

„But I would say what makes an artist or any person who does something that's a little out of the ordinary, that's considered big or considered to be a profound intervention – I think that comes from need.“ (Sean Scully)

SEAN SCULLY

Art comes from need

A Film by Hans A. Guttner



“I think I’m on my own, yeah. I was very much on my own. And this for a long time was a disadvantage, and now it’s my advantage. And that’s funny, when you live your life, and you see it go from a disadvantage to advantage.”



In the last three decades, Sean Scully, born Irish, has, with great consequence, created a characteristic oeuvre of abstract painting. Seeing himself as an outsider up to the present day (“I’ve gone the opposite way of almost everybody of my generation”), he is, at least since the 1990s, one of the leading artists of our time. It would not be a contradiction to call him a traditionalist of modern painting, as he holds on to certain concepts (framing his pictures and the authenticity of subjective expression).

Scully grew up in the working-class neighbourhood of Islington which was an Irish ghetto in London. But his was a creative environment and after wild teenage years between blues club and street gang, and a lot of odd jobs he made up his mind becoming an artist after seeing Van Gogh’s *Chair with Pipe* at the Tate Gallery. Being rejected “by every single art school in London” (Scully) he is finally accepted by the Croydon College of Art in 1965. His beginnings are figurative, he tries to follow in the steps of Schmidt-Rottluff, Nolde, and particularly, Matisse. It is at the university of Newcastle where he turns to abstraction, strongly influenced by op-art. For his “grid” paintings, he develops a complicated taping technique. After a Harvard scholarship in 1972, he had his first single exhibition in London which was a big success (“sold out”). But he did not want to tie himself down, so he changed his style, relocating for good in the United States in 1975 where the paintings of the late seventies show his minimalistic “black phase”. Then, in 1981, with *Backs and Fronts*, he made the decisive turn to a new humanism, including expressive brushstrokes and a complex application of paint. Since then Scully paints with oil colour, wet on wet, and in layers, using broad household brushes, because they leave blanks where the underlying colours come through. Scully’s paintings are characterized by a kind of dirty colouring, done mostly in red, brown, ochre, grey, and black. His formal repertoire is deliberately spare, using rectangles and horizontals by way of

juxtaposition, variation and repetition. He plays with “relationships” and “confrontations” between structures and colours and wants to show “how things come together”. He abhors perfection. For Scully, perfect paintings are dead paintings.



Sean Scully – Statements from the film

ON PAINTING

Monet said: I know exactly what I want to do and I have no idea how it will turn out. And if it wasn't Monet that said that it was me. And that's what happens. I kind of know what I think I'm gonna do, but in another way I really have no idea. And in order to make something, to be a creator, you have to be in some way an idiot.

What makes an artist or any person who does something that's a little out of the ordinary, that's considered big or considered to be a profound intervention, I think that comes from need. Now, I think belief, need and belief, vision, seeing perhaps, is a form of what we might call genius. You know, there's a beautiful film on Mozart, that touched me profoundly. I was weeping when I was watching it, because it's so true. Mozart was standing in front of a billiard table and he had the balls on the billiard table and he rolled the ball. And he wrote and the ball came back. He picked up the ball and rolled the ball. And wrote – the ball came back – rolled the ball and wrote. And this is a way of creating a Muse. You have to have the angel sit here, and then when the angel comes you make the work. And I'm not sure that's genius, I think it's a question of being passive-aggressive. You must be passive enough to allow yourself to be affected and connected enough to allow yourself to be motivated. And a lot of my motivation comes from, I would say, rage, or sorrow - about the way things are. Because the world could be so fantastic and it's not. And a lot of that stimulates what I do.

So in a sense I don't really believe in this idea of genius. I think in a certain way it's rubbish.

A painting has the possibility to be a compression of many things at the same time. So on one hand it's antiquated in relation to my other favourite art form, film, and on the other hand film is antiquated because it's connected to real time and a ninety-minute film takes ninety minutes to watch, there's no way out of that one. It's locked into the tyranny of the narrative of time, and a painting isn't. A painting is an incarnation, an embodiment, and you give it two seconds, or two minutes, and if you are a compulsive-obsessive you can give it two hours, but you can give it as long or short as you want and it works with glimpses, with fragments of time that are free form, and that seems to me to be very appropriate to the age in which we live. And at the same time the contradiction is that it is physical, it's physical and it's made in the same way as (did) the painters who painted the paintings in the caves of Lascaux. The paintings are not painted any differently. This is also the beautiful thing about it, because it's a contemporary art form, yet it reaches right back to our origins, so our line is unbroken and it's unbroken through painting. (You can also say it's unbroken through percussive instruments, music.) And this is why I hold to painting. And my painting in particular is really a compression, or it could be seen as a culmination of all these tendencies. It is possible that painting won't persist, but it always has a way of rolling back into the present. Everybody keeps saying: "Oh yeah, painting's finished" and then: "Wuohhh, here comes painting." And now painting's very strong, it's the dominant art form in the visual arts. And then in five years people'll say it's finished again. And then I won't be able to sell my paintings so easily perhaps, who knows, I don't know. I don't care anyway. But these things come and go. However, painting, abstract painting the way I do it has the possibility to compress

and embody in one moment all this history and longing and present and past in a form that's very simple and quick to understand, yet utterly complex emotionally, and it's like that! – and this is interesting. I'm not telling stories, you see. Filmmakers are telling stories.

Nothing is fixed. It's only fixed because people want it to be fixed. And you have all sorts of structures in the world that can be undone or manipulated or opened up. So in my painting I would like to make mental freedom and to provoke one of our most precious commodities: our ability to imagine, our imagination, to provoke our ability to think other, to think outside our context. I use an abstract language, which I hope is open to everybody, as open to Chinese people as it is to African people, as it is to Eskimos, I don't care who's looking at the painting, but I would like it to be so simple in its drawing and so fascinating in its application or in its treatment that anybody can use it. And that's the point of these paintings that they are a kind of subjective universality.

What I am basically doing is taking something out of the ground that we live on, which is stone, grinding it down to make powder, putting the powder into a medium and stirring it, and making an image that hopes to mean something to somebody else. And this is extremely humble as a project. It depends of course on our communication with each other. It depends on our understanding of what our language is. I mean, I work with this, this is not built by me, but this is something I work with, it's something I inherited. And I inherited the whole language of abstraction.

And what I'm doing is painting layers, and I paint until the point that the painting is transformative to me, until I am moved by the painting. And when I am moved by the painting, I'm not really concerned if the painting

is resolved, I'm not very interested in this as a subject, this word resolution. And - the problem now I had with a lot of my contemporaries was that they were making things that somehow had resolution, that were intellectually finalized and that were clean, conceptually clean. And this to me is not interesting, it doesn't give anything. So these paintings I think have a kind of soul. This maybe the simplest way of saying it. They have a body and a soul.

Art is a way of playing out possibilities. That is the role of art in the world. And - one can do it in many different ways. Different people do it in different ways. As I always say, you know, I like a lot of other people's work and I'm glad that I don't have to make it. I make my work, they make their work, but I believe that you must have some spiritual force, need, inner love for the world to wanna be an artist.

On one hand my work is wilful, there is will, and will is a very powerful human quality, and it has been responsible for many of our triumphs, but it's also been responsible for many of our catastrophes, because will that is not subject to imagination and poetic editing and sensibility is dumb, like watching somebody dig a hole in the ground. It doesn't actually have any merit, because it's a pure demonstration of will. So on one hand my work has will in it, but on the other hand it has to be open, I have to be open to suggestion, to coincidence.

You might say it doesn't have any meaning. It has values. But when you say what does it mean, it could mean I love life. It could mean life is abstract, what it certainly is. If you don't think that standing on a big ball of rock in the middle of the universe spinning around is not abstract, I think you

haven't quite got the idea of life at its fullest meaning in the round. So, I would say it has values in it, and it has emotion in it, it also has colour, beauty, proportion, and then again, this possibility of flexibly, sympathetically, combatively interlocking relationship, but it doesn't have a meaning. I'm not giving out the Ten Commandments. It's not religion. It's not spirituality incarcerated in a religious doctrine. It's open.

Well, the first real painting that inspired me was Pablo Picasso's *Child with a Dove* which was hanging in the school I went to. That was after we left Islington. That was in Siddenham. But that was only a reproduction. However, when I was working in the Victoria Station, Palace Hotel, on the ballroom - I was working as a building labourer, mixing plaster for the ceiling - I started to go to the Tate Gallery. I had a scooter, little motorbike thing. I used to go half an hour for lunch. So I bought this pie, I would stick it in my mouth and drive to the museum, eating it on my motorbike. And I got to look at this painting, I found this painting of *The Chair*. And it moved me profoundly, because I could understand it. It was so honest and direct. And I've always tried to have this quality in my work, because that was the quality that first touched me. Eventually, of course, I worked my way into more sophisticated paintings, because it's not a very sophisticated painting, into paintings of Cimabue and Masaccio and so on and so on, Malevich, and I understood all this, but in the beginning it was the honesty, the humility and the directness of the painting by Van Gogh that touched me profoundly, and I just went every single day that I was working in this job, for six weeks, I went into the Tate. I parked my motorbike outside, which you could do then, because in those days you could park, and I would go in, look at the painting for five minutes, go back and work.

SENTENCES

The subject of my painting, to say it in one word, is relationship.

The willingness to be an idiot is fundamental to art.

Corrections are made by time. Time shows everything.

There's no such thing as a right painting.

A painting should never be bigger as it has to be.

There's no such thing as a humble painting.

It's extremely selfish to make a painting.

It's very easy for abstraction to reach resolution.

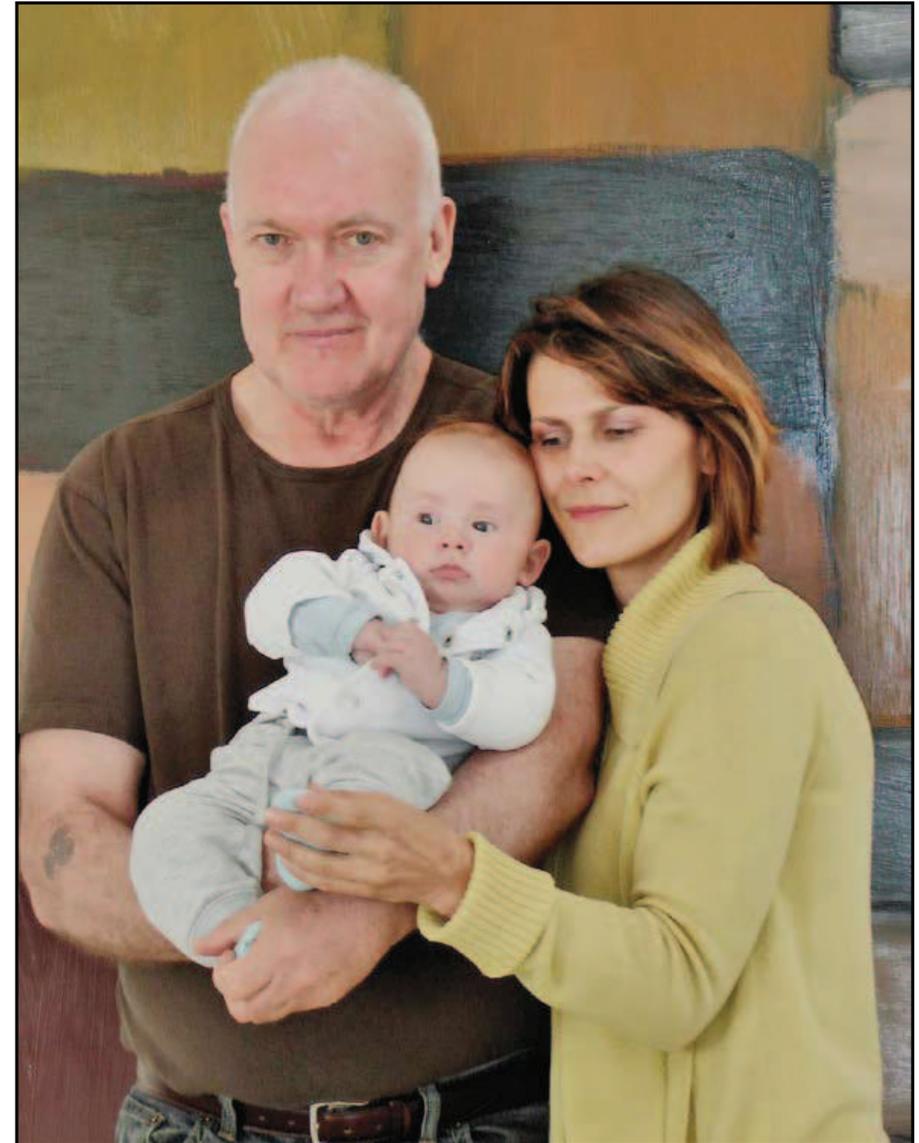
The question is how to make it unresolved.

ON TEACHING

When you teach you have to stop thinking about yourself. And you can't think about yourself self-consciously while you're teaching because you're doing it for the other person. It's an absolute commitment to the needs of the other person. So you don't bring your ego into the class. You forget yourself, forget your own problems and it's like taking a little holiday from yourself. And that I think is the key. If you bring your own ego and your need to dominate and control into the class you will probably destroy more than you create.



- * 30 June 1945 in Dublin, Ireland. His father, John Anthony Scully, is an itinerant barber, his mother, Holly Scully, a vaudeville singer.
- 1949 The family comes to London.
- 1960-62 He is a printer & graphics apprentice and attends evening courses at the Central School of Art.
- 1964 He frequents Tate Gallery where he is fascinated by Van Gogh's painting of *Vincent's Chair with Pipe* (1888).
- 1965 Attends Croydon College of Art.
- 1968 Goes to Newcastle-upon-Tyne to study fine arts at the university. In the beginning he is the only painter among a lot of concept artists. Discovers abstract painting and starts his grid pictures.
- 1972 He receives a scholarship at Harvard University. Develops taping technique.
- 1973 First single exhibition in London at the Rowan Gallery. All paintings are sold. Starts teaching. Stays in London for the next two years.
- 1975 He receives the Harkness Scholarship at Princeton University and decides to stay in the United States, in New York City. Meets painter Catherine Lee whom he marries in 1978.
- 1977 First single exhibition in the USA (Duffy-Gibbs Gallery, New York). His taping phase is over. Strongly influenced by Minimalism.
- 1980/81 He nearly exclusively paints 'black paintings'.
- 1977-83 Teaching at Princeton University.
- 1981 *Backs and Fronts* marks his breakthrough with a new colorful style.
- 1983 He becomes a citizen of the United States. His son Paul of his first marriage dies in a car accident.
- 1984-89 These are the years of his international breakthrough.
- 1985 With his first museum exhibition (Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh) museums get interested in his paintings.
- 1989 First European traveling exhibition: Whitechapel Gallery (London), Palacio Velázquez (Madrid), Lenbachhaus (Munich).
- 2001 Great retrospective at the Munich Haus of Kunst.
- 2003 Divorces Catherine Lee, marries painter Lilliane Tomasko.
- 2002-07 He teaches at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich. Takes residence at Mooseurach, Upper Bavaria.
- 2006 He publishes *Resistance and Persistence: Selected Writings*.
- 2009 His son Oisin is born on May 2.



BIOFILMOGRAPHY HANS A. GUTTNER

Studied theatre, journalism and law. Founded his own production company (Sisyphos Film). Made many films for cinema and TV. Initiated the “Internationales Dokumentarfilmfestival München” (Munich International Documentary Film Festival). His most important work is the five-part EUROPA – EIN TRANSNATIONALER TRAUM (Europe – A transnational dream), made between 1979 and 1996 and consisting of the films (1) ALAMANYA ALAMANYA – GERMANIA GERMANIA, (2) FAMILIE VILLANO KEHRT NICHT ZURÜCK, (3) IM NIEMANDSLAND, (4) DEIN LAND IST MEIN LAND, and (5) KREUZ UND QUER. All of them received awards and were shown at international festivals and theatrically released.



FILMS (SELECTION):

- Alamanya Alamanya - Germania Germania (1979)
- Familie Villano kehrt nicht zurück (1980/81)
- The Kings of the Whole Wide World (1983)
- Im Niemandsland (1983/84)
- Dein Land ist mein Land (1988/89)
- Die Fuhre (1991)
- Kreuz und Quer (1994/96)
- Eine Kerze für die Madonna (1996)
- Die Megaklinik (2004)
- Der Basar von Urfa (2006)
- Der Schneiderjunge von Urfa (2008)
- Glückliche Reise (2009)

CREDITS

Producer/Director:	Hans Andreas Guttner
Writers:	Hans A. Guttner, Werner Petermann
Editor:	Jean André; Michael Bernstein, Markus Müller, Bernd Thomas
Online Editor:	Chris von Lüpke, Florian Knoblauch, Monika Knirsch
Camera:	Hans Albrecht Lusznat, Björn Kurt
Sound:	Monika Knirsch, Silvio Reichenbach, Christiane Vogt
Sound Mixer:	Ralph P. Bienzeisler, Michael Mitschka
Original Music:	Lars Kurz
Musicians:	Rita Gillich (vocals - „Danny Boy“), Lars Kurz (guitars / piano), Andreas Panitz (double bass), Josh Roseman (trombone solo), Andrea Suttner (cello)
Song:	„Moment of Surrender“ (music: U2 - Brian Eno, Dabby Lanois; lyrics sung by Bono)
Production Manager:	Jutta Malin
Finishing:	Wolfdieter Gautzsch
Studio Post-Production:	B.O.A. Videofilmkunst
Production Company:	Sisyphos Film München

With a short extract from Robert Gardner's video „Sean Scully in Malaga“ (1997).
Shot from June 2007 till September 2009 in Barcelona, München and Mooseurach.

DVD CREDITS

Art-Director:	Camilla Guttner
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Graphics:	Matthias Schröppel
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