

**THIS IS A TRANSCRIPT OF THE LECTURE GIVEN BY SEAN SCULLY AT THE FORMAL  
OPENING OF THE "WALL OF LIGHT" SCULPTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK.  
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Lecture by  
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on the occasion of  
the Inauguration of  
The Wall of Light  
at The University of Limerick  
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I am going to plunge right in. I am only going to talk for one hour. I must apologise in advance as this is not an art course for beginners; if it were I would be happy to tell you how much you owe me. We do not have much time, so please forgive me and please try in some way to enjoy the ride.

On the left is Giacometti, if not the greatest sculptor of the 20th century, in the top five of greatest sculptors of the 20th century, obviously Italian. He made figures out of bronze and plaster, a very obsessive artist like myself, not a particularly experimental artist. An artist like another favourite of mine Georgio Oretti, who experimented with the major modernist themes that began at the beginning of the 20th century such as Surrealism, Cubism and so on. He eventually ended up making his own obsessive figures that stand like ragged sentinels facing time and all the elements of nature and human history that are thrown at them. So they represent in a sense, what remains.

On the right is a hut from the Aran Islands, Inis Meáin, a photograph taken by myself. I have been encouraged to lately assume the vanity of a photographer and this photograph is in a book that's published very recently of my photographs. Again, it also represents in a sense what remains. It's a hostile environment, as you all know. Most people here being Irish, will know about how the earth is made and how it is taken for granted. I wont bore you with that but the issue of the wall on the Aran Island is of paramount importance. This is a hut for either staying in or keeping things in. It has a similar stoic personality to the sculpture on the left, which is of course an artwork and therefore much more strangely expressive. This is a functional object. However, in the walls of Aran you will notice each wall has its own personality and was made - in a sense, like a mountain, more vertical, more geometric, rounder, smaller and so on. The wall itself is a question of placing stones so they don't come apart, using gravity to withstand the wind. Both of them in a way express a kind of loneliness. So both of them are in a sense a testament to what remains. Even though one is art and the other is not particularly art.

Now, returning to my work, I'll show you a very important painting on the left called *Backs and Fronts*. I must say upfront, even though some of you less informed people in the audience may have trouble with this, my work is basically figurative. I was initially a figurative painter. A painter and drawer of figures in space and I can do this with some degree of confidence. However I was very much influenced by the mysticism of eastern religions, of Islam, Northern artworks, the kind of artwork that come from Finland, where the Japanese walked across ice to get to America.

There are a lot of correspondences in the world that involved a kind of linear but emotional geometrical art, not the kind of art that one associated with western ideas of ordering. So therefore, the brick in these cultures does not represent a form of domination in nature. It represents a kind of hypnotic rhythm. I tried to bring this in relationship with, say, Alaska, or Rembrandt, or whoever, the western idea of the human touch. This is a picture made up of panels and each panel has a weight, size, height, figure and they are meant to form a line, hence the title *Backs and Fronts*.

The work on the right is painted with a kind of surface we associate with our art, our art being Western art. Our art and touch try to somehow express light. This is obviously somehow related to a kind of religious aspiration. This is the kind of art I am interested in. I put these things out like doors. In fact, I got the idea from two things, one was a door, half opened half closed, and I am very very interested in the metaphor of the door and the threshold and how one space is divided and opened by the simple mechanism of the door. I find doors fascinating, the way they lead from one reality to another reality. By one reality I mean a room where space can be set up as whatever, a hospital, lecture room or workshop. These panels project up the wall a little bit like double-sided drawings in a museum, where an artist's major drawings are on both sides of a piece of paper and the only way to really exhibit this work is to have it at a right angle from the wall so you can see both sides. I love the idea of walking around looking at an artwork, looking at the fact that it's a painting. So I am talking about these works really to set the tone this evening for the subject of the sculpture and to show that my work is in a sense very adaptable to the idea of sculpture.

On the left are separate panels bolted together and painted differently. You can't see it from the slide of course, so you would need to walk from one end to another. It has again the relationship with the decorative, although it is not decoration. It has a relationship with the exotic and the rhythm that one finds in African art, Islamic art, Japanese art, Indian art and in Mexico - all places I like. Of course the rhythm is linear, repetitive of Irish music, which is part of the story. The painting on the left is called *Come In*, the one on the right is called *Murphy*. The painting on the right is in some way homage to Beckett, on the left homage to Joyce. Now I have the opportunity to tell you a story, which is funny, interesting, and not a little sad at the end, but I know you will like it. This painting here, like a lot of mine I've made in the eighties, is made up of a panel project, and what I was doing in a sense is painting around corners, so I was trying to hold together what is coming apart. So the idea of the painting was trying to wrap these disparate parts in a skin that was poetic, emotional and in a way healing. They are painted very expressively, they have a lot of light in them and obviously the colours are quite beautiful. They are heavily layered paintings referred to as pole tradition in European painting. When I painted the painting called *Come In*, I had a very important curator come to my studio to look at my work and she carried with her all the rational baggage of a European curator with New York curatorial expertise. The reason I called this painting *Come In* is because when I finished it I called a friend of mine to come and see it. This part is drawn, by the way, and this part is painted. So it's about weight and lightness. Again it relates very much to the figure, the body in art. My friend came over and told me a very interesting story about Joyce and Beckett. Someone knocked on the door and Joyce said "come in". The next day Joyce was going over the manuscript and Beckett had written "come in". Joyce asked Beckett why he had written 'come in'. Beckett replied, "You said "come in", so I wrote it down." It was a fascinating conversation and at the end Joyce left it in, as an intervention. As you will see from my paintings, I am very interested in the idea of intervention. Things coming in from the top, the sides, bursting through the surface, violating the sanctity of the painted picture surface. I am extremely interested in intervention of all kinds, so naturally I took this as the title for the painting, which was an irrational title. The curator then said "Ah yes, I understand why you called this *Come In* because it is like portal and doorway. This is the doorway and this could be two columns; this could be an entrance so one could call and come in". I said 'Yes, that's certainly one way of looking at it'. Then I told her the story. When I got to the end I knew that she would never show my work because she thought that I was crazy and these were not rational paintings. This brings me to a very interesting point; the difference between my

paintings and a lot of people that were around me in New York is that my paintings are not rational. I am using geometry for emotional results, to provoke the emotion for mystical reasons.

I had another curator come from Boston during the time I was making these paintings and he said to me that my works were perverse, that I was misusing the tradition of geometric abstraction that was of course invented to accompany the Russian revolution. It was meant to represent order and I was using it perversely. He, of course, did not buy one of my paintings. These have been some of the difficulties that I had in America.

So, again, this is a great weight pressing down on solid bands painted in rich, very confident colours in black and yellow and pressing down on something much more fragile in the painting on the right.

The painting on the left is called *Africa*. The painting was painted in a Victorian bedroom in England, which illustrates that location is not really an issue. I don't need to go to Africa to make a painting or picture. It's not really a picture; it is really in a sense an attempt to embody something. What I wanted to do in this painting was to make a massive wall, which is eight feet tall, and twelve feet wide, with a window in it. Windows occur in my paintings a lot and happen in the wall we just built. The window is a way of puncturing the relentlessness of the façade. Another thing I do is I make paintings with extremely complicated colours that represent different kinds of memories or provoke different kinds of light, different light sources, different colour sources that one might sense in one's memory, or nature, or one might have seen in paintings. There is always a dullness to my colours, a sadness to the light in my work. In this particular painting *Africa*, it is dry, it is the same colour as the dirt of the earth. Oil-paper is made from dirt, more or less. The wall outside is made from dirt, the dirt that we walk around on. It's the same material re-jigged and then presented as poetry. This painting *Africa* is made up with many, many layers of colour and was painted very heavily, almost brutally, like a lot of the paintings in the eighties. The window is much more delicate and expressive and of course has another possibility, the possibility of light and hope in this wall of darkness.

These two paintings are again, in their own ways, two paintings about insets. The painting on the left is called *Angelica*, the inset comes in from the top and the paint was removed to leave a gap. I did a whole series of paintings that were done on the idea of weightlessness. The others I called *Angel*, *Angelina* and *Angelica*. Hanging on the right is a painting called *Catherine*, (1994). One can see it as a wall with two windows or one can see it as a floor with two other figures on it. What is very important about paintings from this period is that the insets are real. So the paint is painted with certain urgency as in the paintings of Van Gogh, or an abstract expressionist, but is also a model of love with the fact of concrete painting, so these are real windows and are taken out of the painting. In one way it's a romantic painting, and in another, it's a little vandalised by the fact that it's got a kind of brute inset going on inside of it. In a lot of my painting there is oscillation between the ugly and the brutal, the confrontational and the romantic and the poetic. The problem I have with the romantic and the poetic is that if it's not checked, if it's not put into the same kind of critical correspondence with another impulse, it becomes the sentimental, and then of course we don't like it anymore because we don't respect it.

So this painting on the left is really a question of skin and the absence of skin. In the inset, the skin of the paint is taken away so it has a much more fragile sense of its own body and it hangs precariously in the main body of the painting. What keeps it together of course as a painting, is our idea of a painting as a rectangle. These two things give out two very different sensations. When the insert is surrounded by the painting it's much more secured, it's as if the painting has become a protector of the inset.

So on the left is *Four Large Mirrors*, one of my major works; it is in a museum in Düsseldorf. It was in my retrospective but now it's part of their collection. A huge work, another theme, the idea of reflection, which is a way to measure a way of looking at identity. The first is called *Narcissus* of course; the idea of looking at one's self or looking at one another on a kind of structure. Being reflected by another. To reveal more of one side, questioning the other, or separating and joining from each other. Constantly a process of joining and separation, which is central to my work. The relationship of these surfaces, one to another. Its very unusual for me to make a surface and leave the surface, I'm always putting something in correspondence with something else to set this vibration up between identities.

You have an orchestra here because it's complicated by the fact it's repeated four times. We have four within one work so it makes something almost endless. It becomes exuberant. All the reds are different, the yellows are different, all creams are different. The browns and blacks are not simply painted over various colours. The shadow/memory of those colours is subverting everything like background noise. These are cut separations. Right. *Land Lying Blue*, taken from the idea of the horizon. One might say it is abstract; it has strong associations with nature. Like the colour of the rhythm of the horizon. In my talking and thinking I am constantly making reference to the horizon line, the mysticism of the horizon line.

A German philosopher wrote a text, a very beautiful text, written with the simplicity of a great intellect in which he said: "One of the great advantages of abstraction is that it never completely explains itself." This is the limitation in the short term because my paintings don't really provide halfhearted answers. They are not really meant in a sense to be understood. Like us, we are not really made to be simply understood. We have our own mystery, which is essential to our quality. We cannot as individuals be summed up and defined, explained away.

These are called *Generally Speaking Union* very much about almost bringing together - in a much more harmonious way than I was doing in the eighties where surfaces were divided. Verticals were up against horizontals, ruptured appendices were much more aggressive, an attempt to bring two halves together. In my work I am always looking at the similarities of things and the differences of things. He said an abstract thing doesn't explain itself and that was its power. We like items that have mystery and we need things that have mystery because we live in an age where mystery is being taken out of everything. The world is being deconstructed and demystified. In the course of understanding we have two great needs, the need to understand and the equally powerful need to be mystified. There are very few areas left in the world culture that are mysterious. One of these can be art. So what is a disadvantage in the short term can be an advantage in the long term; that is why I paint the way I paint. There is always something in my paintings that is inexplicable. One has to meet that to be prepared to have a relationship with something that isn't going to be explained to you. There are certain things that can be talked about but cannot be explained. That is part of its power.

The painting on the left, one of my fair paintings, again hanging in Düsseldorf has a very deep surface, this surface has been painted many times. The design is simple. It couldn't be simpler. What is interesting about the painting is the complexity of treatment in relation to the utter severity and simplicity of the drawing. So really, this painting on the left is like nightshades and morning light.

The painting on the right, the natural and artificial is the opposition in a sense, the colour of nature, the colour of blood and roses. First is a theoretical argument about colour, of black and white, the opposite of light and dark. I put this together in an awkward union, but nevertheless a union, so that one side is something in relation to the other side. So like I said before, the coming together and the separating constantly, as in all other things in the world.

These paintings are much more recent. These are *Wall of Light* paintings. I used to go to Mexico a lot in the eighties. This experience, I have to say, helped me very much to do this work. It gave me, in a sense, the informed courage to do the work, which is different from obvious arrogance. Looking at the wall of temples in Mexico was very moving. Again, they are so interesting because so much information has been lost to us. Something mystical, something that cannot be explained, there is a gap, and these walls would change colour dramatically from pink to darkest blue green, depending on the time of day you go to see them. One could feel the way these walls are meant to play with the environment, the light, and the air of Mexico. So I was sitting on a beach and I made a little watercolour and I called it the *Wall of Light*. They are polar opposite to the walls on Aran. This led to a huge group of paintings, a very different kind of personality was painted on the right. The right *Wall of Light* is somehow more airy. The left *Wall of Light* is more scratched out and somehow has a sharper kind of edge.

This painting on the right is called *Cameron*. I show you this because of its relationship to the wall, the polarity of feeling that can be set up between black and white, how the fight within us between black and white, the constant oscillation between yes and no, between high and low, can be endless, and is endless.

This one on the left is an homage to my father and will be in the Hugh Lane gallery in Dublin. My father's favourite month was November so this in a sense is a picture of November as much as it is a wall of light. So basically what I'm doing is taking this very simple way of building, no more complicated than the way people who build walls on the Aran Islands, as a form of drawing. But what I bring to it is far more complex because its paintings marry the European and American painting tradition, so the associational potential is far greater because I have the great gifts of colour. The colour in my paintings is extraordinarily complex - pinks, all pale, sour or sweet, alive and vital, and always the edge. The way things come together is crucially important to my work. In this painting, you cannot see it very well, but the underneath is painted yellow so it's really like a blanket of melancholia that has been rushed onto something more aggressively vital, more optimistic. Again this goes back to black and white, the purest way. We can talk about the contradictions in terms of colour but my work is extremely nuanced, in a sense that every time something is turned over, it's different. It's like, if you say you can see the falling leaves in Autumn, they always do the same thing, like one never gets tired of watching the ocean coming in and going back out again. So my work and the way my work is connected is to this rhythm. It's not really a body of work that's about invention and I don't pretend to be inventing anything.

This is a strip obviously, not a strip like an American strip. The reason I show you this is to show you that when you say "strip", it is like saying "apple" or "flower" - it doesn't really define what it is. You can paint things like this thousands of times and let it mean thousands of different things by the way they are painted, the context in which they are painted, and the size they are painted. This is a painting where the strip in relation to the history of art relates to nature, in the way it didn't later on in America, where minimalism was so prevalent.

These are endless columns by Brancusi, another great artist of the 20th century. He made a lot of these columns that were meant to imply infinity. So again, an artist of repetition, a very focused obsessive artist, belonging to the same family that I belong to. This artist represents in a sense a kind of calmness, a calm sense of perfect harmony.

These are two works by me, watercolours. The work on the right is pastel. What I tend to do is to make the same thing different. I use scale very powerfully. The watercolours on this side are made with the absolute absence of physical effort with a very loose wrist. The pastel, which is quite big, is a work on paper and has to be shown in glass that's made with a fair amount of physical effort and again, made with the same amount of materials, stone materials. The same stone as the wall is made from. It's just ground down, mixed with gum and then rubbed into the paper.

What I'm doing here is allowing the light carried in the paper to come through the colours so they are transparent. These are obviously more metaphysical, because the edges are soft. So if you get soft edges you get a sense of obvious mystery. This is another photo of mine on the right, of a hut on Aran, and a wall in the background. Again, it's simply material rearranged, which is what the wall is.

This is the quarry in China. You'll like this part because it's narrative. I'll tell you the story of the construction of the wall. This is how they take out the blocks and there they are carrying them. When I first had the idea to do the wall, I wanted to make it out of material from Ireland. I had this extremely sentimental idea that I would almost dig my hands into the ground in Ireland and pull up this wall and it would come out black and white. It would refer to the black and white in a lot of Irish facades. It would refer to the buildings and ancient walls of Ireland, and would be absolutely rigorously contemporary. But then we were unable to find anybody in Ireland who could do it, so we had to look outside of Ireland. I love the idea that we found the stones in China and Portugal because this corresponds much more closely to my idea of being universal. Because nationalism for me carries a lot of problems and continues to cause a lot of problems if one is so invested in one's own little cultural syntax. I am very fond of the idea of bringing these stones together from different parts of the world, in a sense forcing them together. Placing them into perfectly democratic relationships of black and white, the white from Portugal, the black from China.

Here they are all wrapped up, ready to come to us. Solid boxes. Its quite beautiful. There it is. I made a little inset in the wall because by pure luck we found out we had the stones polished, if we wanted to use

that side. I was thinking about an idea of making an inset like some of the paintings. It wasn't my idea. In fact, it was Shane's (de Blacam). But he gave me the idea so now it's mine. The little inset is made very simply. The same material is just turned around very simply, reconsidered, retouched, restroked, reworked and it becomes a signifier of something different. It has an entirely different distinct quality to the rough part. When you look down at the wall it becomes almost impressionistic. It's not as clear colouristicity. This window or inset was dropped down into the wall and presents a little problem or a little question. It gives it a point of intimacy. It's like a wall within a wall, which is going back again to the fascination I have of paintings inside paintings or windows inside houses.

I don't know if you have ever been in a room with no window. It wouldn't be very pleasurable. I thought it would be very interesting to somehow put a smudge or a stain on the relentlessness of the slate. I must tell you, the wall is made of stacked stones. There is the same number of black stones as white. It is exactly fifty fifty. It's the rhythm the two have set up emotionally and visually.

END