

FEATURES *Artist interview*

Sean Scully:

THE WANDERER

Soon to turn 70, the Irish-born painter has been on the move since the age of four. With major shows opening in Venice and other cities, he tells how travelling the world helps him stay “in an active situation”.

By Pac Pobric

In the Bavarian Alps, mobile phone reception is elusive and Sean Scully is chasing it when I reach him by phone. He is driving to his farmhouse and studio in the village of Mooseurach with his five-year-old son, Oisín, who is in the back seat playing with Star Wars Lego. Scully is in an enthusiastic mood. He is in Germany for a five-month stay and has been looking forward to the reprieve. “I always paint well here because it’s very relaxed,” he says on the phone. “But I paint well wherever I am.”

Scully turns 70 in June, and the unfolding birthday celebrations have taken him all over the world. His retrospective *Follow the Heart* opened at the Himalayas Art Museum in Shanghai in November 2014 and travelled to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where it closed in April. Another survey, *Moving or Profound or Necessary or Beautiful*, at the Pinacoteca do Estado in São Paulo (until 28 June), opened in April. By the end of the year, 13 galleries and museums in eight countries will have hosted exhibitions of Scully’s work, including the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin (12 May–20 September), the reopened Museum Liaunig in Neuhaus, Austria (which was due to open on 26 April, as we went to press), and the Palazzo Faller in Venice (Land Sea, 9 May–22 November), as part of the 56th Venice Biennale.

Restless and rootless

Mooseurach might be a respite, but Scully is restless. When I first meet him in New York, before the phone call, he has just sold his Chelsea studio of 16 years and is in the midst of building a new one in the nearby town of Palisades. He is making plans to open studios in Berlin and London and is fighting the urge to spend more time in Venice. “It’s really hard not to live there if you’re European,” he says. “You really have to fight it off. It has these long fingers that reach out towards you so that you spend five years of your life being disappointed in Venice before you leave.” Maybe China, where his retrospective has been graciously received (“There have been 150 reviews,” Scully tells me), would be better: “I really like it there. I love the people, I’m fascinated by them. Yes, I could easily live there.”

Since Scully was a boy, rootlessness has been his only real permanence. He was born in Ireland in 1945 but moved with his family to London when he was four. Poverty prevented any real stability. “We moved around a lot because we were homeless and starving,” Scully says. “And this has given me a relationship with place that is brutal.” He left home at 19 and later, in 1975, emigrated to New York. In 1983, he became a US citizen, but wanderlust has always taken precedence over homemaking: Mexico, Morocco and Spain have all since served as temporary homes. In each place, Scully has been motivated by his unease.

“I do it to stay in an active situation,” he says. “You can’t get too comfortable. Art comes from discomfort, I’m sorry to say.”



Wandering animates Scully’s imagination and there is a James Joycean quality to his roving thoughts. He weighs his words carefully before speaking (“I’m trying to be diplomatic,” he says at one point, after pausing between thoughts on Mark Rothko), but once he begins, he is difficult to slow down. He speaks in short, sharp phrases that are hard to isolate because they are always expanding. In Scully’s vocabulary, some words have no synonyms because their meaning is too precise, so he uses them repeatedly as he elaborates a thought. Stories that look like diversions are intimately tied to the main idea. His expressions are lyrical but precise: his paintings are “the skin” of an emotion; his art can be seen as Minimalism “compressed” with Romanticism; his slabs of colour are “like soft packets of wrapped air that I put into place”, he says.

“Being an Irish person,” Scully says, “you naturally have access to a lyrical use of language. I think a love of language promotes ideas because ideas come from articulation. It’s not simply that you have an idea you then compose into prose; prose itself creates ideas. The way that verbs, nouns and tenses are constructed produces thought. It flows back. Writing and painting spill over, one to the other.”

Literary sensibility

Scully is an eager reader, and his literary sensibility sometimes informs the titles of his paintings. His 1982 work *Heart of Darkness* takes its name from Joseph Conrad’s novella. *Pale Fire* (1988) is titled after Vladimir Nabokov’s book of the same name. And the novel *Molloy*, written in 1951 by Scully’s countryman, Samuel Beckett, is also the title of a picture Scully painted in 1984.

But titles are elusive and Scully’s pictures are as restless as he is. They always amble away from the language that tries to hold them. Scully is fond



Transatlantic view: Sean Scully in his studio in New York City, which he is leaving after 16 years. He is building a new studio in Palisades, New York, and plans to open others in Berlin and London. *Landline Green Sea* (2014), one of the works he will show in his exhibition at the Palazzo Faller in Venice this summer, is part of a series referencing landscape, marking a departure for the artist

of a story about a visit to his studio from Diane Waldman, a former curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. She brought a young colleague who “loved my work”, Scully says. “But Diane Waldman was a bit stand-offish – very New York, very cool. And she looked at a painting and said, ‘What’s that one called?’ and I said, ‘Come In’ and she said, ‘Oh yes, I can see it’s very architectonic, and this could be seen as a door.’”

But the title in fact came from a friend of Scully’s, who told the painter an anecdote about Joyce and Beckett. “Beckett was taking dictation from Joyce and somebody knocked on the door,” Scully says. “Joyce said, ‘Come in’ and Beckett wrote down ‘Come in’ and the next day Joyce reads aloud: ‘...and he goes along here she was with hair black as coal, come in.’ And he says to Beckett, ‘What did you write down “come in” for?’ And Beckett said, ‘You say come in, I write come in.’ And I considered it a gift that a friend of mine had come in and given me [the story of] ‘come in’ – so, Come In.”

Verbal education

As Scully tells it, Waldman was not impressed: “When I had given this mad explanation with Beckett and Joyce, I could see that she had a look of mild disgust on her face. Right there I understood that this square peg would not fit into a round hole.” But the episode speaks to the way Scully thinks: discussion is his first school.

Although he earned a degree from Newcastle University in 1972 and that same year was awarded a fellowship to continue his work at Harvard University, he says his real ideas come from what others leave behind in conversation. “My education is nearly all verbal,” he says. “It’s from talking to people like you. You come in, drop something and I pick it up.”

Digest Sean Scully

BACKGROUND

Born: 30 June 1945, Dublin, Ireland

Early life: Scully's family moves from Dublin to London in 1949. In one of his first trips away from Ireland, Scully and his family are stranded aboard a ship lost at sea for eight hours before the captain finds his way. At the time, as Scully later told a journalist, the situation was precarious. "The waters those days were full up with floating mines" left over from the Second World War. Nearly 40 years later, the experience informed Scully's work *Precious* (1987), which speaks to his parents' most cherished cargo: their son.

Education: In 1960, Scully becomes an apprentice at a commercial printing shop; two years later he starts classes at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. He earns a bachelor's degree from Newcastle University in 1972 and is then awarded the John Knox Fellowship for a one-year residency at Harvard University.

Lives: New York, Mooseurach, Germany, and Barcelona

Represented by: Cheim & Read, New York; Timothy Taylor Gallery, London; Kerlin Gallery, Dublin; Kewenig Gallery, Berlin; La Taché Gallery, Barcelona; Galerie Lelong, Paris

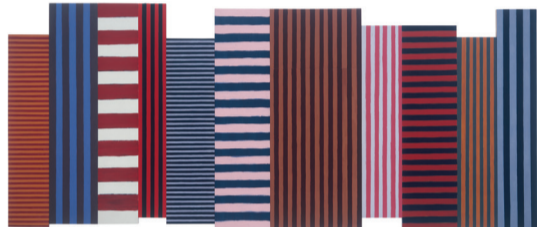
MILESTONES

Catherine (1975)

Scully's early work, from the mid-1960s, is figurative, but by 1969, he begins to make abstract pictures. In the early 1970s, his paintings are cerebral yet colourful, but that changes after his emigration to New York in 1975, when Scully's work becomes more austere. He later told the poet Carter Ratcliff that he felt the need to paint "severe, invulnerable canvases so that I could be in [New York] and not feel exposed". As the philosopher Arthur Danto wrote, the Black Paintings, as Scully calls them, have a "defensive agenda: the stripes serve as bars to keep the hostile environment at bay". The paintings were a "five-year love affair with Minimalism", Scully has said.

Backs and Fronts (1981)

This 12-panel work (the seventh panel from the left, which looks like one part, is in fact two) marks a turning point for Scully, after the Black Paintings: it is one of the first by the artist to make a virtue out of discord. Each panel was painted separately and Scully kept the parts in different rooms so that no single section would influence how he painted another. "I put it together so that it was wrong," he says. "But when I made the painting, people were so angry with me. The only people who liked my painting when it was shown at MoMA PS1 [in 1982] were a group of punk rockers."



Landline Yellow Yellow (2014)

Scully's Landline paintings, eight of which were shown at the Cheim & Read gallery in New York this year, are his latest change of direction. He describes these works as a "break" from his Wall of Light series, which includes around 200 pictures made between 1998 and 2013. "The Landline paintings are quite close to landscapes," he says. The most telling shift in the series is that "the vertical has fallen out of the paintings", as Scully recently said. "And the vertical of course is referring to architecture." The Landline paintings include several that he will show in Venice at the Palazzo Falier. Scully describes those works as "swinging from side to side", much like the water in Venice's canals.



"It's very seductive, the movement of the water. But that kind of representation of Venice is done with Monet"

Even in just this sense, Scully is a traditionalist: he believes deeply in the Socratic method of open debate. ("I'm very ancient in a certain way," he says.) His work, too, reaches for clear precedents. It is often compared to Rothko's, and Scully himself names Vincent van Gogh, Kazimir Malevich and Paul Klee ("who are all wonderful writers") as the bearers of the tradition he works in. His contemporaries also furnish him with ideas. "In a certain way, I'm following Gerhard Richter, who is a high-minded, dead serious artist, as am I. That's the branch line that I'm on."

But Scully's reverence only goes so far; he does not follow blindly. His true tradition is that of critique, and he worries about artists who are too respectful of their own ideas, or who plot a course and follow it diligently. He is anxious about refinement and bemoans "the decadence of New York abstraction, which isn't worth a damn". He snaps at artists such as the abstract painter Joseph Marioni – "this man is just extraordinarily deluded" – because their art is buried in history. "We're not in the age of Rothko," he says. "You can't do that again, you can't be a sentimental dropout. You have to live in the world of contemporary energy."

Reaction to landscape

The newest pictures Scully will show in Venice carry the energy of the city's canals. With their thick blue bands of colour, "they make you think about water and stone", he says. They are related to the Landline pictures Scully has been making

for the past three years, each of which references landscape painting. Yet he is quick to point out that the Venice pictures are not landscapes per se. "Venice is very beautiful," he says. "It's very seductive, the movement of the water. But that kind of representation of Venice is done with Monet. You can't do it better than that. So what I've done is a reaction to Venice, not a representation of it."

The Landline and Venice paintings mark a departure in Scully's work. The vertical and horizontal bricks that have been the building blocks of his painting since the 1980s have given way to purely horizontal swaths of colour. The change has prompted strong reactions from some who know Scully's work well. The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who was particularly close to the painter, saw the Landline paintings and "got really violent", Scully says. "His wife had to take him out of the house. He said to my wife, 'What have you done to him? What's the matter, does he want to be young?' He cancelled the friendship."

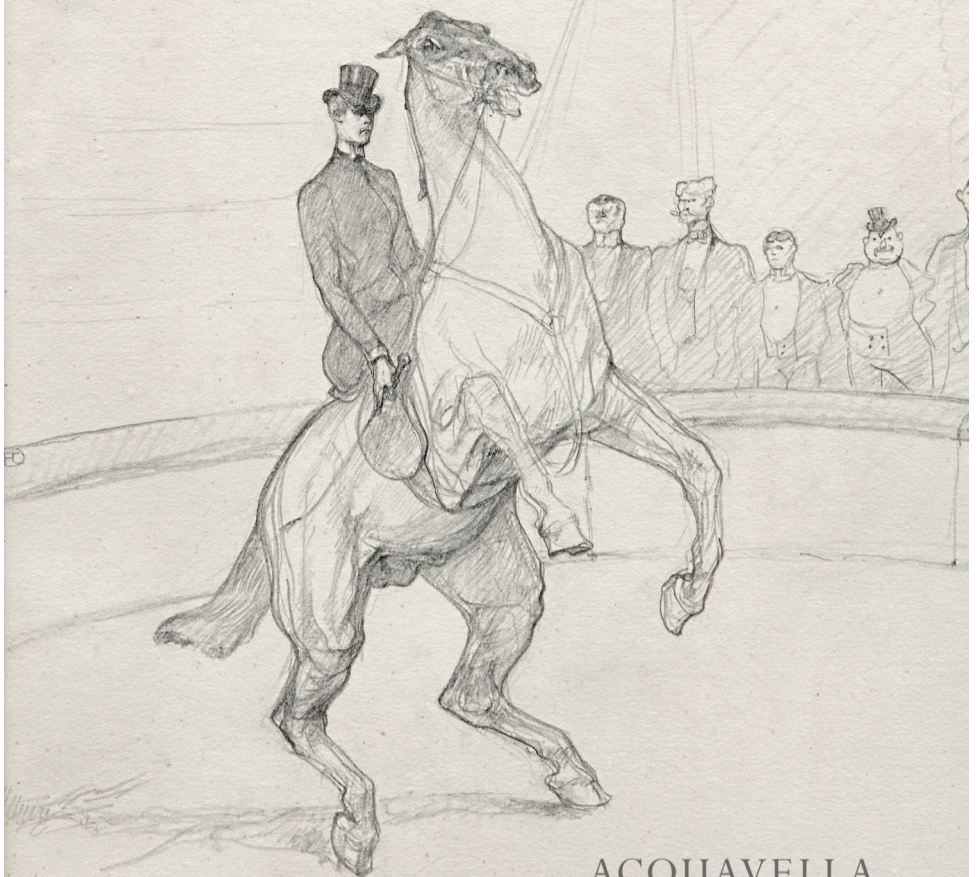
Habermas's anger speaks to the difficulty of Scully's endless artistic resettlement: even his relationships are on the verge of fleeting. "Sometimes I think I shouldn't have come," he says of his move to New York 40 years ago. But his break from life in England was what made his work and life possible. Scully is optimistic. He feels he is finally earning the respect he has always deserved. But disruption, not praise, is what keeps him motivated. And soon he will be disrupting his life again to return to the UK: he is "looking to establish a studio in London again", he says.

On the cusp of turning 70, Scully can look back on his life and work as a restless search for something to hold on to. "Art comes from being broken in some way," he says. And scattered, he could have added.

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Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Au cirque, écuylère de haute école - le pointage [detail], 1899
Pencil on paper, 19 3/4 x 12 7/8 inches (50.4 x 32.7 cm)

JACOB EL HANANI DRAWINGS

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Jacob El Hanani

Gauze [Detail], 2008

Ink on paper

17 7/8 x 22 3/8 inches (45.4 x 56.8 cm)

Art © Jacob El Hanani

