

*Since the 1970s, Scully's work has explored the tensions between European and American conceptions of art. This you could interpret as squaring circles (appropriately enough for so geometric an artist): reconciling formal purity with exuberant colour, hard edges with blurred borders, flat surfaces with layered textures. A reconciling impulse is clearly seen in his less well-known works on paper, in pastels and in watercolors. The stacked, layered, geometric shapes are called tiles, chessboards and stripes and are rendered in soft, smoky pastels and watercolors -- sometimes in dark, Rothko-like greens, sometimes in burnt orange and monochrome.*

*What immediately strikes me about them is how unusual it is to see these media at this scale. Scully's works on paper will be on view at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester from Saturday. The artist was on his way there when he called this morning. I asked him what attracted him to the medium of watercolor.*

The first time I used it as a matter of fact was when I went to Mexico, and why I did this I really don't know. I went to the art store before I set off, and I bought a replica of a nineteenth-century replica of an artist's traveling watercolor box, with a ceramic tray for mixing up the colors and little pads of pure pigment. I was so charmed that I bought it. I then bought a watercolor pad. Since that trip I never go anywhere without them, and they have become a major part of what I do. There is something about watercolor that is so fragile; that it lacks a physicality I find very moving and intimate.

*Is the most obvious difference and challenge in moving between oil and watercolor that oil is by definition opaque and watercolor translucent, that they are completely different media in that respect?*

They also have a different relationship with time. When you are doing a watercolor you mustn't lose contact with the paper. You are caressing the paper and in a sense, staining the paper and teasing the light out of the paper. It is the dynamic between what is

underneath and what is on top that creates the vibration in the watercolor. And the way that all the edges are left outside. All this is very visible. It is a very, very light touch that is required and the time is very short. With a painting, on the other hand, it is exactly the opposite, physically. You are dealing with the weight of the material, the opacity of the material: the layering is actually transforming the surface and you are inventing a completely new surface, one that you are making by hand. Even though the edges are blurring, the quality of the paint and the weight of the paint are making everything quite heavy. I wanted the painting to be quite light, to manufacture light but to still manufacture weight: to have *gravitas*.

*Do you feel that in working with watercolor you are surrendering some of your power to the medium, in a way? Almost as if the watercolors contribute more to the final painting than the oils?*

It requires practice. It requires a certain amount of submission to the material. I use almost no bodily power, as I am almost resting my wrist and my touch is incredibly light, very delicate. And that is why I like to do it so much. It is so different from the manual handling of oil that you heard about.

*So it is not as if the watercolor sketches are preparatory to the main event going on in oil. These are things that have a life and existence of their own.*

Yes, I don't really make preparatory sketches for large or medium pieces. I work on all scales. Sometimes, in fact, I make the painting and the painting, I think, is quite public (especially the large ones): they aren't made for private people, they are made for public spaces. And afterwards I have made works on paper almost as if the painting were the preparatory sketch for the works on paper. And the works on paper were for me to keep.

*How does that change when you start using pastels, as that is almost a dead art? It is very much nineteenth-century.*

That's right. It's almost as if you should use pastels with a smock and a beret and use little Q-tips to rub them in. I actually paint with my hands and I get filthy when I do it. I feel like a coal miner when I have finished, but I like the medium because it's a relic. Anything that is a relic is attractive to me. There is something in my nature that has become more apparent over time as painting has become less fashionable, although that may be cyclical. I like it better now than I did when it was more conventional, now that it has become the art of rebellion, the true minority art; and that is interesting to me. And it is a similar dynamic to the one that attracts me to pastels.

*Does that have something to do with being a European in the United States? Being conscious of having a different cultural location, perhaps, than an American-born artist?*

Yes, that is a very interesting point. I think perhaps there is something about that which attracted me in the first place without my really knowing it. I went to America and then thought that maybe I could become an American artist. In a sense I can become an American artist, but only like De Kooning, who wasn't really an American artist although he is held up to be the acme of American art now. So there is something interesting about putting yourself in the position where you are the outsider.

*Sean Scully Works on Paper is at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester from Saturday until the twenty-fifth of August. Call in also at the Manchester City Art Gallery should you be passing through, as there is a complimentary exhibition of his paintings.*

*That is all for tonight.*