

Sean Scully in conversation with Tim Marlow, Tate Gallery, London: 25 March 2004

Sean when I think of you I think of many many things, you were born in Dublin, you moved to London when you were younger, you now have studios, at the last count in London, Munich, Barcelona, New York. You've taught in places as diverse as Chelsea Goldsmith, Princeton, Sunderland and more recently you were made a professor in Munich so you have this incredible diversity, but I want to bring it back to a story I once heard and I have never actually asked you if it's true or not somebody told me that you actually go into this extraordinary life when you were working as a builder, but you made lunchtime visits to what was called the Tate gallery, what is now called Tate Britain. Is that true is it how you got into art?

It's a true story, it's not how I got into art it's not that simple, I wanted to go to art school and I had a big fight to go to art school one thing that is extremely important about London is that is an institution that was started after the war by the government called Floodlight, and it's a beautiful title instead of pointing floodlights up at the sky looking for bombers they pointed the floodlights at books so you could go to evening institute, so I went to evening institute, and gradually clawed my way out of being a member of the working majority. And on my way to doing that I was working in the Victoria Palace Hotel which is over Victoria Station, and we were working in the great ballroom it's kind of interesting actually because the plasterers were doing the ceiling, and they're the artists, the laborers, who were the slaves were underneath, making the plaster, twenty percent of which you get back on your head and the space above the scaffold is 8 ft and the space below is five feet, so you can imagine what you look like when you get home, you look like a boxer, every night, it is a romantic story. And now I come to the nice part. I had my scooter as you know. And I parked it outside right near where that cinema is, the theatre, that dome one, there was a parking place there, London was a lot easier in those days, you could park anywhere, and I did. And I would drive down to the Tate, what I looked for was an opening, a window that would allow me to enter art. And Vincent van Gogh provided that window with the utter sincerity and honesty of that painting, the painting of the chair which is now in the National Gallery/ and then I would eat my lunch on the scooter going back like this. So I would look at the painting and go back everyday I did this, which is exceptional for a working class kid. It's also a fantastic alibi for free admission into museums and galleries, isn't it....

Well so is Floodlight, it's very important. It allows people to travel through the social structure, you can do that in London if you want to do it you can do it, but have to give up all your spare time that's the price.

Does van Gogh still seem as important to you now as he did then? or does taste---is it layered do you build ---pivotal figure?

It's an interesting question, I don't think that I've really abandoned any influence that I've had I've added, I've taken on more as life has gone. I have had later a big influence from Spanish paintings, that's very evident in my work and with Vincent, I just think that he is beyond criticism. I absolutely adore him.

I still find it extraordinary of graspo the idea that everyting we see of van gogs is painted in, well ten years is his period as a practicing arist the potato eaters is 1884-85, the majority of the work we see of vangogh's is two to three, is and incredibly intense period. do you see that intensity in the owork---

yeah for me its undeniable its of course an act of extreme giving , self giving and self destruction, ive felt this myself. recently we were living in Barcelona, and when we live in Barcelona, its very primitive the way w live. really simplui life, ad everday we do the same thing, we go to the studio and we work. we go and get lunch for ten euro or whatever it is the we go back and everything is stripped down to fit the work. and after a couple of weeks of working like this I feel like I'm literally running on empy, I'm so nervous and strung out, emptied out and in a way a little destroyed. so to do that for three years woul dresult in a crisis, but of course the painting are just incredible, things there so passionate, direct honest and radiating love.

well we go waling on a mountain, but usually it has to be something that s connected to a revitalization, a retouching of the surface of nature and I can't imagine any other way to get better in a sense, because when you're painting, the way I painti any way, I don't get other people to make my paiontings, I 'm not a pimp artist let's say. I don't pay less than the mimumun wage sand have batteries of people making their work. I make all my own work myself, that's what its dependent on, its dependent on this personal commitment. and I have to go walking or taking looking I tend to do it just by taking little breaks

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no I can , what I woul dsay is that in that month which is a typical sojourn in Barcelona and I work like crazy and it gets mor enad more and more intenst and then it starts to go so well. that I almost think that I m loosingin my mind sometimes because in is coming out so beautiful and so imnocently in a way. and then we lock the door and go away, because I can't really move anyway because of the wet paintings and the air is dangerous, after a while ouve got so much ol paint drying it becomes almost hostile to human life, so its best to go away.

we I that's something that I have really no idea about I don't think about these things very much, I'm more interested in being grateful that I make enery, you understand, I'm so happy that I can make energy. In the way that I live, so in that sense I feel extremely lucky, very priveledged. To be able to do this. So I tend to ...ask me that question again.

no there's a relationship, of course, but the relationship is quite mysterious in the sense that one is carrying over information or a felleing a desire to make a certain kkind of a painting, from before, that's not really a reflection of how one is feeling at the time so im not simply refelkceting moods but what I am trying to carry forward I suppose are bigger feelings or more enduring feeling, that might be the way to say it. So the work is sometimes very hard to dovery hard to keep going, of course its very hard to do

anything for a long time. Its very hard to keep anything going, but then Im thinking about ideas or conversations ro sensations, and of course you might think when one is happy one makes maybe a happy painting, but I remember one day I made a paionting that I still have, its extremely harmonious, its based on several points but theres a line of reds going down in the painting and as they go down they get brighter and there are these different creamy colors, they look like lights, nithg lights, and this was a really bad day for me and I painted a fantastic painting, so one thing is really not controlling the other but what what of course I am trying to do which is particular to painting, I think is make a compresseion, its not a construction as are other manifestations of the visual arts, a painting is a compression where everything is somehow made thought felt, and arrived at at the same time so one might describe it as a monumental moment which is what I think I'm looking for. So there's emotion in it, theres a lot of emotion, and of course I am, as my friends will attest, a moody guy. And so Im not a cool painter, but the way all this works is quite difficult to separate out sometimes. In the last few years for example I had the worst three years of my life I would say. Except when maybe my son died, that was I would say maybe a shorter disaster period. The last three years, my father dies, and I had many other personal troubles and recently my mother died the whole thing was extremely traumatic, we moved to London and then we lived with my parents, because they didn't like where they lived, so moved in to say it was good enough for us. So there we all were, together in a very difficult situation, because its difficult to die, and my father was dying and then my nmother was dying and in that three years I made some of the most light filled paintings and some of the most gentle paintings, I have ever made, so , its very complex. Its like that guy barnard in the crying games says: who knows the secrest of the human heart.

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well I sometimes am being used by my work, because sometimes I think its really ugly it has a , its ubsurdly sincere. And in that sense, the things I do the dthign I say the way I am, I am in a sense a ridiculous figure, particularly in London which is so hip

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ive seen this aspiration in London for a long time and I've seen it gradually getting better like somebody making a football team over 30 or 40 years and London has finally got what it wanted to get in the 60's in terms of visual arts, its hip, and estimated. And of course I am in the art mogul sense in the gagosian, Saatchi sense, I am an awkward situation. I make these things athat are very very intesnse very meant sincere relentless driven and I say things that go along with that, and in that sense they are strange works b/c they are on one hand clear and on the other hand very very complex. So I'm interested in my work but Im perhaopops not as interested in it as other people are maybe.

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its very very difficult I think for all of ourselves to be abel to see ourselves as we are to others, the way we are in space. And I think that sometimes the most attractive people are those that are not aware of themselves in a sense, not aware of their potential, lets say. I would say that I am an extremely good fighter, fo me to go to new york when I went to new york and to not be got rid of is quite something because in the 70's, when I went to new york, if you wanted to get rid of an artist you only needed one word, and that word was European and you'd turn from a racing car to an old car with the doors

falling off in a second, because the perception of you would be that your work was not on in they had the tiger by the tail and they didn't want any interlopers into that situation whatever moment of madness decided me to go to new york I went there and once I engaged in that fight, I wouldn't leave until I'd made it the way I wanted, and then we left.

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well im not sure htat it has a defining certitude one might say, but on the other hand it has meaning, theres a stronger concentration on materials in euro art one could argue, on the surface of thing, and the weight of materials the weight of matter, anselm keiffer would be a ferfect example and the art made in the usa has another quality which of course comes from, many places but one places is folk art the Hudson river school and big America, big space and an unforgiving situation where there is no room for mistake where as in London in particular nad in Barcelona I woul dsay, on is allowed to experiment more with ones being with out risking everything in new york you can't do that, the pressure is just enormous. So I think that fo me , if I think back on it I would say that two things happened one was that I wanted to go to ny b/c I wanted in a sense to make my work big and confrontational in some way and I wanted to close down the geographical space between what I was doing and what I was doing it in relation to. So I was working with all the people that I was interested in , and then my work underwent a crisis, a second crisis where I wanted to give it body and soul dand spirita dn fro that, I came back to my European roots. And I engaged not ionly in eurpean painting but in the dialogue of having exhibitions in Europe and having perople write on my work, bc you learn a lot when people write on your work.

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ia was a fuigurative painter and I might have stayed a s afigurative painter had my circumstances been different. Because we all like to think that we are what we are but what we are is tremendously defined by context, we're in a relationship with the world everybodys in a relationship and everything that you touch in your life is effecting you and in fact making your own personal content and theres another thing that you start out with ,your spirit, however you would like to describe that and then there's early experiences that are very powerful, but I changed in London before I went to newcastel to abstraction, I started to make abstract paintings, and there were two big options at that time and one was provided by bacon and freud and david hockney,a ndthe other was provided by the abstact painters in engladn and there were many of them, john hoyland was extrememly important then. And was influentioal and others too.,ian stevernsen was my prof nad tess gerray was shoeing her work a lot. So ia had already changed from figuration to abstraction, I wanted to get a the ambtion of abstraction in its most intense form** I wanted to understand abstract expressionism better, in other words,really eat it in some way b/c I was always in love with the Rothko room of course, but its not enough to look at a painting you know , one has to see where that paintings comes from one has to see new mexicop for example or one has to see seatle or one has to the west coast and see hwere Clifford still is from, you can go to canyou de shea, where all the Indians live, Navajos live there, and all the rock faces, iron oxide comes through, they looklike paintings, they look like abstract expressionsist paintings and one can see where it comes from clearly, and the war and this desire to make a kind of secular universal spirituality, I'm very interested in this

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well I can't say definitively if it has that power or not**for me of course but Im not paintings my pictures for me I don't have a big enough house, but I belivedv it has that possibility and it certainly have that hope