

New York Artists in their Studios with Timothy Marlowe  
Produced by Marilyn Harris for BBC Radio 3

Sean Scully interviewed by Timothy Marlowe in his New York studio January 25,  
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**TM:** This large, airy, light, room in downtown New York, in Chelsea, is like a giant playroom. There are two ping-pong tables but straight in front of me, there is a pair of shoes, crusted with paint, and on the walls are numerous canvases usually larger than the span of a human body with a series of interacting rectangles of color. This is the work and the studio of Sean Scully, who was born in Dublin, who spent his early childhood in London and who now lives and works in three cities: Barcelona, London and, of course, New York. His work is owned by almost every major museum of Modern Art in the world and he's had retrospective exhibitions in every continent.

Sean this studio that you have here is the size of gymnasium; does it have something of a gymnasium feel to you here?

**SS:** No, it's a question of light and viewing space. The paintings need a lot of viewing space so that you can walk around, but you know I worked in a Victorian lounge in London before I got my ACME studio, for 5 years, and I made some of my most important paintings there in that room, so I don't need the space to make the paintings, but I need the space in a sense to look at the paintings. I think also that my paintings have evolved quite a lot in the last couple of years into more light filled, less overtly physical.

**TM:** Is that partly because of the studio space that you've now got to work in?

**SS:** Well I think it's partly to do with a lot of things. I don't mean to be flippant about it, but to have a studio like this you've got to be able to buy a studio like this and...

**TM:** Which in New York must be pretty tough, it must have cost a fortune?

**SS:** It did. So that means that you have to have reached a certain point in your life to be able to do that. That in a sense allows you then, hopefully, to evolve to the next step in your work.

**TM:** The light that comes in here is all from above. That's optimum for you, is it?

**SS:** Well it's fabulous and it's such a privilege to be in a town like Manhattan where they build up, and to not build up, to be in an old garage that is what this was, and probably a stable for horses at one point. The building is exactly one hundred years old. It's such a privilege to be able to stand in this room, to work in this room, to walk around and to see all the paintings without any impediment.

**TM:** Your work has been for the last two decades, I mean in simple descriptive terms, a series of different colored, sometimes the same colored, rectangular planes that jostle for our attention. But they are clearly delineated sometimes quite literally. There is a physical gap between them where you imbed one canvas seemingly into the surface of another. That is the optical effect now with these works. What seems different is that the surface sometimes seems to absorb light, then of course when you get close it seems it is also reflecting light. I'm probably way off the mark, but I am wondering how you can try explicitly to capture or give some kind of body to light, how do you approach that?

**SS:** That's really the key question for me. What I want to do is, as you've said, make a body of light in some way or give body to light. I work the paintings very direct, I make all the colors on the painting as I paint. The whole mystery of the material itself and its own volatile nature, in relation to my not entirely unvolatile nature, causes the paintings to have a kind of unpredictability, even though I am painting the urban grid. The unions, the junctions between the forms now, I think you have probably noticed, are more opened up, so there's another sort of light that's seeping through from the back. For instance, let's look at this painting here, that's made up predominantly of dark reds, oranges, golden yellows, and whites, but it has a green color, like the green one might find in nature, coming through from the seams. This is breaking down the forms, so I think the balance between the architecture and the poetry of the paintings has shifted recently in favor of emotion. Well, it was always about emotion, but the emotion is of a different kind now.

**TM:** It makes the paintings quite illusive doesn't it, because even though you can grasp them as a physical or visual fact, edges are blurred, there is another area, or as you say, another color coming through so that they not only have this sense of forms on the same plane jostling for your attention and seeming to move because of the edges being slightly blurred, but there is also this other dimension, depth that then comes through.

Do you paint on set colored grounds or is that part of the mystery of painting, mixing the grounds up as you go along as well?

**SS:** Yes, everything is used for it's optimal improvisational potential. That includes the very thin painting that I start out with, usually on the floor, that is like a giant watercolor, and I use a very old fashioned kind of glazing material made in jolly old London that I have shipped over at great expense in order to achieve these results.

**TM:** So, you are producing something on the floor, on paper, as a kind of rehearsal of the canvas?

**SS:** No, I am doing it directly on the canvas with an oil glazing material that this guy in London makes for me, and I ship it over because he makes it so beautifully I can't ever get it quite right myself. Also, I don't really see why I should, because it's not my job. My job is to put the paint down in the right place at the right time.

**TM:** You do work on paper though?

**SS:** Very much so.

**TM:** But they are self-contained works? They are never studies for something larger?

**SS:** No, nothing is a study for anything else. Everything is of the moment, being alive, fully alive when its made. I have often made works on paper after the paintings to have something for myself that's more private. So, one could argue that the painting was a study for the work on paper.

**TM:** You talk about emotion and the quality of emotion and certainly, abstract paintings broadly inspire or generate emotions and they are sometimes perceived as spaces or arenas into which the viewer's imagination or emotion can be projected. But I think, with your work, it does strike emotional chords in a way that is hard to explain, unless you are standing in front of it. Now, at the risk of being reductive about this, when you look at a painting that you've made, this one that is in front of us, the oranges and reds, and the gold and the yellows; does that evoke a particular state of mind that you were in when you painted it, in any way?

**SS:** The answer to that is yes, and hopefully they all do. This painting I have given the title of a city, a town in Mexico, it's called "Wall of Light Alba", and it has a southern, golden, dusty, desert light. It has also an absence of black, which is very unusual for me; most of my paintings are punctuated by black. Black is very important to me because it has a relationship, I think, with death. It gives the painting areas of certainty or absoluteness. Matisse called it the queen of colors. This painting is extremely sensuous and musical. The one on the other side of it, I painted recently for somebody who died, so it's a memorial painting. It is a much more energetic and, I suppose, nervous work. It has a lot of yellow in it and it has three blacks in it that are pretty evenly spaced. It has all these strange semi-transparent, golden, pink, grey, transparent, white colors in amongst these yellows, with a lot of red coming through. It's quite a passionate painting, and a very aggressive painting in a certain way. Somebody said it was like a twenty-first century version of a German Expressionist painting in the abstract.

**TM:** Now what strikes me, talking to you about your own painting, seeing you look at them, perhaps it would be too romantic to say you almost give me the impression that you are looking at them again for the first time. But, there is a sense of wonderment in your eyes. Is that part of the process for you, that not only when you're making these paintings you're trying to surprise yourself, but actually they reveal themselves to you continually and in different ways whenever you look at them?

**SS:** Well, it might sound simplistic to say it, and it's a very simple thing to say, not such a simple thing to achieve, but you really, to do something all your life and to do it to an exceptional level, I think you have to truly be in love with it. You can't do it for that length of time for any other reason. Because as a painter, particularly now, not that it makes any difference to me, I couldn't care less about the art world, but your walking along a stone road if your are painter now, and you have to be deeply in love with it, and believe in what it is, and I do. I love my paintings I think they're sustaining. They are to me. They're very sustaining.

**TM:** You have studios in London, New York, and Barcelona. Is there something of a restless spirit in you? Is there something almost nomadic about you?

**SS:** Oh yes, for sure, because I started out my life as, everybody knows by now, as an *immigrante*, from Ireland when I was three. We moved around such a lot when we got there too, from single room to single room, to single room, to another one with a tin bath on a nail outside at the back, until we finally moved to suburbia, South London. By the time we got there I was into moving and I wasn't that happy to settle down, I was bored. So, I like to move around and I find the world to be extraordinarily interesting.

**TM:** You suggested a terrible pun to me Sean, which is that home for you, therefore, is where the art is, but we'll put that to one side. Do you therefore feel at home everywhere potentially, and sometimes nowhere?

**SS:** I feel at home pretty much everywhere. I like London, but the world is too interesting to me to just to stay in London.

**TM:** But, are you systematic in the way that you break your time up between your three studios, or do you just go when the whim strikes you?

**SS:** Well, I go often when the whim strikes me. Everything is set up, all I need is the front door key and I work straight away. When I'm painting, I'm so involved in the painting that I don't care where I am. I could, more or less, work in a railway station if I had to.

**TM:** What about the rhythm of the work? How long does it take to finish a painting? Or is that a question like, how long is a piece of string?

**SS:** Some paintings have taken me a long time to finish. For example, there is a painting, a big painting, in the Reina Sofia in Madrid, called *Africa*. It's one of my best-known works. It's a dark brown painting with a pale yellow window in it, and it took, I think, a few months. Doing it and putting it away, doing it and putting it away. I have had paintings that I have worked over several years, and on the other hand if I'm really on, I can make a painting in three hours if everything goes right. If I am in a very emotional state, I'll make a painting usually out of it, and there the rules and the truth of that is somehow of a higher nature than mere esthetics. Once in Barcelona we saw this dog, and it was lost and we were running after it and it ran across the Grand Via, and it got run over and killed. There was a woman on the other side of the street looking at the dog and she was crying and we were talking to her. I went to the studio and I painted a painting for the dog. That was a three-hour painting and I simply couldn't make a mistake. There was no time for looking at the painting in relation to whether this looks good next to that, whether this activates this correctly; it was another kind of truth that was bigger than that, as if my hand was being somehow directed. The painting just came out flawless and it was finished.

**TM:** Does it seem like a risky business, painting? Because the way you just described that painting, it sounds like you couldn't make a mistake and almost everything was flowing for you. But do you get the sense of fear ever when you are painting?

**SS:** I think that my life really is so speculative that there is no point in me being afraid, because if I were to start to be afraid about things, the whole edifice would crumble because I have no certainty in my life. As an artist you can be swept away by the tides of fashion in ten minutes; Rembrandt died broke.

**TM:** You have this amazing sense of humor and there is always a kind of mischievous glint in your eye, or there often is, and your paintings can have a lightness of touch, but they don't have the faculty to make people laugh. I don't think that's what they're about, but do they therefore seem completely removed from you? Do they seem like the very serious side of Sean Scully?

**SS:** I don't personally think that art should be funny, that's not why I got into it in the first place. If had gone into comedy, you know, I would have written to Harry Worth, or Arthur Askey, or Norman Wisdom, if I had wanted to be funny, and gone to the school of funniness. Of course, I do have a very strong sense of humor and that has protected everything and, in fact, has made everything work for me in America. I've received the kind of treatment in New York that is only reserved for

outsiders and it's a very special kind of treatment. It hasn't put a dent in me but that's because I've got a sense of humor, a sense of the ridiculous, and I enjoy the ridiculous.

**TM:** This city has plenty of that.

**SS:** This city pretends to be something that it's not. London on the other hand, to take the other example, is a city that seems to be more closed but is in fact extremely open. This is a city that pretends to be open. You know, you get in a taxi and it says: *welcome to the big apple the greatest city on earth!* Well, if you have to keep going around saying you're the greatest city on earth its like me going around saying welcome to my studio I'm the greatest painter on earth, if you have to say it, it's clearly not true. This is a very hard place and a very inaccessible place. I'm in the fortunate position now of being able to go to Europe, particularly continental Europe, where my work is really, I would say, loved; embraced. That gives me a lot of emotional support.

**TM:** But if this city is so hard, I'm now getting the feeling that one of the reasons you want to be here, and you are here working, is you won't let it beat you. So you've got to compete with it. Is there some truth in that?

**SS:** Yes. I can never walk away from a fight; it's just not possible for me. I have to win in the end. And, to return to your earlier question, no, of course my work isn't funny in the least unless you think its funny that somebody would paint stripes for his entire life. Some people might think that that was funny. But it's no funnier than composing musical notes for your entire life. It is all fairly extreme stuff, but there's a kind of spiritual, emotional quest at work here. Well, its pretty obvious, its self-evident.

**TM:** Sean Scully, thank you.

