we don't like it anymore because we don't respect it. So this painting on the left is really a question of skin and the absence of skin. In the inset the skin of the paint is taken away, so it has a much more fragile sense of its own body; it hangs precariously in the main body of the painting. What keeps it together as a painting, of course, is our idea of a painting as a rectangle. These two things give out two very different sensations. When the inset is surrounded by the painting it's much more secured; it's as if the painting has become a protector of the inset.

So on the left is *Four Large Mirrors*, one of my major works; it is in a museum in Düsseldorf. It was in my retrospective but now it's part of their collection. A huge work and another theme -- the idea of reflection, which is a way to measure a way of looking at identity. The first is called *Narcissus* of course: the idea of looking at oneself or looking at one another on a kind of structure, or being reflected by another, to reveal more of one side, questioning the other, or separating and joining from each other -- constantly a process of joining and separation, which is central to my work. It's very unusual for me to make a surface and leave the surface. I'm always putting something in correspondence with something else to set this vibration up between identities.

You have an orchestra here: it's complicated by the fact it's repeated four times. We have four within one work so it makes something almost endless. It becomes exuberant. All the reds are different, all the yellows are different, all the creams are different. The browns and blacks are not simply painted over various colors; the shadow-memory of those colors is subverting everything like background noise. These are cut separations. *Land Lying Blue* takes from the idea of the horizon. One might say it is abstract; it has strong associations with nature, like the color of the rhythm of the horizon. In my talking

and thinking I am constantly making reference to the horizon line, the mysticism of the horizon line.

A German philosopher wrote a text, a very beautiful text with the simplicity of a great intellect, in which he said: "One of the great advantages of abstraction is that it never completely explains itself." This is the limitation in the short-term, because my paintings don't really provide halfhearted answers. They are not really meant, in a sense, to be understood -- like us, we are not really made to be simply understood. We have our own mystery, which is essential to our quality. We cannot as individuals be summed up and defined, explained away.

These are called, generally speaking, *Union*, and are very much about almost bringing together -- in a much more harmonious way than I was doing in the eighties where surfaces were divided. Verticals were up against horizontals, ruptured appendices were much more aggressive in an attempt to bring two halves together. In my work I am always looking at the similarities of things and the differences of things. He said an abstract thing doesn't explain itself and that was its power. We like items that have mystery, and we need things that have mystery because we live in an age where mystery is being taken out of everything. The world is being deconstructed and demystified. In the course of understanding we have two great needs: the need to understand and the (equally powerful) need to be mystified. There are very few areas left in world culture that are mysterious. One of these can be art. What is a disadvantage in the short-term can be an advantage in the long-term; that is why I paint the way I paint. There is always something in my paintings that is inexplicable. One has to meet that to be prepared to have a relationship with something that isn't going to be explained to you. There are certain things that can be talked about but cannot be explained. That is part of its power.

The painting on the left, again one of my fair paintings that hung in Düsseldorf, has a very deep surface, a surface that has been painted many times. The design is simple; it couldn't be simpler. What is interesting about the painting is the complexity of its treatment in relation to the utter severity and simplicity of the drawing. So really, this

painting on the left is like nightshades and morning light. The natural and artificial are in opposition, in a sense, in the painting on the right: the color of nature, the color of blood and roses. First there is a theoretical argument about color, about black and white, about the opposite of light and dark. I put this together in an awkward union, but a union nevertheless, so that one side is something in relation to the other side. So like I said before it is the coming together and the separating constantly, as in all other things in the world.

These paintings are much more recent. These are *Wall of Light* paintings. I used to go to Mexico a lot in the eighties. This experience, I have to say, helped me very much to do this work. It gave me, in a sense, the informed courage to do the work, which is different from obvious arrogance. Looking at the wall of temples in Mexico was very moving. Again, they are so interesting because so much information has been lost to us. Something mystical, something that cannot be explained: there is a gap. And these walls would change color dramatically, from pink to darkest blue-green depending on the time of day you went to see them. One could feel the way these walls are meant to play with the environment, the light, the air of Mexico. So I was sitting on a beach and I made a little watercolor, and I called it the *Wall of Light*. (They are polar opposite to the walls on Aran.) This led to a huge group of paintings. A very different kind of personality was painted on the right. The right *Wall of Light* is somehow more airy. The left *Wall of Light* is more scratched out and somehow has a sharper kind of edge.

This painting on the right is called *Cameron*. I show you this because of its relationship to the wall. The polarity of feeling that can be set up between black and white, how the fight within us between black and white -- the constant oscillation between yes and no, between high and low -- can be endless, and is endless. This one on the left is an homage to my father and will be in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin. My father's favorite month was November, so this in a sense is a picture of November as much as it is a wall of light. So basically what I'm doing is taking this very simple way of building, no more



complicated than the way people build walls on the Aran Islands, as a form of drawing. But what I bring to it is far more complex because its paintings marry the European and American painting tradition. So the associational potential is far greater because I have the great gifts of color. The color in my paintings is extraordinarily complex -- pinks, all pale, sour or sweet, alive and vital -- and always the edge. The way things come together is crucially important to my work. In this painting you cannot see it very well, but the underneath is painted yellow; so it's really like a blanket of melancholia that has been rushed onto something more aggressively vital, more optimistic. Again this goes back to black and white, the purest way. We can talk about the contradictions in terms of color, but my work is extremely nuanced in the sense that every time something is turned over it's different. It's like if you say you can see the falling leaves in autumn they always do the same thing, or like one never gets tired of watching the ocean coming in and going back out again. So my work, and the way my work is connected, is this rhythm. It's not really a body of work that's about invention, and I don't pretend to be inventing anything.

This is a strip, obviously not a strip like an American strip. The reason I show you this is to show you that when you say "strip" it is like saying "apple" or "flower" -- it doesn't really define what it is. You can paint things like this thousands of times and let them mean thousands of different things by the way they are painted, the context in which they are painted, and the size they are painted. This is a painting where the strip (in relation to the history of art) relates to nature in a way it didn't later on in America when Minimalism was so prevalent.

These are endless columns by Brancusi, another great artist of the twentieth century. He made a lot of these columns that were meant to imply infinity. So again an artist of repetition, a very focused obsessive artist, belonging to the same family that I belong to. This artist represents in a sense a kind of calmness, a calm sense of perfect harmony.

These are two works by me, watercolors. The work on the right is pastel. What I tend to do is to make the same thing different. I use scale very powerfully. The watercolors on this side are made with the absolute absence of physical effort with a very loose wrist.

The pastel, which is quite big, is a work on paper and has to be shown in glass. It's made with a fair amount of physical effort and, again, with the same amount of materials, stone materials -- the same stone as the wall is made from. It's just ground down, mixed with gum and then rubbed into the paper. What I'm doing here is allowing the light carried in the paper to come through the colours so they are transparent. These are obviously more metaphysical, because the edges are soft. So if you get soft edges you get a sense of obvious mystery. This is another photo of mine on the right, of a hut on Aran, and a wall in the background. Again, it's simply material rearranged, which is what the wall is.

This is the quarry in China. You'll like this part because it's narrative. I'll tell you the story of the construction of the wall. When I first had the idea to do the wall I wanted to make it out of material from Ireland. I had this extremely sentimental idea that I would almost dig my hands into the ground in Ireland and pull up this wall and it would come out black and white. It would refer to the black and white in a lot of Irish facades. It would refer to the buildings and ancient walls of Ireland, and would be absolutely, rigorously contemporary. But then we were unable to find anybody in Ireland who could do it, so we had to look outside of Ireland. I love the idea that we found the stones in China and Portugal because this corresponds much more closely to my idea of being universal. Because nationalism for me carries a lot of problems -- continues to cause a lot of problems if one is so invested in one's own little cultural syntax. I am very fond of the idea of bringing these stones together from different parts of the world -- forcing them together in a sense, placing them into perfectly democratic relationships of black and white, the white from Portugal and the black from China. Here they are all wrapped up, ready to come to us. Solid boxes. It's quite beautiful. I made a little inset in the wall because by pure luck we found out we had the stones polished. I was thinking about an idea of making an inset like in some of the paintings. It wasn't my idea. In fact, it was Shane's (de Blacam). But he gave me the idea so now it's mine. The little inset is made very simply. The same material is just turned around very simply, reconsidered, retouched, restroked, reworked; and it becomes a signifier of something different. There is an entirely different, distinct quality to the rough part. When you look down at the

wall it becomes almost impressionistic. It's not as clear coloristically. This window or inset was dropped down into the wall and presents a little problem, or a little question. It gives it a point of intimacy. It's like a wall within a wall, which is going back again to the fascination I have of paintings inside paintings or windows inside houses.

I don't know if you have ever been in a room with no window. It wouldn't be very pleasurable. I thought it would be very interesting to somehow put a smudge or a stain on the relentlessness of the slate. I must tell you the wall is made of stacked stones. There is the same number of black stones as white. It is exactly fifty-fifty: it's the rhythm the two have set up emotionally and visually.

END