

Breaking Doric Down: The Art of Sean Scully

Over the past forty years, critics and biographers have auditioned countless metaphors in an effort to isolate the spirit of Sean Scully's indefinable work. Glossaries of geology and cartography have each supplied more than a few resonant tropes, as his canvases have variously been described as semi-precious stones, seismic strata, and lost maps. Architecture has arguably provided the richest cache. It is not uncommon to find Scully's paintings compared to blueprints or fragmented walls, to hear reference made to his broad mosaics, or to the opaque translucence of his cathedral-like windows. Vivid recollections from his childhood have only validated the invocation of what might otherwise seem a fanciful lexicon of thresholds, floorboards, and unvarnished rafters. Whether one thinks first of the imposing church from which, as a boy, he smuggled eight long votive candles (which he buried like waxen bones in his parents' garden), or the occasions when he played in the ruins of London's legendary Crystal Palace, talismans of brooding physical structure have been formative to the growth of the artist's imagination. Even the names of many of the sub-styles into which he has categorized his work—"Bridge", "Enter", "Fort", "Landline", "Post and Lintel", "Towers", "Window", and most recently "Wall of Light"—reinforce dominant motifs of draughtsmanship and carpentry.

Given such personal sanction of an all-encompassing architectural metaphor, it would be tempting to see the Doric paintings as an extension of lifelong preoccupations with material interiority, or the culmination of an obsession with dwellings that were, are, or soon will be. Indeed it would be easy to measure the width and breadth of alabaster and onyx blocks that seemingly comprise these paintings against an allegorical vocabulary of horizontal entablatures, angular abacuses, and dark architraves. But there is a more compelling sense in which these works constitute instead a radical shift in the artist's achievement—a shift which involves an abandonment of the physical altogether in favour of something utterly numinous: a kind of negative visual theosophy—architecture beyond architecture—which, rather than evoking palpable construction, builds itself instead on absence, erasure, and the erosion of sense.

When reflecting on the formidable cultural legacy of ancient Greece, one ineluctably thinks of a muscularity of action and myth—a flexing of intellect and lore into a materiality where the divine is calculated in irreducible ratios of measured space: fluted columns and sculpted friezes. Here, gods and mortals mingle. But there is a more mystical counter-current of classical instinct which resists the shouldering of spirit and the hammering of fiction into tangible phenomenon, and

prioritizes instead the evanescent and visually ineffable—a counter-current with which the Doric paintings are perhaps more profoundly in accord. The third-century philosopher Plotinus provides the most succinct articulation of this mystical intuition in *The Enneads*:

...we must realise that our thought cannot grasp the One as long as any other image remains active in the soul, and that while other sights possess and distract the soul it can take no impression of their contrary. Just as we say of matter, that it must be without qualities to be able to receive the forms of the universe, so and much more must the soul become formless if it is to harbour no impediment to its fulfilment ... To this end, you must set free your soul from all outward things and turn wholly within yourself, with no more leaning to what lies outside, and lay your mind bare of ideal forms, as before of the objects of sense, and forget even yourself, and so come within sight of that One.

Emphasizing the dependence of presence on absence, light on darkness, Plotinus's enunciation falls within the perennial stream of thought from classicism to modernity known as apophaticism (from the Greek word ἀποφάσις, or apophasi, meaning "to deny"), and would influence subsequent mystical thinkers of an emergent tradition of so-called "negative theology" (or the *via negativa*). In visual art, commentators have detected instinctive sympathies with the dissolution of "outward things" and the erasure of "objects of the sense" in the obfuscating chiaroscuro of Caravaggio, the sfumato of Rembrandt, the luminous emptiness of Rothko's chapel paintings, and the pioneering expressionism of Arshile Gorky, who once remarked that he painted not things themselves, but the spaces between them. It is in this context that one begins to make sense of Scully's own allusion, in describing his Doric paintings, to the gaps and lacunae between columns as being the truest manner in which this recent work summons the proportions of that classical order.

Until the present series, residual fibres of formative lived experience—from Morocco to Mexico, from Ireland's Aran Islands to Barcelona—weaved themselves forensically into the fabric of the artist's work. In such signature canvases as *Araby* (1981) and *Uriel* (1997), which invoke the breathed atmospheres of North Africa and Catalonia respectively, there is a discernible thereness which invigorates the palpability and psychological materiality of the pieces—a substantiveness which is entirely understandable given the immediate personal connection that the places evoke. But in Doric, absence is all. Whatever one may be inclined to equate in these works to the solidities of sculpted stone are as credibly compared to *tabula rasa*, blank slate: the nothingness of ossified air. These paintings represent a maturing philosophy of negation from the artist that transcends the rag-and-bone shop of ephemeral substance and the perishable contours of an

illusory actual, in favour of an imperceptible possible. For cultural analogies of such a trajectory of imagination, one might think of the journey that brought J M W Turner from his early and architecturally-exact *Norham Castle on the Tweed* (1806-7) to his late *Interior at Petworth* (1837), which seeks apophatically to define the estate's interior by way of an annihilating immateriality of light.

In the adjacent art of poetry, the arc of mind might be compared to T S Eliot's, where the alluring cacophony of textures in Scully's seminal *Backs and Fronts* (1981) corresponds with the fragmentary clamour of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, while the mysticism of the Doric paintings mirrors the negative theology of the poet's later masterpiece *Four Quartets*. "In order to arrive at what you are not," Eliot writes, as if providing a caption to the Doric works themselves, "You must go through the way in which you are not":

And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

"Where you are not" in confronting Scully's Doric paintings is in the presence of the Doric. Here, there are no grooved columns or carefully sculpted capitals. To speak of stagons or guttae, of metopes or triglyphs, would be merely to rehearse again an imprecision of motif—to condescend to the mastery of the work by obscuring it with real words evacuated of real meaning. Rather, the power of the Doric paintings lies precisely in its ability to speak without speaking of a substance beyond substance—of a thereness that isn't there, wasn't, and never will be.

The evasive Doric dimensions of Scully's paintings—their paradoxical adherence to and steadfast resistance of that rubric—situate them alongside modalities of Doric-ness in music, literature, and even maritime history, which, by contrast, are capable of casting unexpected light on the works. For those who may be unfamiliar with classical architectural orders, "Doric" and its cognate "Dorian" may bring to mind instead the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/91), a novel whose gothic decadence may initially seem at furthest remove from the soul of Scully's paintings, and the slow erasure of phenomenal sense argued for here. Certainly few works feel as temperamentally opposed to the spirit of Scully's stark *Doric Grey* (2011) than the famously debauched decay of Ivan Albright's egregious portrait of Wilde's Dorian in 1943. It is, however, when one considers how Wilde reverses the permanence of art versus the perishability of life (the portrait showing the corruptions of age and vice, while the subject remains gloriously unchanged) that a dialogue between the visions of the Irish novelist

and those of the Irish artist becomes truly intriguing. For Wilde, art is a plane on which life can be outlived not because of naive fallacies asserting its permanence or immutability, but because it is more vital than life, and thus more susceptible to the vicissitudes of disintegration and change. Scully's *Doric Grey*, in other words, like Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, has endeavoured to depict the undepictable—to make art do what we rationally know it cannot: to see the space between the real and the imitative, the tonal gap between life and death.

In musical theory from antiquity to the present, an array of diatonic scales (though not necessarily related to each other) have had the term “Dorian mode” attached to them. While it would be unwarranted to devote time to reconciling what distinguishes these modes to the quadrate proportions of Scully's paintings, the aspiration of each of them to sculpted harmonies from finite strings or, more modernly, from the rectilinear black and white keys of a harmonium or piano keyboard, is in accord with deep tropisms of Scully's energy in his Doric paintings. The overt musicality of a work such as *Queen of the Night* (2008), whose title calls to mind Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* (1791) (and which was created by Scully in the same year as his first Doric work), has been pared back in the spare orchestration of the Doric paintings to the most fundamental recital of angularly plucked chords of darkness and light. The result is a symphony of complex simplicities in a series of paintings whose notes fugue from work to work. Themes introduced in one work are returned to and reinvented in the mute music of another. These paintings keep time. The abiding sense is one of standing among archetypal chords slowly being shifted upwards and down, backwards and forwards, endlessly jiggling themselves in search of an ideal harmony that has never fully been formulated before, never been heard. “And the way up is the way down,” Eliot says elsewhere in *Four Quartets*,

the way forward is the way back.
You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.

Is Sean Scully still here in his Doric paintings? There's no doubting that the inimitable coordinates of abutting blocks still spin along familiar axes of the artist's imagination. But something has changed. Rather than stemming traceably from memory or experience, these works intersect vertically with their authorship unaccountably and as if from elsewhere.

In 1911, a British ocean liner lost itself in heavy fog before running aground off the remote Taichow Islands of southeast China. Hailing from the same Belfast shipyard that would launch the *Titanic* a year later (almost to the day), *SS Doric* was the sister vessel of *SS Coptic* and *SS Ionic*.

Marooned, the abandoned liner was soon set upon by villagers who looted it, then set its steel carcass on fire. The image the incident conjures of battered metal giving shape to uncurbable flame pulsing in a night occluded by mist and fog is closer to the brooding incandescence of Scully's Doric paintings than any inert metaphors of capital and column could possibly evoke. Whether the artist (to flog the metaphor to breaking point) should be equated with the shipbuilder, the captain, or the crew, is to pose a false choice. To my mind, he's the first fisherman on the scene, holding a bucket of blubber fuel and a match; he's the one who is going to point the ship's prow in the direction of a bright nothingness, where all things tend; he's the one who's going to incinerate the darkness and take the hulking *Doric* down.

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