

October 2005

Sean Scully at The Phillips Collection, Washington DC

SS: I will only talk for an hour, I will try to make it concise today I'm going to take you through a story of my work how it evolved, a little bit about my life and how I got to make the paintings you will see in the Phillips Collection. On the second floor of the Phillips Collection Stephen has installed a small retrospective to give you some background information. Today I'm going to try and cover the evolution of this early work and the crisis as I see it in abstraction the fall of modernism and what I did in response.

This painting (*Overlay 1*, 1973) was painted in London after I came to the United States. The first time I came to the United States was on a fellowship, the Frank Knox fellowship. I went to Harvard University and worked in the Carpenter Center in a Corbusier building. I got 2500 dollars a year to live on, which of course is far too much. I remember getting a bill for 8000 dollars from the University and when I went to the office the woman there told me it was alright I didn't have to pay it so then I understood America. It's been working that way ever since, I wish someone told me then the more debt you were in the more you money you had.

What I tried to do with these paintings was to do something in response to cubism and I wanted to try and enliven abstraction by making it illusionistic. To put space into the painting and make the painting pictorial because obviously if you have an abstract painting you've lost the possibility to tell stories, you've lost the human figure so as a compensating element I thought that perhaps I could make the painting so it was systematically overlapping, and at the same time giving the pleasure of illusionism, a pictorialism of some kind to try and keep the visual interest going, the human need for narrative and representation. This was a painting I made after I had been in America and what I used to do with these paintings was measure off grids that were even but arbitrarily connected to each other. For example this red edge was really an accident. What happened the was the painting had a kind of inner tumbling space so that one would work on the painting until it was completely filled up, and when one got to the point that I started taking away information that was put down in the first place the painting would obviously be finished. Naturally it has a relationship to the space that one finds in Jackson Pollocks paintings but it's far more systematised, I would say.

This painting (*Grey*, 1973) is also upstairs, it was painted around the same time immediately on my return from Boston. Again I began with primary colours and gradually worked over the painting until the primary colours were showing through from the back in chinks so it's important once again to think of the relationship of cubism where the object is broken down and the space becomes spread out and at the same time introverted so it's pushed into the painting in a way that's difficult to follow in terms of the narrative of the object representing the crisis of the object.

This (*Overlay #2*, 1974) is a very important painting in relation to what happened later. There was a period when I was in England and once again plotting my escape to the

United States and I was determined to come to the United States because I wanted to make free abstract painting, free thinking abstract painting. It was really necessary for me to come to find an audience for my work. I had already begun to find an audience for my work in the states before I arrived, so there was an automatic relationship. Now these paintings were made in 1974 and they have never been shown until now, well they were shown briefly at West Coast by and large they have not been shown the flat paintings. So what I was doing with these paintings was questioning the idea of illusionism as a way of keeping painting going. Now these open grid paintings, of which there is only one upstairs represent intent to return painting to the issue of surface to make a very physical subjective surface cut through by a sense of structure. The paintings were all called Overlay which is characteristic of my work from the very beginning, it still is characteristic of that. In other words there has always been attempt by me to make a mystery or a compression of a surface. The paintings before were illusionistic but they came out of a sense of layering, overlapping a relentless sense of one thing on top of another thing to make a history of the making of the painting within the painting that can be followed. And these are not narrative in the sense that the ones before these are, paintings that have to be felt and are more mysterious, in other words not explaining the space of the painting. The lines in the painting were made with masking tape that was laid on the painting was painted again and then another set of lines were laid on with masking tape and the painting was painted again with heavy rollers and then it was pulled up and if it wasn't what I wanted I would start again and lay the paint down again with the rollers to try and make a skin that was cut in the way that a wall has spaces between the bricks. So they are negative spaces but in a sense they are holding the wall together. So here you have the romantic and the structural so I think these are crucial paintings they are coming out now finally to see the light of the day what's also interesting about these paintings for me in a personal sense is they haven't been shown for 31 years since they were made. That's pay back or as Turner says it's a rum business. If you decide to it you have to ready you have to be ready sit on your own work for 31 years.

This (*Brennus*, 1979) is kind of impossible to see and they were actually kind of impossible to sell so there's consistency there. These are the paintings I made when I came to America. When I came to America I metaphorically of course, burned down my own house. I'd build up something that was based on the grid as you can see, or the cross, the intersection of things, the one thing holding together another thing. There's a kind of binding in the early paintings there's always a cross of one kind or another whether it's a diagonal crossing or weaving or a vertical one but there's always a cross and what occurred to me recently is that when I came to the States my cross became uncrossed so in this painting as you can clearly see there are only horizontal lines. All the paintings that I made after I came to the States were made with horizontals only, so I stripped down the paintings to their utter minimum and the paintings became more connected to surface, and the history of surface making, the subjective surface as they developed.

Now naturally there is a relationship here with minimalism. But I was a reluctant member in the sense that this is a night painting it is made with a kind of night light, red black,

blue black, grey, brown, night colors one set on top of another equally striped all the way down so in a sense they are kind of zen paintings. I also was marking my own time, holding a position and working like this for five years. This was extremely important because I didn't come to the states with the idea that I could just come to the States. I think I understood the difficulty of being an immigrant and there's more to being an immigrant than you would realize, at the outset. It's more difficult than one imagines it is going to be. Places are more different than one might imagine despite globalization. So I took out of my work the color and the cross, that makes the sense of a prescribed shape the drawing of a rectangle or the drawing of a lozenge shape and I only allowed myself to work with horizontal lines. And obviously I was very connected to the work of Agnes Martin at this time. These are burned, in a sense burned paintings but relentlessly Zen, contemplative, meditative, and they gave me a chance to make my work, hold my position and be ready.

About 1980 after working on these grey and black paintings for five years very consistently with tremendous amount of discipline. I decide to try to reintroduce the idea of relationship into painting. In other words I'm thinking if you take out a figure from a painting, human figure you take out representation and pure representation a tree, house whatever things in the world you are creating an absence but it's not possible to create the absence inside a human being. You are creating an absence of the satisfaction of the answer of a human being. But we can't alter the human need of narrative representation a connection with the world sensuality and so on. All the things that we associate with content. I mean you can't make monochromatic paintings and expect to save abstract painting. It's not going to fly because it doesn't have in it the things human beings need. So having taken out the space, taken out the geometry, the sense of divisions and the reference to architecture in these black paintings; having made a very intense but other worldly body of work I decided to put back relationships, proportion, zones one thing against another in a kind of competition, a kind of dialogue. This painting is called (*Araby*, 1981) painted in 1981 and you can also see this upstairs. The areas in this painting start to become physical and painted. There is another dimension to it which is sculptural, the ability to make a relationship.

I got to this (*Backs and Fronts*, 1981) from the Black paintings you saw in about 18 months. So as you can see I seriously changed my mind. This painting is 20 ft long, it was shown once in New York and has never been shown since, it's called Backs and Fronts so now I'm making a reference to something figurative. It's not called untitled # 33 or whatever.

It's a powerful reaction against minimalism and it involves proportion, colour, direction and surface. Some panels are casually painted and others are less casually painted some are quite tight, referring to the black paintings, some are really opened up and the colour of course is exotic. So this is a form of declaration it declares what I'm going to do there after.

This painting (*Red and Red*, 1986) is what I did there after. This painting is called The Fall. This painting was bought by Gifford Phillips one lovely day when David McKee

also came to the studio. At that time Gifford Phillips was about my age so it's very interesting when you see these things after a time and you see what happens to them. This painting takes the notions that are in Backs in Fronts and started in paintings such as Araby to a more emphatically physically aggressive point. There is a huge lump of red divided physically and then somehow unified in a painterly sense. Unified to use the sense metaphorically, with the skin of culture. with handmade brushstrokes. Here in the right of this painting there's a shallow panel a very heavy panel in the middle and then the painting draws back and it's broken in two places on the left. So the paintings are structured yet painted it's as though I'm trying to make the painting in pieces to make something that is broken and put it back together again or hold it together with paint. So as a metaphor that's quite interesting. There's a psychological effort. What I'm trying to do in a sense is save abstract painting one of the things about it psychologically is I think of it as something that's broken and I'm insisting that one can repair it with paint, bond it together with paint.

I'll tell you a little story that's quite interesting. There's a photograph upstairs of my studio on Duane Street near where the world trade center was. And in that studio when I moved into the studio there were shelves because it had been a textile warehouse and the entire inside of the space it was a cavernous 4,000 square feet was that filled with shelves that were all made of wood and the wood was beautiful because it was there for 30 years. I dismantled all the shelves and used the verticals to build the loft so it was free, and then with the shelving I stacked it against the wall. I did that thing for a reason I think, as it was like sculpture. The boards were as thick as a book and 3 meters long and they were all stacked against the wall so it looked really like a very physical minimal painting, a sculpture. Now the end of it projected from the wall, obviously, so it was a block against the wall that was very fascinating and I'd pass this on a daily basis and of course I allowed myself to do this as self manipulation. When I began later on to make little paintings out of lumps of wood that were found, I found that the wood of course was made of different thicknesses so I was making steps in the paintings. And the little stretcher of this is built with the wood from the shelves that were in the loft when we moved in. So it's a very clear case of not only recycling but the suggestion of context, environment, and how that can insert itself into your mind.

New York is a rough place you can't really say you like it that much. You can say you like walking around Washington DC, you like the lovely houses. But it's hard to love New York. However, its abrasiveness has something to do with inspiration and art comes from discomfort or tragedy or difficulty I think. So I see at this point around 1984 or so, a tremendous crisis in abstract painting. At this point in history I'm working against all the Neo Expressionists. So this represents in a sense the fall of the tower of modernism and New York had been rolled over and the European painters started to come in. It's like watching a boxing match between a super heavy weight and a fly weight. And the American artists in a sense were trying to paint like European artists whereas only a decade before the European artists had been trying to paint like American artists but by then the American idea had, simply run out of gas.

So there I was having thrown in my lot with the United States in America, but with an entirely personal history of European painting in my body and in my very being. So I was able to refer in a sense to both, and what I'm trying to do here and what I have been doing ever since is trying to make something with tremendous feeling out of the very simple and obvious metaphor. It's also interesting to note that at this time I was also building lofts for other people.

This painting is called *The Bather*, 1983 and again it has a very strong attempt to re-introduce not the figure, but the sense of the figure, it doesn't have a face or arms or legs but it has a sense of being figural. It has the width of my hips and it is a landscape, and is a homage to my hero Matisse, and a great painting in the Chicago Art Institute. This painting has an orange bar running up the middle, and the stripes that are painted around it are painted as stripes, yes, but also like trees. They move and have broken edges, they have a complicated surface and they have light within them. So the painting has a tension and a brutality and this corresponds with a rather tender title, and a nostalgia for the figure, as I used to be a figure painter.

*The Bather* was painted in 1983 and this one is *No Neo*, 1984 so you could say I'm always picking fights. At the time that this was painted in New York there was a lot of talk about "Neo", Neo Geo, Neo this and Neo that.. So in a sense there was a sense of turning history on it's head and I was reacting to the idea of regurgitation of the models already seen in the history of art, so I made this painting that I called No Neo. I was making aggressive abstraction that had in it the ability to be relational. And this was very important then as abstract painting had become arid and largely grey. There was a battle in the hearts of minds of the art world between the minimalists and the Color Field painters, and the Minimalists won, as the Europeans jumped in on the side of the Minimalists, so it wasn't a fair fight. So what I was trying to do was to bring back the physical element of a painting you could feel you could walk into but also the sense of weight. They would stick out of the wall, in fact I would stand them up in the studio like sculptures and I almost made sculptures but I didn't because if I had made sculptures they would have been literal, and I was only interested in saving painting. So I was flirting with sculpture, but making paintings that referred to the history of painting. I was mixing up the colors on the surface and paintings with a lot of feeling.

This next one is called *The Fall*, 1983. In this painting there is a tremendous fight between falling and rising. Obviously the red and yellow are functioning like ascending columns, and the darkness of the painting, the doom of the painting is that the top is falling into the bottom, and the bottom is holding it all up. I speak metaphorically of course. Once again it has an inset in it. I added a piece on. What I wanted to say about Backs and Fronts and these ones that follow, I haven't made a study of this, but shaped painting so far in abstraction had been made by dividing inwardly and what I did was to make paintings by re-addition. I would add and then take off, put a bit here, or there. This could be a horizontal painting or a vertical painting. It could be turned on its side and something could be added so it was very free. Absolutely open. I had canvases that were mismatched and I would put them together. The idea of falling apart and holding together

in a dynamic contest for survival was rampant at the time that I was making these paintings in the middle 80's.

This is called *Empty Heart*, 1987. Towards the end of the 80's I started to flatten out my paintings and became more interested in the idea of windows. The idea of a double experience within a painting. This painting was painted for my son who died, so it is a painting of emotion and devastation. Based on 2 blacks and 2 whites, lightness and darkness. There is a frame which in a sense is protective, but also gives a sense of incarceration, which is prohibitive. Here are basically 2 paintings, the painting of a hole, and a painting of what fills that hole. Once again, trying to put something into the painting that gives it a human figurative, figural aspect as a metaphor. So now I'm dealing with the figure in the window in these paintings that follow.

This is *Why and What Yellow*, 1988 painted in 88 and has a metal panel and a red blue panel in a kind of woven field. It is very aggressive in the way that it has been painted, the paint has been put on very heavily. The idea is that the surface is sensual referring to the history of painting, and somewhat violated by this metal panel. I was doing this quite a lot in the late 80's, breaking the romance of the painting, the narrative of the painting with a metal panel, or with another painted panel. So one is looking all the time at near and far. I find it quite interesting too that there is sense of bigness and smallness, but it is the same stuff that is being re-cycled, and twisted, and re-introduced in another way into the painting to keep it alive and to keep these relationships open and strange. One is looking at relationships that are not necessarily understandable but that have a force.

So this is called *Secret Sharer*, 1989 and I was reacting to a short story by Joseph Conrad. So when I am working sometimes I am thinking about things, but I'm not painting them deliberately, but I'm allowing them to influence the activity atmospherically. *Secret Sharer* is the story of somebody who is carried secretly on a ship, a stowaway. Here there is a dark almost hidden window on the left, on the right there is a red short band. It's a painting that has golden yellow running right through it. It is based very much on dark and light. This painting is particularly extremely human, and there is a sense of collision on the right as it bangs up against another form of drawing, and another colour.

This painting is called *Dakar*, 1989. At the time I made this I was playing a lot of music by John Coltrane and thinking about Dakar (not that I have ever been to Dakar, but I was thinking about it) and the painting has a tremendously brooding quality, as do a lot of my paintings - they are very dark and romantic but unsettling, the relationships are unsettling at least. So once again, there is a heavy shelf that is hanging over and down on something that is working like architectural foundations, working like short, fat bars that are pushing it up. So these paintings are all working in relation to gravity, the idea of the figure, weight, body, mass, buildings, wall, the metaphor of holding not holding etc. As you can see the top is painted with a really devastating black and grey, which you might view as beautiful, or extremely ugly, depending on how you react to the painting. I think that my paintings are concerned in a way with beauty because beauty is moving, but they

are not sentimental. I appeal to sentiment as a human being, but I am making paintings that are always highly structured, so there is always a contest between the drawing and the way the thing is painted. This is one of the last of the sculptural paintings I made.

This is called *Tiree*, 1993. This is another painting around the idea of the metal, also concerned with making again a relationship or a broken relationship, a separated relationship. So here you have the inverse of the relationship of *Why and What Yellow*. Here, this little panel on the right is stranded. It is pulled away from the bigger painting on the bigger panel on the left, and what I was doing here was setting up the sense of distance. It is a relationship, and a relationship of distance, so one can see two things at the same time and they are not touching, the painted surface is no longer touching, and there is a steel column that is holding it in place like a form of incarceration.

This is called *Ukbar*, 1994, and there is another one called *Okbar*, 1994 and indeed another called *Ookbar*. I was responding in these paintings to a place in Kurdistan,???where nobody knows quite whether it is Okbar or Ukbar, or what this place is called. So nobody knows how to get there. When I started to paint these paintings I only did two, because they caused so much trouble as no-one knew which painting was being referred to but eventually I added another. It is very interesting and it is also on a profound level connected to the notion of place in abstract painting. The notion of place in abstract painting is free. It is indistinct. One doesn't know quite where it is and one has to find it for oneself, within the painting. And this is why I like abstraction so much because one gets to think out of context, and this is one of the few moments in life, or few that I can think of, where one can think freely as a human because all other thought seems to be burdened by context, historical context, historical prejudice, you don't get to think free ever. There is always information in front of you and here, in abstraction, I try to make the space, a place that is free of context and is liberated. [It is entirely unlike the Matisse-ean idea but it is not the same, either, because I am trying to make something that involves you actively with abstract thought and thinking.](#)

This is a little painting in the show and is called *Scarp*, 1994. This painting is doing two things at once, and in this painting I am breaking up the certainty of what you are looking at. Of course the way I paint does that too because the colors I am using are infuriatingly complex and made on the painting. The surface of the painting is very strong, and the geometry of the painting is painted out as struggle between the idea and the experience. The painting is simple but experiential.

This one is called *Because of the Other*, 1997 because the things in the painting are where they are because of where the other bits are. In other words, one is the way one is in a relationship, because of the other. I was going to make another painting before I made this, and I started to break up the surface one Sunday afternoon in London, in my studio, and when I finished the painting I realized that it was like a Wall of Light, watercolour, that I had made in Mexico. I made a watercolour in Mexico in 1983 for an exhibition. *Because of the Other* was made in 1997 and this says something about my whole endeavour. Clearly there is something wrong with a person who forgets to do something

for 14 years, ...we'll set that aside for a moment... however things have to be made at the right time, and I am not working in competition with other people in my generation. I am utterly non competitive. I am only working with things that are interesting to me, and are holding my attention. I take my references from various points in art history, like Masaccio who is very important to me and Cimabue too. These are the artists I refer to in terms of color, they use this dead light, a falling light in Italian Quattrocento painting there is a beautiful sense of restrained exuberance. A lamentable exuberance would perhaps be a way to say it. Or an exuberance of regret, and this is running through my paintings all the time. There is always a sense of subdued sensuality. So I made this painting later because I made the idea for the painting in Mexico on the beach, in a moment of inspiration, after looking at the ruins there and seeing how the light changed the walls from orange, to blue, to black, pink in the morning. I am very fond of running all over the ruins in Mexico. So after visiting them I made this little watercolour, with all these little zones in the work, reflecting the possibility of different times of day, and the way the stone structure can be brought to life with light, and the environment, which is fundamental to culture. But I had to make all the other paintings that I made first. In other words it is first things first. And this means I am prepared to park something for 14 years and come back to it. My work is not based on invention it is really based on evolution, and there has to be an authentic gestation, for it to be moving and to affect another human being. It cannot be made at the wrong time, out of fear that someone else might have the same idea. I actually don't care if someone else has the idea. I'm still going to it when I am ready. I am not in competition in that way.

Wall of Light paintings. I got the inspiration for the colour in the painting from a de Kooning poster, and I was also thinking about Picasso, so I have made a painting with pink and blue, cream black and yellow. Part of the painting is scraped away. You will see that the way this has been painted is much rougher than some of the paintings that follow. Wall of Light Pink is from 1998 more or less at the beginning of this group of paintings. One thing I should also mention is that when I worked on this series, the Wall of Light series, I have always worked on other things too. I always keep windows open and think this is very important.

*Wall of Light, Desert Night, 1999.* has an interesting narrative to it. Liliane were invited to go to Las Vegas to watch the boxing. And when I got there, I really flipped out. I was really upset by it. The architecture of all the hotels is like a wheel, and everything leads you to the casino. So it is a kind of trap and you can't get out and you keep passing the same place. I have a tendency to get hopelessly lost anyway, so imagine a person who gets hopelessly lost, 2 blocks from his own house, it is desperate in Las Vegas as there is no sense of proportion. It is disorientating and the opposite of everything I do in my work which is very much about a bodily sense of proportion. And here I was in a floating reality. One minute I was in Egypt, and the next in Medieval England. It was a desperate situation so we hired a car and when out to the desert, we went to Valley of Fire, the colors were extraordinary. We were driving back towards dusk and all the rocks were turning different colours and I held this within me. When I got back to New York there was a giant canvas conveniently waiting and I painted that painting the very next day. And this is something I do a lot. I see something, and have a feeling of something,

it might be the light, or the heat, they are very specific in that sense, and I unload the painting. Anyway this one came out like this, first time, because it was ready. You can't do something when you're ready. Painting doesn't need to be a struggle. I agree with Woody Allen, when he said "the best things come easy" and some of the best paintings that I have shown you were made in an afternoon. I always remember a story by Picasso: he was on a beach with his grandchildren, all day, playing on the beach and then they'd go up to the house to have dinner, and between 5 and 7pm he made a painting, because he was ready to make that painting.

This is *Coyote*, 2000. Of course I named it after Coyote, because I love Coyotes. They are survivors. It is quite artichoke and I have used very reduced colour, but even so it has color in it. I use a lot of grey in my paintings and am making reference to Manet, I suppose, the beautiful surface of Manet, and the slow noble hand. The hand says everything about a person, something that is disappearing from our culture. People used to have handwriting, but they send e-mail now. I think handwriting says a lot about a person. I have never seen it but someone once described Adolf Hitler's handwriting to me and said it was virtually horizontal, as if it was flying off the end of the paper. Couldn't get from one end of the road to the other quick enough. A rather overly developed sense of ambition. But that is just a vulgar example of how handwriting reveals a person's nature.

*Wall of Light, Dark Orange*, 2001. This is in the Met. It is more monumental, thinner,, some areas are taken out, some color taken out. I do a lot of putting it on, taking it off, putting it on, taking it off, and there are a lot of seams in the back of the painting that give information which has something to do with Vuillard. Vuillard's paintings are subversively controlled by what is at the back. Same with my photos I guess. When you see a building it is the front of the building you are meant to see, but I am more interested in the back of it, because that is what you are not meant to see. These paintings are being constantly emotionally unraveled by what is at the back. So here you are looking at a white painting that was an orange painting, which was a black painting, and has been converted to a white painting over time.

This is a painting (*Niels*, 2001) I made for a cousin of mine who was dying, and very ill at the time. So I made this painting with a lot of yellow. It isn't too big either, I can dominate it. I am trying here not to make something monumental, but something on a human scale. 2 m x 2 m. This brings me to an interesting point about proportion and scale, and the mystical relationship between people. I once went to see a de Kooning show and I noticed that the canvases seem similar in size to mine. So I looked in a catalogue and they were all 75 x 80, like this painting which I found kind of funny. The other thing I should say about de Kooning is that I was a figurative painter, and when I make a drawing I am not counting, but feeling a drawing. So in a sense my work seems, perhaps, a lot less radical than the work of my American contemporaries. R Ryman for example. And the same might be said for the relationships de Kooning had with his contemporaries. I have been thinking about this lately, in relation to Rothko and Pollock, for example. They seem less radical but over time they become more powerful, and it is this relationship that de Kooning had to the whole history of European art, that is very

similar to my own. The other thing is that the first time de Kooning came to America he was a very young man. The same is true in my case. I was 26. So I was already partially made. I wasn't like I am now but I had a reservoir on which I could draw with me, from Europe, which I had not discarded and which I could use in my moment of crisis within the paintings, and to get myself out of a minimalist trap. And so I see myself configured in history in a similar way and I find this an interesting comparison, though of course one cannot design these things, life has to be lived and afterwards one sees what happens.

This one is called *Dorothy*, 2003. I painted this painting for a friend of mine who died in Ireland. She was a wonderful woman and she was instrumental in rebuilding my relationship with Ireland. I wanted to make a painting that was deep and sorrowful but also a painting that had some hold on life, that reached to life. So there are colours here that relate to the colours in nature, in other words the natural world is not lost in this painting. It has its hand on the natural world. The painting is also like stone, and it is awesome in a sense, but it is not unremitting. The argument isn't taken to an extreme where all colour is purged from the painting.

This is called *Raphael*, 2004. It was made in New York and in NY I am significantly more armoured than when I am in Europe. I feel that I have to be more rigorous in New York, and that makes NY interesting because it challenges me. This painting was made over a very long time. It has what Donald Kuspit called human sedimentation. It is painted in layers and as the layers are added over a long period of time so an experience is being made. Sometimes paintings are made in four hours, so one can't prescribe these things. But it is interesting for me to make this painting, to leave it, come back and make it again. Leave it, come back and make it again. So the issue of time, layering.. not just a simple measure of time but time lived, is in this painting. But I called it Rafael because it has been classicized over time, and as we all know Raphael was the great conciliatory artist as am I. A bridge builder. No, I am a warrior, but as a painter I am trying to build a bridge. Bridge builders are more important today than people that take hard positions in the world as it is now.