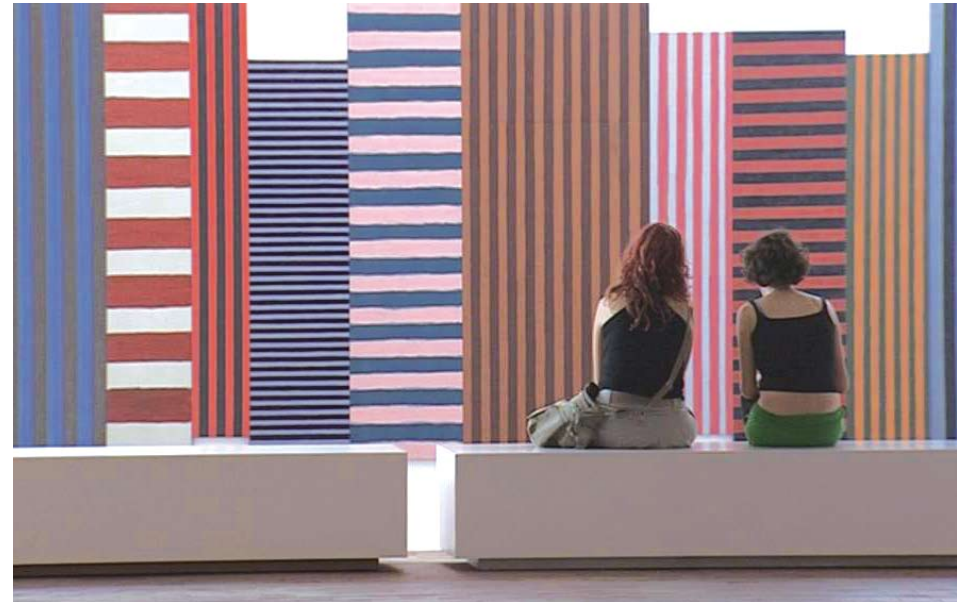


In the last three decades, Sean Scully, has, with great consequence, created a characteristic oeuvre of abstract painting. Seeing himself as an outsider up to the present day (“I’ve gone the opposite way of almost everybody of my generation”), he is, at least since the 1990s, one of the leading artists 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 become 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 the painting of *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.

“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.” (Sean Scully)

- \* 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 paintress 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 paintress Liliane 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.



“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.” (Sean Scully)

“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.

“I’m paraphrasing nature, so in a sense what I’m doing is making the grid – which is an intellectual framework that we have invented in order to order our cities – and I fill it up with information that is already in the world, the information of the sky, of the trees, of the rivers and so on and so on, the skin of animals. All those sensual forms of information gathered into the work to inform, to enrich it, to bring it into the human spirit.” (Sean Scully)

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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)
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With a short extract from Robert Gardner’s video „Sean Scully in Malaga“ (1997).  
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## DVD CREDITS

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# SEAN SCULLY

**Art comes from need**

A Film by Hans A. Guttner