

Kevin Power: Questions for Sean Scully

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Question 1: You construct through what you term a 'daft plan' of verticals and horizontals as a kind of loose inclusive form that allows you to feel at ease with yourself. But how do you understand these principles – as formal, as symbolic, or as psychological?

Answer: Of course I use horizontals and verticals, more or less, exclusively. I see them as symbolic and psychological. Horizontals are the eternal horizon, where we see the edge of our own local world. Verticals are assertive, like us standing. There are a lot of references to figures and nature in my work, so naturally it has a psychological aspect to it; where the assertive and the affirmative human action comes into contact with the permanent.

Question 2: Sixties London would have included the London Group, English Pop, Rauschenberg, the huge 1954-64, which I guess, was like your first overall view of American work etc? How did you negotiate all of this? Where did you see a site for yourself?

Answer: London, by many, was regarded as the epicenter of the universe during the 1960's and more specifically in '67. My involvement with the culture of music and political change was total. As you know, I opened a blues club in '68 and I received, lets say, the occasional affectionate smack on the back of the head, in Trafalgar Square, when the police were trying to discourage our extremely enthusiastic attempts to bring down apartheid in South Africa. It was an extraordinary moment to be young and to this day I am deeply marked by it. That is to say, I remain romantic and idealistic.

London recovered its extraordinary verve. All influences were pouring in and being absorbed, like Japanese cinema, American blues, French radical thinking

and unrestrained hope. I was making ‘political’ posters against the US war in Vietnam, and very importantly I was beginning to understand the long-term differences between art and politics, and what their limitations and possibilities were, and are to this day.

Question 3: Ambiguity, the ‘principle of uncertainty’ via Heisenberg, ‘negative capacity’ via Keats were very much contemporary figures of the Sixties. These are saturated, existential, and romantic, stances towards reality. You seem to have constantly held to them, suffused them some kind of poetic whisper or affirmative shout. Much contemporary work places language at the centre whereas you still hold to ‘man, and above all to ‘man’ as engagé, committed in the Sartrean sense as centre. The Sartrean affirmation was ideological, and you remain deeply political - how do you see this entering the work?

Answer: Yes, I hold to man in the face of the constant disconnection from and disembodiment of language and methods of the dissemination of language and information (such as war on television), from our emotional moral self. I have watched this tendency develop, definitely since the Sixties, and it disturbs me. I try always to reconnect my language with emotional human force. I live in an age of deconstruction and sophism, where spirituality is circumvented, in favour of socially and morally ‘separated’ language games. I see that this can have a function, since it might serve some notion of clarity, but I don’t ultimately believe this. I don’t believe that a separation of linguistic structure from morality and emotion clarifies anything of any use. I am therefore a reconstructivist. My work is affirmative. I want to affirm the expressive potential of the individual, to reestablish this in the face of world order.

Question 4: I mentioned Rothko in the sense that your forms also often bleed at the edges; have an understated aura. But could you tell me what it was that impacted you about Rothko's work, what it was that mattered, how much the work was the measure of the man?

Answer: The majority tendency in our age is to simplify the art problem. In other words, the visual and the serious have come apart, thus canceling out the profound. In the work of Rothko, and one or two others, the ideal of making high-minded visual art that's great to look at (like, for example, Veronese) is achieved.

Question 5: Your work is a high energy construct, very much a charge of the emotions of the moment, of a knot of emotions. Are they specific, that is, anchored in a known circumstance or feeling, or are they more a general anomic condition?

Answer: The emotions that I'm working out of, or working under the influence of, must be specific since they have to be present in order to exert their influence. But I am not attempting to 'paint them' or 'represent' them, though I am definitely directed by them. But feelings don't have names necessarily. When I'm painting in the countryside I might make a green painting. However my problems and possibilities get carried around with me. I think the big issue is to have a connection with the world so that this connection can be recognized in the work. Then it's affecting.

Question 6: Are these loose formal structures metaphors, resistances that you subjectify and humanize?

Answer: These formal structures like 2,3,4,6 or even 5 are common and actually don't mean anything. I made a very simple little triptych last month in Barcelona. The painting came out very dark. It looked like a painting from the 19th or 17th century, pushed through the curtain of abstraction so that it arrived in the present: remade wrong. It has the feeling of the past that is all shadow, and touch, but it's made out of the material that we have now.

Question 7: Your work process seems to me to involve a minimal structuring agent that may have its origin in diverse sources, coming both from the world outside and from the

organizing tendency of the mind. I am referring once again to the horizontal/vertical structure, or the pairing both as oppositional and as complementary forces. But my point is that when you are working these reference points become holds that in a very literal sense 'hold' the physical activity together. Things are cancelled out, overwritten, without a second thought, and harmony in any classical sense is clearly not a central objective. What seems to matter is something more complex, like a glimpse of truth, that seems to be the drive behind the work, what is emotionally and intellectually at stake. You may well cancel out a colour through what seems to me essentially an impulsive reaction, and you may also cancel out a type of brushstroke without thinking specifically about what lies next to it. You seem rather to think or act in terms of a fluid whole that can finally, through a momentary recognition, or intuition, or through a more calculated mental process as to what works or does not work, come to some kind of resolution. Although, I suspect if one thing does not work it immediately upsets the whole applecart and things have to reposition themselves, find their place once again. I may, of course, be off the mark in what I have said but I'd like you to comment on the process that is central to the works, as an enactment or re-enactment of something coming into being?

Answer: I am surprised by how well you intuit my working process since I have never explained it to you. Also to a degree you answer your own question. I paint and repaint to 'get at' or 'hold' a glimpse of some truth. That's why my work is not formalism or even a form of structuralism. I don't work towards a sense of obvious harmony, though I am concerned with beauty. Because it has a surface like no other art form, I believe that painting cannot only show pathos but is uniquely able, at rare moments, to embody it. The difference between an image and a painting is profound, like the difference between a photograph of a person and a person. The only visual art form that can embody so much experiential structure and feeling in a single moment, a glimpse, is painting. And that's a question of skin.

I'm using extremely simple forms that I see running through the basic human ordering systems. I never allow it to become baroque or intricate, I keep it somehow fundamental so that it can be recognized from more or less any cultural point of view. I see these simple forms as what unites us and what runs beneath cultural superstructures that have caused us to be estranged. This is why I keep it simple. Then I'm using body and my emotional condition to layer it with meaning, to give it the power to draw out light, touch and feeling.

Every time I start work, I am aware that I am picking up, once again, a simple way of ordering relationships. But the act of painting is highly nuanced so after a while (I mean about 30 years) the colour and the material and the emotion become unified, everything is inseparable from everything else. So the relationships between the shapes are constantly open to re-interpretation, everything becomes weighted and coloured into place, and relationships are ongoing and flexible and nuanced, their meaning is not fixed or rigid although what they paint into place is basic.

Question 8: Related to the question I have just asked, I'd also like you to specifically address the implications, meanings, and weights of the brushstroke, since it often involves very different kinds of register which presumably have to read as distinct emotional states, or as the complexity of physical action, as in the metaphor of the dance so present in Matisse and Pollock, and yet, of course, so different in their understanding. Do you work through a whole range of emotional states within the picture, as part of its essential tension, as fragmentary statements or impulses? Or do you see the whole as an emotional statement with a coherence that can also embrace contradictions?

Answer: When I am working I'm not interested in simply arriving at something that looks good visually. I had a friend comment once, after watching a film of me working, that I had painted out three or four good paintings on my way to the final version. She was right in a sense, but a painting has to bring more, it has to embody meaning. It's not just a sign; it's a sign with a skin and a body.

If the spaces between the blocks in my paintings are opening up that has meaning. It makes the relationships less secure or more flexible; it's not a simple question of a visual effect.

When I'm working I'm moving around a lot in front of the paintings, so there is rhythm in the brushwork, this is affecting the shape, how it is made, how it looks, how it meets, or not, the shapes next to it. The way I'm painting directly affects the weight of the paint and thus the colour. Everything is painted into its place, as the title 'wall' implies I'm building a surface, but I'm building out of feeling directly, and this feeling has rhythm.

Cezanne paints the ordinary. He paints his apples and his apples are ordinary just like any others. So that cannot be the point. To paint the subject down, or to paint a subject that is banal, is to search for transcendence in the simple, to elevate the simple rather than to illustrate the important.

Artists who want to 'get at something' to represent a profound moment with intimacy have to work with the simple. So obviously, my work is relating to Mondrian and Newman, but my painting solution is very different. Mine includes sensuality and the body and I pursue a kind of pathos that is ever-present in our attempts to capture these moments.

Cezanne said that all he had was his little thrill, and in a sense that is what he had. He was a picture builder who wanted to give deep structure to feeling. I could say the same: all I have is my little thrill, supported by will.

Question 9: I'd also like you to comment on your sense of 'the pair' that runs throughout your work. Is it a kind of metaphor for the basic human relationship and of the whole range of the confused flow of emotions and ideas that come from that?

Answer: The Pair.

The idea of coupling is fundamental to my work. I've been working with diptychs for many years, which I believe represents an obsession with relation. I wanted to put back into painting (abstraction as its called) relationship, and the first relationship is ourselves in the mirror or ourselves with another. It's an endless possibility and an endless problem. In fact it's THE problem and THE possibility: so I'm painting it, again and again as it happens.

In this sense abstraction can be considered close to philosophy, the juxtaposition of bodies and thoughts, whose open-ended pairing and ordering and texture reveal deeper meaning.

Question 10: How do you set yourself in relation to Greenberg's statement that the superiority of abstract art is based on its historical justification, by which he means abstract art's ability to salvage something from the collapse of the bourgeois cultural order. In other words, in Greenberg's terms, that it produced an avant-garde culture, a superior consciousness of history. By which at one more remove he undoubtedly meant a Marxist critique of society. There is a lot at stake here and Greenberg also insists that there are higher values than aesthetic values, and he reminds us of Thomas Mann's argument that to take aesthetic values and introduce them into questions of morality is a barbarism. It is a useful reminder! Can art, in fact, affect the course of human affairs? Where do you see yourself within this debate?

Answer: I think of Greenberg as probably a great man who I don't agree with. He may be right about the historical position of abstraction, if one considers the work of Malevich and Rosanova etc. However, he is also the same person who said at a lecture I attended "Dem Ruskies can't paint". I personally think that, like Napoleon, Greenberg lost his way. The historical vitality that he refers to is not

exemplified by abstract painting that is made (or designed) according to canons of perfect arrangement or good taste or lets say high-minded taste.

The high-minded ambition that I refer to with Rothko has nothing to do with taste, the question of beauty is raised here. However to my mind beauty in art has to be complex and complete as an experience and must therefore be prepared to take on pain and pathos.

I don't see abstraction as historically superior. But then it's true to say that Greenberg's historical references are very different to mine and I was born when the Second World War was over. I think abstraction in a sense could be considered as historically inferior. This might be even more interesting.

I am not interested in the obvious centres of power. The greatest Rococco painter, for example, was Jean Antoine Watteau who painted the demise of his own artistic context. I would argue that 'power' obscures truth or emotion. I find myself historically in the position of an individualist, since the terrain that I look out on is occupied by other art forms. This allows me to make paintings that are 'figurative', or to put it another way, that are concerned with the memory of the human figure. I paint relationships. I don't paint abstractions. I think the 'weakness' of abstraction is the very centre of its expressive potential.

Historically speaking one might say that my work has evolved in reverse. Greenberg is right to assert that abstraction came out of revolution, but at that point it was weighted with mysticism and symbolism. In America it was opened up and cleaned up so that it became visually and physically commanding and self-evident. I worked my way through minimalism, now I'm taking a simple syntax that has been identified with suprematism and minimalism and I'm filling it in. I'm giving it back to emotion and humanism, and since my own story begins in Europe, and since I have the whole history of European painting to draw on, I'm using it. It would be different and unavailable for an artist who started life in

America. As information moves back and forth it's modified and transformed, and then it takes on a possible new meaning. Painting seems especially adapted to this process of re-interpretation since it has the ability to absorb small changes that give off different emotional realities. It's limited and highly responsive without ever entirely explaining itself. In the beginning of Italian art (13th century) painting was devotional, and almost entirely devoid of ego. It might have to return to that state in order to continue. That's one of its many options.

Question 11: This takes me to my own central problem with reading abstraction. I don't believe, of course, that it dies. I remember Pablo Palazuelo telling me that there was no way of going back to any prior condition once it had been stated: an unequivocal claim for its superiority as a language. But I do wonder, with the collapse of Marxism, with its dialectic ceasing, if there has been nothing left for abstract art but its own values, i.e. it talks about itself and thus matters only to very few of us? And possibly even more problematic is the fact that we now feel intellectually absolutely at ease within its discourse. I mean that the values that abstract art stands for are no longer in active interplay with other values which they refuse to be subsumed under. I believe that abstraction has certainly been revived through deconstruction, through deconstructing how language systems work, and what they have come to mean. It has never lost its pertinence as a metaphor for science that produces images of the world of ourselves that we have never seen and are abstract in essence (I expect you remember that book by Waddington, in the 60s I think, that showed the intimate relationships between the abstract works of the Expressionists and biology). I also think, and it is here that I would inevitably situate your work that abstraction can still track the complexity, inclusiveness, uncertainty, and contradictoriness of human nature and of contemporary experience - but I also wonder how it can do so! Does it need a structure? Could it be as flowing as life itself? The possibilities seem immense but not all are opportune or touch a nerve within our time. The whole Eurocentric sense of the unquestionable superiority of Western civilization is being put under radical question and this inevitably means a collapse of many of our central myths?

Answer: Your problem with reading abstraction leads us into our zone of disagreement. Since I don't really care so much about the connection between abstraction and its obvious centre of cultural political power, it necessarily follows that I don't see its loss as anything other than a future possibility in the ongoing evolution of painting, abstraction being only one part.

If one looks, for example, at a 50 year old film it looks as if it is 50 years old. Despite my love of film and my knowledge of it, I acknowledge that this is a problem. This will happen soon enough to video too, because it depends so deeply on the seductive power of technology. It has 'obvious power', 'obvious appeal'; too obvious to be interesting.

I am personally not concerned with the development of abstraction. I am involved with the development and the relevance of painting. That is why my work is so different from abstract painting (like Newman) that it has formal similarities to. On reading your question again, I might revise my opinion that we disagree here, but I do believe we see it as something distinct culturally.

I also don't agree that abstraction was revived by deconstruction. Deconstruction in philosophy might have been an interesting moment, a little house cleaning so-to-speak. But in painting I believe it has achieved perfect mediocrity. Because painting is an art form and philosophy is not. Painting is made out of material and if it's used as a terrain of examination it might sound clever, but finally, it lacks the quality that is crucial to all visual art: the power to affect us.

DECONSTRUCTIVISM

As I previously mentioned, I'm a reconstructivist. It's one thing to take a bus apart, and as I've acknowledged it might be argued that it has a function, but it requires an entirely distinct form of energy to put it back together again.

The philosopher Schelling in the 19th century thought that art had reached the place that philosophy struggled to find. The power of painting lies in its ability to realign and redefine itself with evolving concerns without having to transform its physical character. It can also compress feeling and experience in a way that doesn't submit to over explanation, into a simple flat surface. Philosophy is, in a sense, everything. So is painting, but it's a different kind of everything. Philosophy has to explain itself. If it doesn't, it is in danger of becoming Art. When Art tries to explain itself it becomes weak, and the abstract painters who were influenced by deconstructivist philosophy did just that. I can see that the conceptualists might like it, but that's not my problem; I'm making paintings.

I use abstract forms because they are fundamental shapes, this makes the rhythms of the relationships move in a free space. Nearly every form of communication in the world now submits to deconstruction. Painting has moved into a space where it can resist this juggernaut.

Question 12: You said somewhere that beauty has more to do with the relationships we make than with the way we make things, in that we're not living in an age of crafts. How do you take that over into the work? I recall Olson arguing that our central task after Modernism was to undermine the egocentric position of man, of man as artist, as authority, and to find a more ex-centric stance to reality. In terms of poetry this implies a new inclusiveness, both in terms of reducing the need for a dominant authorial language and in a new receptiveness to outside voices, to other narrations. How do you feel that this beauty, implicit in relations with an 'other', can enter the work, i.e. so that the artist actually does listen to the 'other' as equal?

ANSWER: We are not living predominantly in an age of crafts. This does not mean however that crafts do not exist, or that they are not important. They are very important, outside the militarily and economically dominant corner in which we live. But in a mass produced culture, one of our shrinking possibilities lies in the arrangement of mass produced objects as opposed to the objects themselves. If

you go into your friend's house and he has the same telephone as yours, it may not be on the same table and even if it is it may not be on the same carpet and even if it is it can't be in the same apartment unless you live together. Identical arrangements don't exist.

In my own work I am taking my painting into its own humanistic expressive history and away from the direction of the mass-produced world. One could argue that the mass produced world is dehumanizing, though that depends on how we use it and where we create our areas of freedom. My work is relentlessly emotive and whenever I paint I surrender to emotion made by hand, so in that sense I am resistant. I'm making a romantic complement or opposition.

Question: And finally I know that you are now teaching in Germany, in a master class where painting stands as a central figure but also as an open figure. What would you see as your central purpose in taking on this task that at one level can only be a distraction from the work even though it obviously supplies a continuing dialogue with the present through the interests and preoccupations of the students?

Answer: I am teaching in the Academy in Munich because simply put: I want to give a place to young people who want to paint and who have, in art schools, been bullied into not doing so.

