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Kevin Power / Sean Scully

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(Questions to Sean Scully on the occasion of *Encuentro, Mudial de Las Artes, Valencia October 3-6 2002*)

1.) You matured in the climate of the sixties – an intensely active period both culturally and politically – politically with Civil Rights marches and race riots in the States, with the assassinations of the two Kennedy brothers and Malcolm X, Vietnam and the My Lai Massacre, the death of Che Guevera, the civil conflict in Ireland and May 68 in Paris and culturally with Pop, Fluxus, Land Art, Happenings, Assemblage, Minimalism and with Newman terminating his Stations of the Cross and Rothko the series of works for a chapel in Houston. What was it for you that now appear as key formative experiences and what were your significant encounters with contemporary art?

It has often been said that at certain points in the '60s, London was the cultural center of the world. And it certainly felt like it. My influences were everything. Everything was coming in. The class system in London was falling, was in fact in free fall. For me personally, it was the discovery of American Blues, and the shameless exploitation of it by British rock bands. Cinema from Japan and France was shown regularly. And Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett. But more than that, after the Second World War, a certain kind of structured, class-ridden society in England was finished forever. I was living in a milieu of freedom and experimentation; everything was philosophical, in the sense that, unlike today, an active and aggressive questioning of every possible value and mental structure was ongoing, in even the seemingly smallest of conversations. There was an intense romantic idealism in the air and this has stayed with me and marked me deeply. When JFK was shot, I was painting huge theatre sets for a small time theatre company. We all worked for nothing. The rest of the time I made anti-Vietnam poster. We fought in the streets with the police, to bring down Apartheid; and we did. There was an attempt to make a new kind of spirituality, I was very political. So when I finally devoted myself to Art, and the end of the 60's, it had to embody the values that I manifested in other ways, in the mid-60's. It's a very good question, because people don't often ask me what the spirit of the 60's did to my subsequent paintings, and what it continues to do.

2.) Both yourself and numerous critics of your work have discussed it in terms of its relationship to four major contemporary figures, Mondrian, Matisse, Rothko, and Pollack. Indeed you have said that "if you put Mondrian, Matisse, and Rothko together, you have my work" Meaning not so much that is an amalgam or derivation but that they constitute the figures with whom you consistently dialogue. These are figures that create

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what Harold Bloom would call “the anxieties of influence,” the fathers that a strong artist has to assassinate for his own work to fully emerge. Could you expand on the nature of your long and intimate argument with their work? And could you also say why Pollack – the existential wild card-was so quickly disregarded and why your impulse should have been to tame him-I am thinking here of your remark “Mondrian taught me how to geometrize Pollack”-rather than explode into the freedoms that his work appeared to offer?

I have always been deeply attracted to a sense of structure. Another monumental influence for me would be Cézanne, whose work is heroic. He is a builder of paintings; he said that all he had was his little thrill. And this, in a sense, is all I have. I go to the mountain, as he did, again and again, and I am driven by love and feeling. Though the need to make a kind of moral order is very deep in me. My work is not a rejection of influences, or the assassination of my artistic parents, but rather, incorporation. I have eaten them, and now I am them. This is what I mean by spirituality. It's an absorption and complete identification, into another way. I have not advanced merely through a sense of competition.

I never liked or admired much Newman's criticisms of Mondrian. I always thought that it was ungrateful and inappropriate. And, ultimately I believe it to be a part of his limitation. Pollack is very interesting and important too, and like me: a linear artist. In addition, we are both obsessed by rhythm. As, of course, was Mondrian. However, my deeper agenda was always to go deep into the soul of painting; to classicize it to a degree. And to make an emotion that was built and permanent. Pollock's energy takes painting to its very limit. And like other AbEx artists: he made it extremely difficult to follow: except with further reduction. I am involved in the re-building of painting. It's a historically more complex agenda.

3.) In all events your opting for what might be seen as a transcendental wing of Abstraction goes somewhat against the climate of the times when Abstract Expressionism was beginning to be seen as a style, where Jasper Johns, whilst maintaining the visual seductiveness of the work, had clearly cooled or frozen things so that the works appeared as a barrier rather than an invitation to emotional empathy, where Ryman was engaged in paring things down to the painting's simplest components, and where Minimalism was trying to reassert an edge of social criticism, even political dissent, in a kind of common-man poetics. What were your reactions or reserves to these new tendencies?

Quite clearly, I have been variously fascinated by them: and yet critical of them. They are all important yet ultimately inadequate, in relation to what I want to do. So basically I have tried to do, or bring in to my own domain,

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some of the aspects of the work you refer to, whilst rejecting its limitations. Peter Scheldahl argued that Johns's flag paintings proved that you can't paint abstract anymore. I would argue the reverse. Which is: that if you want to paint things that already exist, you have to paint them flat, like abstract paintings. Johns is very important to me because he values and paints beautifully the subject surface, whilst embracing banal subject matter. It is transcendentalism cut off at the knees. I have kept this frontality, and I have made what might be called an emotional frontality. Which permits me to rescue from the wreck of the past: the color, the subjectivity, the touch, the sensuality and the sexuality of lost values in painting: while I paint a contemporary rhythm, which doesn't submit to spatial narrative.

My subject matter (formally) is also quite banal since it's only stripes and blocks. However, it's freer than Johns. We have very much in common though, a kind of mastery of touch; that looks back. One might even argue that Johns's paintings look like Cézanne's transformed into flags and numbers.

Am I out of fashion? I certainly hope so. The majority position is by definition over-subscribed; and therefore in no need of further representation.

4.) You have shown a consistent wariness of the vaporous dangers of spirituality and an insistence on relating it to or discovering it within life itself. It amounts almost to a belief that it starts in the ordinary? I recall a series of photos of yours from the 90's that centered on doors and windows and where the tonalities and wear of the paint on the buildings was close to your own textures and colors. Do you always start from something outside in the world, or do you also work directly off an emotion?

This feeling of course further aligns one with Johns, though our solution to this problem is very different. Particularly with abstraction, where many artists hardly know how to draw: there is a great danger of achieving a kind of empty seductiveness; that really ends up as sentimental decoration. I'm not questioning the artists' intentions: which I'm sure are very sincere. It's simply that, when one enters too acceptingly into the seductive space and beauty of abstraction, it's possible to only achieve pleasure. And that's not art. This incidentally is happening with great frequency now, in other art forms, such as video: where the artists are simply too happy with their inherent technical possibilities. In other words, where everything is visually impressive for a couple of minutes: and everyone goes home happy. This is the Biennale syndrome.

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I believe that any kind of transcendence, spirituality or redemption, starts with the ordinary. I come from the ordinary. I grew up in the ordinary. And early on, I went to work like an ordinary person. A seriously dangerous problem for an artist working in an Academy or in New York or London is that you can build your arguments on too much received opinion and philosophy. This is comfortable, but fatal. And you are likely to end up, however unwittingly, as a sophist, building or extending arguments, too comfortably situated on the accepted point of view.

I have tried to connect my work with the world that exists outside painting, from subject matter inspired by the street.

5.) Your work is intensely musical, like the intensity of listening to each other that one finds in a string quartet or in the Miles Davis albums of the sixties. It is characterized by rhythms. Modulations, intensely felt chords. It surges and affirms a highly nuanced presence and emotional range. It seems to hold time within it. In other words, you still feel that Abstraction is the ideal language for deep emotion or what might be called the lyric valuables that allow contradictions to lie up against each other?

Yes I have talked recently of the relationship that I have to music. And as you know, I had a blues club when I was 18. And I never work without music, unless I have to. It is sometimes said that all art aspires to the condition of music. I would like my art to aspire to something like the condition of music: but a condition that can be felt and experienced in a deep moment. I think with painting you can get rid of the problem of time. You can feel it abstracted in the rhythms, in the layers of the painting; but you are, for your moment, free.

I do believe abstraction is and was meant to embody deep emotion. I believe that's its job, in the history of art. The edges of the character and forms in my paintings should lie against and with each other, with complexity and emotional depth. Naturally one feels time in my work, because it is layered. It is repainted many times, in different colors and weights of paint, always by me: until somehow everything lives, however gracefully or awkwardly, in its right place. So it's a façade, but it's a façade that submits to feeling or is overwhelmed by it: since nothing is perfect.

6.) You have talked about yourself as a 'romantic realist', a stance that given our present circumstances is not easy to sustain both on account of the geo political changes taking place in the world and because numerous philosophers seem to be questioning the

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gains of our Western humanist tradition to which such an attitude clearly belongs. How do you see the real as now penetrating the romantic frame through which you “feel” the world?

This is a very big question, a question about which one could write a book. I am very aware that the romantic is now seen to be of limited relevance. However, I have attempted to articulate my idealistic sense of romanticism in the world, as it is, with its problems now. Without giving up on my true personal feeling. To say it simply, I think it's not only possible, but important to offer a deeply felt example of a humanistic art form: in a world that has become extremely cynical. I have lived through many changes, social and political, that have affected me and changed me. However, my art is trying to address something eternal and universal. So however difficult it may be for someone with my sense of connection (connectedness) to continue to offer an idealistic/humanistic view, I have to keep doing it. In fact, the worse it gets, the more crucial it is to offer it.

I hope my work can stand as an example of another possibility. I realized, when I moved out of the political arena in my radical days, that I would experience as an artist moments of guilt and impotence.

7.) You have said that your works don't deal with clarity but with revelation. What is it that you mean by that? Consuming clarity surely constitutes a form of revelation?

I understand what you mean. And certainly one form of revelation (which is to see and understand) is bound up with clarity. What I meant by my seemingly contradictory remark is that I don't necessarily associate revelation with focus and clarity. I associate it with harmony and a sense of belonging: whilst accepting that the world and being human in it is complex and inscrutable. Perhaps one could say that to have an insight into your own self doesn't necessarily have to clear everything up. I may have also made this remark in the context of a discussion of perfection. My own view is that perfection (which involves clarity) is somehow false. My own sense of harmony includes mystery and imperfection.

8.) How do you relate and choose color? I know that you have talked of yellow as conveying the tragic and the sexual but I suspect it is not your intention to allocate symbolic connotations to color? Your palette might be seen as relatively reductive in that there are clearly characteristic Scully colors, but the range of tones is immense?

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I did recently paint a painting for someone who was dying. And I used yellow and black and white. I was immediately attracted to Van Gogh in part because of yellow. Since it has such a strong sexual life-affirming charge. So many flowers and trees are yellow. I don't think of color symbolically when I work. Though I am aware that often I fight for color in my work, to assert my connection to the natural world. I actually have no theory about color whatsoever, and I have no idea really why I make my paintings the colors they are. Afterwards I can always interpret them as active, sad, resolved, awkward, etc., though not when I'm painting them. Then I am working, wet into wet, in an emotionally charged state. So I am not looking for clarity. I am looking for emotion. So I work and work, until it arrives. I am not, in a sense, making it or forcing it or controlling: I am improvising and painting with feeling until it arrives. I feel as if I am making the painting, though I am not controlling its destiny.

There is, as you say, a wide tonal range in my work. And most of the colors are impure and then found again on the surface, since that's where they are given their body and shape and place, how they are situated and painted and how the rhythm of the painting is affected by them. So it's extremely complex since a painting that was yellow that has turned black in its journey can never be a completely black painting. It will always be a black painting with a yellow history. This of course is the way our world is made. There's no such thing as a clean slate.

9.) *What is your intention with the floating pieces?*

I wanted to make a double-sided environmentally active painting. That engaged memory, and walking around: the way sculpture does. I was also fascinated by the idea of a painting that was tentatively connected to the wall. It was also a way of activating painting. Since paintings are occasionally overlooked, because they are always presented the same way. Flat to the wall. I wanted to turn them out into the space, and put them into a floating relationship with architecture, and especially the floor. I once saw a double-sided drawing installed this way: perpendicular to the wall. I couldn't stop walking around it.

10.) *In the eighties many artists deconstructed Abstraction, insisting that it is essentially a language code, a known rhetorical figure that stands as one of the major contributions of Modernism. How would you answer that?*

The painters who deconstructed abstraction are mostly, in fact, from my generation. I think of them as clerks or bookkeepers. They have replaced a

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sense of creativity with a sense of inquiry. And most of them would, I suspect, have been nearly top of their class at school.

11.) I am wondering how you react to that English tradition of portraiture that has accompanied across the years- Bacon, Auerbach, Freud- that seems in a strange way to compliment your own concerns in that it is deeply human, saturated in emotion, full of contradictions, clumsily moving forward, and overwhelming as presence?

This is a fascinating question, and one that I had to answer definitively when I was a student in England. I was giving a lecture once in Berkeley, California, and someone asked me why I left England. I replied that once I had a dream, and in my dream I walked into a wet cobblestone cul-de-sac. At the end of the cul-de-sac, slumped against a damp brick wall, were Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud, dead drunk, sketching each other. I love everything about their enterprise: with the exception of its insularity, and its hermetic investment in a certain branch of London society. This again relates to the question of the '60s. They grew up in another age, during the war. I grew up in an age where we rejected the high-society bohemian values that preceded us in favor of a bigger internationally minded idea.

12.) And finally, Sean, what new concerns, as emotional tensions or as images from the world outside are now pushing themselves forwards as urgencies within your latest works?

My work lately moves towards more lyrical movement and swing within the work. The architecture that was so strong in the '80s has given way to a more influential brushstroke. Instead of making my work more critical of the condition and possibility of painting, it becomes more secure in its own simple and unique opportunity. The word Light enters, these days, with great regularity into my titles.