

Constantinople or the Sensual Concealed.

The Imagery of Sean Scully

Glancing from a moving train or car at the world flashing by, at the landscape and the people, the objects distort into coloured stripes. The greater our speed the less discernible these objects appear. Leaving behind and surrendering their materiality, the stripes encapsulate in their growing deformation and abstraction the minor and major events transpiring 'outside'.

It is this intimation of the real world, of the objects, of the countless stories lying beyond, beneath and between the geometrical form of the rectangle – which characterise the enormous power of the paintings of Sean Scully. ((Abb 1: Ausschnitt /Sollbruchstelle))

Born in 1945, the Irish artist Sean Scully incorporates in his paintings initially the European, then the American, and subsequently more strongly once again European pictorial traditions – mirroring his own biographical journey. He requires a pictorial structure, formally stringent and architectural, which divides up the canvas into grid-like, abstract compositions with a restricted vocabulary: The stripe - in horizontal and vertical formation - is his only element. This is accompanied by the use of impasto, with over-painting and layering featuring strongly as his key methods. Emotional, almost intuitive, the selection of colours is shaped by his own experiences, and accommodates the desire for a narrative; in contrast to the formal pictorial structure, it appears in a range of variants. The narrow gaps between the stripes or the "traces of experience" flanking the borders of the individual elements which he deliberately leaves untouched, are like window slits, revealing momentary glimpses of the mysteries beyond.

The haptic quality of his paintings – evoked by his opulent, layered application of paint - the wet-in-wet painting with broad brush strokes, which necessarily remain identifiable, captivate the viewer: He perceives almost on a tactile level an implicit, concealed sensuality, which occasionally reveals itself; he senses the rich pictorial world of which he cannot partake, yet which is always present and arouses curiosity. ((Abb. 3: Detail: erkennbare Pinselspuren))

By means of this painterly dialogue – between the formal austerity of the pictorial architecture and the expressive application of paint, which long since been his “hallmark features” – Scully succeeds in executing something quite contradictory: On the basis of objective, abstract, rational compositions, he conjures a subjectivity, i.e. emotions, moods, associations and ‘images’. Titles such as *Wall of Light Dog*, *Happy Days* or *Königin der Nacht* underscore the narrative moment and the foreshadowed emotions. ((Abb.2: eins der Bilder))

Initially Scully’s paintings are alien to us, appearing too abstract to admit easy access. Yet the deeper one immerses oneself into the paintings and appropriates its structure (or experiences), the more one senses the enormous tension, the breadth of emotions, the almost spiritual quality which imbues each single form, and his entire oeuvre.

Scully continually explores the underlying foundations of abstraction by highlighting the intrinsic value of the artistic means – the aesthetics of form and colour - and places it at the heart of his work. Yet he is not striving to produce the perfect ‘dead’ paintings, and consequently his emotional treatment of colour and his playful disregard of formal order enable him to fulfil his aspiration “to humanise abstract painting”. Each painting is afforded an open structure, strives not for perfection, but is fragile. Rather than providing the ultimate solution, a range of

possibilities is raised. It is an offer by the artist, furnishing space for our own associations, predicated on his conviction that the distance between the artist, the painting as the mediator and the viewer can be overcome. He pays tribute to his conviction that life does not form a unified entity, but is fragmented, isolated and fractured. His paintings are “a desperate attempt to hold the world together, and I seem to be running around [travelling], trying to piece it together from these broken pieces and parts.”

By virtue of the artistic exploration of interior and exterior, figuration and abstraction, tension and relaxation, light and darkness, subjectivity and objectivity, of the relationship between content and form, his works appear powerful, sensual, life-affirming, optimistic - albeit strangely ‘constrained’, yet open.

To refer to Sean Scully superficially as an abstract artist who paints only – often dark – geometric forms and decorative variations thereof, is a common misconception, which fails to grasp the exuberant richness which lies behind the facade.

Possible explanations for his artistic approach lie in his biography – an unsurprising observation, which probably applies to every artist. Conscious of the theatrical nature of his Irish mentality, Scully himself looks back on his childhood and youth as a time of extreme tension, aggression and anger, as a time of social and religious upheaval and diverse relationships (also to places), which continually have to be redefined. He grew up surrounded by storytellers and songwriters and subsequently had to prove himself in London’s Irish ghetto. Captivated and inspired by the highly colourful images in the Catholic churches, he decides at early age to become an artist. These “few happy moments of his childhood”, to quote the artist himself, grant him the

stability he needs to contend with the harsh realities of life, and allow his deep, inner needs to take shape.

These upheavals give an early indication of the formal elements (stripes, lines), with which he came to compose his paintings, and which conferred upon his narratives, emotions and memories, a certain (formal) protection.

Consequently his interest lies not in fashioning the one harmonious story, but in the many autonomous narratives/sequences/relationships, which find their *raison d'être* in mutual juxtaposition, vie with each other and generate tension. The basic concept of his work is to transport this content into repositories, which sometimes (formally) forge mutual relationships or yield further possibilities - independently of each other. Scully's focus here lies in the relationship and communication between form and content. "Instead of painting a relationship, I therefore paint fields and piece them together. (...) I treat the fields separately from each other and then throw them together. This introduces a certain violence or immediacy; it also implies the possibility that relationships can be broken."

Steeped in the figurative style of a Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, an Emil Nolde or even a Henri Matisse, Scully is finally admitted to the Croydon College of Art in 1965 to study art after many failed attempts. During this time he is also influenced by the works of Piet Mondrian (essentially the later works with reference to New York's street grid plan). Initially he paints figuratively, but also develops an interest in Op-Art, Abstract Expressionism and above all in the paintings of Mark Rothko. In 1969 he travels to Morocco for the first time, where he is enthralled by the abstract colour compositions and luminous colours of the Moroccan textiles – marking the beginning of a fascination with African culture which has endured until the present day. In 1972 he is

awarded a scholarship to Harvard and soon Scully devotes himself to Minimalism and the formal Purism of the time, executing a kind of all-over paintings, in which he dispenses entirely with gesture. ((Abb. 3: *Overlay Painting, # 1 oder 2*)) The only form he permits is the vertical or horizontal line (diagonals feature only occasionally as a contrasting element) – as a “signifier for modernism”. He binds his canvasses with masking tape in order to create more radical, clearer forms and his colour palette is reduced, static and full of clarity. ((Abb. 4: *Crossover Painting*, 1974)).

In the early 80s he departs from this perfection once again, deeming this form of art to be too formal, empty, detached and inhumane. As he himself subsequently stated: “And the Minimalists removed the content from Abstract Expressionism. Accordingly art reached the point where it had lost its ability to communicate” – a capacity and function of art, which Scully regards as elemental.

However, rather than returning to figuration, he sees in abstraction a generosity which admits all kinds of subjectivity and openness, without assuming a dominance.

This upheaval is best exemplified in *Backs and Fronts* from 1981 ((Abb. 5)) and in the *Catherine paintings* from 1981 onwards ((Abb. 6)): These paintings comprise autonomous elements, are possessed of a narrative structure and a more expressive paint palette. They are open-ended, abounding in perspectives, yet do not have the exclusive character of Minimalism and hold the prospect – not in plagiaristic sense – of becoming the abstract variant of Matisse’ artistic realm. These paintings now recall the glance from the moving train and reflect the almost filmic character of his work.

A decisive criterion distinguishing these works from his earlier output, are the different sizes/heights/widths and variously painted sections of the canvass which Scully - without prior planning – eventually combines to form an almost sculptural composition. And a title such as

Backs and Fronts, for example, underscores the narrative component and traces the painting back to a concrete experience (that of a long queue of waiting people): Thus Scully uses the formal element as a metaphor for human behaviour. Whilst furnishing an indication of the emotions, his titles have hitherto never alluded to the stories and inter-relationships (substantive or formal).

Paintings such as *The Bather* from 1983 ((Abb. 7)), which rank as among the most important from the ensuing period, herald the beginning of Scully's international breakthrough. It is a homage to Matisse, in which he reformulates the figuration and coloration to affectionately express the colourful richness we associate with the French painter. Scully describes it more appositely: " ... [it] has a kind of giddy craziness about it, an ecstatic quality. It's physical and highly structured, but not with the structure of reason. It is the structure of feeling." Here his focus lies not in the figure itself, but in the significance/feeling/nostalgia of a figure, and thus with great poignancy, the formally powerful image enters into a dynamic dialogue with the empathetic and intimate title.

Scully's art is strongly influenced by his own visual experiences, gathered on his extensive travels, and his paintings reflect his encounters with other countries ((Abb. 8: *Araby*, 1981)), other cities, people, events, the history of art, literature, film and music. He documents photographically the things he observes in passing. The photos are frequently of architectural motifs; coloured doors and windows, walls, panels and layers of stones or scenic landscape/stripes, which are artistically transformed into paintings, such as *Colored Landline*, 2003 ((Abb. 9)) and which reflect simple horizontal structures such as land, sea, sky, sun and clouds.

Scully describes his preoccupation with this other medium as a "shopping spree", on which he collects visual material.

His studios – maintained in the three very different locations of New York (since 1975), Barcelona (since 1994) and in the rural outskirts of Munich (since 2002) - are symbolic of his artistic and personal development, and find their reflection in his paintings. ((Abb. 10: *Small Barcelona Painting*))

His output throughout the 1980s until the early 90s is characterised by variants and repetitions (in the positive sense of further development), in which his paintings are highly condensed. Frequently Scully combines an ensemble of canvas elements within large-format works; paintings such as *Falling Wrong*, 1985 ((Abb. 11)), and *Happy Days*, 1991 ((Abb. 12)), convey a sense of how intensively he works and grapples with the structure in order to continually arrive at new solutions. The stripe, once so rigidly orientated towards the vertical and horizontal axes of the painting, is now rendered in ever new variations. The canvasses appear almost corporeal and sculptural. Here it is evident that he is pursuing his highly personal objective of establishing interrelationships, which - based on his own experience – reflect interior and exterior structures and lure the viewer in by holding up a mirror to him. Scully himself describes this as a natural phenomenon: “And since art... comes from life itself, it mirrors one’s own life - warts and all.”

He attaches great importance to the aspect of ‘open-endedness’. “Every time one does a painting, the question of how one remains both open and closed at the same time must be addressed once again.” The message of the painting is continually undergoing modification, assuming just one of many possibilities. The viewer becomes aware of the interchangeability of the structures, of the process of seeing between construction and destruction, division and addition. The

plurality of the formal relationships is source of fascination to Scully. Triptychs, paintings structured like checkerboards feature strongly, occurring in a multitude of different facets ((Abb. 13: *Two One One*, 1985)) ((Abb. 14: *Union Yellow*, 1994)); or the stripe/surface itself is ruptured, and appears to dissipate and 'lose' itself ((Abb 15: *Darkness Here*, 1989)) – a kowtow to the abundance of content?

This surging momentum of all these possibilities continually impel him to fashion ever new, finely-tuned facets of the formal repertoire. Works such as *Darkness and Heat*, 1988 ((Abb. 16)), *Uriel*, 1997 ((Abb. 17)), or *Pink Inset*, 1991 ((Abb. 18)), highlight his return to working with surface, (in contrast to a work such as *Backs and Fronts*), and leaving the figures as isolated forms, as core(s). Leading its own existence, the single form appears to have its own 'personality', which transforms it into an individual, and it is only this that the title reflects.

This core is either protected, hermetically sealed off, encased by other formal elements (strongly redolent of the form of the medieval 'Hortus Conclusus', and consequently of the iconography of the Virgin Mary), or the enclosed painting surface is breached by fissures, then enclosed again by the insertion of an *inset*. Often these paintings-in-a-painting carry the title of *Passenger*, who is always located beyond the actual structure, intimating movement, and thus incorporating the viewer more directly. ((Abb. 19: *Passenger Line Pink Blue*, 2004)).

In these works, and in the *Window-* and *Figure* paintings ((Abb. 20: *Window Painting*, 2005)) ((Abb. 21: *Figure Figure*, 2004)), one recognises clearly that Scully is availing himself of another *modus operandi*: Seemingly he is not adding here in order to relate 'the' story, but augmenting a form with further structures to render it comprehensible. He appears to find greater appeal in working from the inside to the outside, rather than vice versa. The motif of the window and the door plays a central role, assuming in his work the

function of a prototype or metaphor. Throughout the history of art, the window has served as a symbol for the link between the internal and external worlds, and conversely it affords an almost voyeuristic insight from the exterior into the interior.

The works dating from the late 1990s, such as *Wall of Light Light*, 1999 ((Abb. 22)), *Königin der Nacht*, 2003 ((Abb. 23)), or *Abend* from 2003 ((Abb. 24)) - whose titles speak for themselves – exquisitely embody Scully's key interests and concerns. They exude a poetic, almost painful melancholy. They radiate an astonishing softness of structure, furnishing evidence of Scully's unwaveringly positive attitude to life, despite his acknowledgement of the negative (without which he would not be able to heed his inner compulsion and thus accomplish his work) and reveal to us how the warm colours shake off their gravity to become ever brighter. The theme of light, the illuminating and melancholic aspect of light, is another key feature of Scully's work which is matched by an increasingly fluid, transparent and highly varied brush technique – rich in playful nuances. Many of these shimmering, silvery paintings originated in Barcelona.

The most recent works – now on copper or gleaming aluminium – such as *Mirror Silver*, 2007 ((Abb. 25)), or *Cut Ground Colored Triptych 6.08* from 2008 ((Abb. 26)) – attest to Scully's creative power and dynamism, his courage to reflect reality and hold up a mirror, and the ongoing process of change, of seeking, of open-endedness: They reveal his current interest in the impact of painting on another surface. In *Titian's Pink Robe* from 2008 ((Abb. 27)) he embarks upon a journey, forges a relationship, analyses, confronts, transforms and engages in a conscious dialogue with Titian's paint palette, in an affectionate homage to that by-gone age.

One is almost tempted to say that the greater abstraction of many of the earlier works, the still clearly formulated resolution of the external and internal conflict, his inner compulsion have given way with age to a more relaxed approach to himself, to his painting, to the structure of relationships and to a greater freedom.

Sean Scully appears to have found his inner harmony - without losing his dynamism, his sensuality and curiosity.

Susanne Kleine, December 2008