

Questions to Sean Scully about his exhibition in Rio de Janeiro

**The edges of your geometrical forms have become soft through time but the inter-relationship between individual elements on the canvas have remained personal marks on your paintings. Is it your intention to bring organic components into minimal art rationalism?**

I think that particularly in painting a sense of architectonic structure comes from a desire to create a sense of moral order, and the simultaneous desire to make a visual/painterly contribution to the universal thought structures, that shape our time.

In that sense, abstract painting, moved away from nature, and closer to philosophy; which is human nature.

After minimalism, I wanted to reconnect abstract painting to the emotional and spiritual power that it had lost, during the 'cool' decade of minimalism. So I began to re-introduce the idea of competing forms and relationships, painted emotively; at the beginning of the 80s. My paintings are drawn with the forms and shapes that constitute contemporary life and the building of cities. But I have pulled into this dialogue the colours and surfaces that come from the history of painting and from nature. That means that the paintings appear emblematic; but they have the soul of the natural world.

They have simplicity, but they are layered with the mystery of human effort and feeling.

**How does your work relate to deconstructivism?**

Deconstructivism was an interesting analytical moment in the development of philosophy. A kind of 'pit-stop' where the parts were checked out, before they were put back together again.

When it is applied to painting, it results in an Art that is aimed squarely at the second level. There is a group of 'conceptual' abstract painters in New York, that I have been working in opposition to, for the last 15 years.

The intellectual justification is borrowed from the deconstructivist philosophers and the abstract paintings of the great German painter Gerhard Richter, who, in a sense remade abstract expressionism, with a great sense of emotional distance. Thus, opening, some new territory for abstract and figurative painting.

The followers of this cool distanced thinking work as if they were nineteenth century pathologists, dissecting the body of art, and pulling apart creativity, to see what it is made of. As if this were ever a real possibility. If we take apart the components of a painting by Van Gogh, will we understand Van Gogh? I don't think so. It's a banal form of investigation, when applied to painting. A group of visual detectives. It's a form of 'sophism', where they are competing with art

critics, and tailoring their artworks, specifically in order to provoke a favourable response.

But potent and important Art, for instance Picasso, was never based on strategic investigative intelligence. It has emotional insight and power. A far higher form of creativity.

I am engaged in Art on this level. I want my paintings to have spiritual power; not academic intelligence.

Colour rather than form expresses the personal experience in painting. The feelings that seem to emanate from your work are melancholy and sorrow. Could you tell us a little about your colour choices?

Colour choices in my work are highly intuitive. Colour, if we forget theories, has the potential to be the perfect mirror of a sensibility and a psychological outlook. When I am painting, I am making the colours as I am painting. So that the colours are inseparable from the drama of me making the painting. The colour is entirely bound up with the identity of the shape, and where it is and what it is next to. The edges are made with many colours, and are the honest yet mysterious evidence of work and feelings. It's true that there is a sadness in the colour and light of my paintings. But this is a question of nature. This is not a quality that can be contrived. There is a dying light in some of my paintings, however there is an energy, very connected to life, in the way the colour is put down. They say that the people of Spain deal with the subject of death every day, as I do myself. Meanwhile, we have made the world into something close to a disaster area. My paintings have a beauty; but it is as you say, sorrowful or melancholic.

### **What do you listen to (if you do so) while you are painting?**

When I am painting I always listen to music. I had a blues club in London when I was 18, and my mother was a singer. Sometimes in the 'Latino Style', that was so popular in London after the war. Now I listen to Arvo Pärt (deep, rigorous and sonorous), Bob Dylan (morally fierce) Virginia Rodriguez (sensual and melancholic) and Neil Young (eternally hopeful)

### **Who is your favourite artist nowadays?**

My favourite artist nowadays would be Agnes Martin. Her work hovers at the edge of the pictorial world. She is linear and poetically puritanical. Her work is a constant whisper of hope, without sentimentality.

Sean Scully, 16 August, 2002