

Since the 1970s Scully's work has explored the tensions between European and American conceptions of Art. This you could interpret as squaring circles, appropriately enough since such geometric an artist. Reconciling formal purity with exuberant colour, hard edges with blurred borders, flat surfaces with layered textures. A reconciling impulse clearly seen in his less well know works on paper in pastels and watercolour. The stacked, layered, geometric shapes are called tiles, chessboards and stripes and are rendered in soft smokey pastels and watercolours. Sometimes in dark Rothko-like greens, sometimes in burnt orange and monochrome.

What immediately strikes me about them is how unusual it is to see these media on these scale. Geometric abstract tend to be glossy, the opaque and the monumental. Scully's works on paper will be on view at the Whitworth art gallery in Manchester from Saturday and the artist was on his way there when he called in there this morning. I asked him what attracted him to the medium of watercolour.

The first time I used it as a matter of fact was when I went to Mexico and why I did this I really don't know. I went to the art store before I set off and I bought a replica of a 19th century replica of an artists travelling watercolour box, with a ceramic tray for mixing up the colours and little pads of pure pigment and I was so charmed by it that I bought it. I then bought a watercolour pad. Since that trip, I never went anywhere without them, and it has become a major part of what I do. There is something about watercolour that is so fragile, that lacks a physicality that I find it very moving and intimate.

Is the most obvious difference and challenge in moving between oil and watercolour is that oil is by definition opaque and watercolour is translucent and they are completely different medium in that respect.

They also have a different relationship with time. When you are doing a watercolour, you mustn't lose contact with the paper. You are caressing the paper, and in a sense staining the paper and teasing the light out of the paper. It is the dynamic that is what is underneath and what is on top that creates the vibration in the watercolour. And the way that all the edges are left outside. All this is very visible. It is a very, very light touch that is required and the time is very short with a watercolour. With a painting, on the other hand, it is exactly the opposite physically. You are dealing with the weight of the material; the opacity of the material and the layering is actually transforming the surface and you are inventing a completely new surface. One that you are making by hand. Even though the edges are blurring, the quality of the paint, and the weight of the paint is making everything quite heavy. I wanted the painting to be quite light, and to manufacture light but to still manufacture weight. To have gravitas.

Do you feel that working with watercolour that as the artist you are surrendering some of your power to the medium in a way? Almost as if the watercolour's contribute more to the final painting than it would with oil.

It requires practice. It requires a certain amount of submission to the material. I use almost no bodily power, as I am almost resting my wrist and my touch is incredibly light. Very delicate; and that is why I like to do it so much and it is so different from the manual handling of oil that you heard about.

So it is not as if the watercolour sketches are preparatory to the main event going on in oil. These are something's that have a life and existence of their own.

Yes, I don't really make preparatory sketches for large or medium pieces. I work on all scales. Sometimes in fact, I make the painting, and the painting I think is quite public (especially the large ones) they aren't made for private people, they are made for public spaces, and then afterwards, I have made works on paper almost as if the painting were the preparatory sketch for the works on paper, and the works on paper were for me to keep.

How does that change when you start using pastels, as that is almost a dead art. It is very much 19th century.

That's right. When you go to the art store its almost as if you should use pastels with a smock and a beret, and you use little cu-tips to rub it in. I actually paint with my hands and I get filthy when I do it. I feel like a coal miner when I have finished, but I like the medium because it's a relic. Anything that is a relic is attractive to me and there is something in my nature that has become more apparent over time as painting has become less fashionable although maybe that may be cyclical. I like it better now than I did when it was more conventional; now that it has become the art of rebellion. The true minority art and that is interesting to me and that is a similar dynamic in the one that attracts me to pastels.

Is that something to do with being an European being in the United States? Being conscious of having a different cultural location perhaps than an American born artist.

Yes that is a very interesting point. I think perhaps that is something about that which attracted me in the first place with out really knowing it. I went to America and then thought that maybe I could become an American artist. In a sense, I can become an American artist, but only like De Kooning, who wasn't really an American artist, although he is held up to be the acme of American art now. So there is something interesting about putting yourself in the position where you are the outsider.

Sean Scully Works on Paper is at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester from Saturday until the 25th August. Call in also at the Manchester City Art Gallery should you be passing through as there is a complimentary exhibition of his paintings.

That is all for tonight.