



Abstract Painting,
Art History and Politics
Sean Scully and
David Carrier
in Conversation

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Abstract Painting,

Art History and Politics



Untitled (Mirror) 2020

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These interviews were conducted via Skype in late May/early June 2020. A few small selections are incorporated from previously unpublished interviews done in Morocco, in September 1996, and also from an interview published online in *Brooklyn Rail* as “Sean Scully with David Carrier,” in March 2018, and reprinted here with permission. A few editorial notes give references to the bibliography.

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Preface

This book discusses the life and art of Sean Scully. Presenting very recent, extensive interviews, it offers a comprehensive portrait of his entire career. Doing such interviews always involves two personalities, that of the subject and that of the interviewer. Here, then, I will introduce myself and briefly discuss my relationship with Scully. Knowing something about my background will aid readers in comprehending many details of this presentation. In important ways, my career as a writer has sometimes been linked with his. And some parts of the interviews, which we only touch upon briefly, even elliptically, will make more sense if they are spelled out here in a little detail.

Scully and I first met in the winter of 1982. At this time, in ways that I didn't understand at all, the American art world was in a complicated state of transition. Many of the leading senior artists who were established in the sixties continued to work and show productively. And various well-established critics, too, continued to publish. But it really wasn't clear what was coming next. The contemporary art world thrives on change, which often makes life exciting but usually unpredictable.

The famous Yale art historian George Kubler, whose short treatise *The Shape of Time* (1962) was then much-read, spoke of an artist's "entry point" to identify a position in time and space. An "entry point" is the moment and place at which you enter the contemporary art world. If you are lucky enough to have a good entry point, Kubler argued, then you may find support for novel ways of thinking. Scully describes this very point without reference to Kubler in an extremely economical way:

If you want to be famous, you have to do something at exactly the right time. You have to do exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. It's what Shakespeare describes as "two star crossed lovers." And it's as if your trajectory, which is something that you've made, is something that crosses the skies and coincides perfectly with the desire in the culture which creates star crossed lovers, exactly as Shakespeare wrote. And it's as true today as when he wrote it.

Scully was lucky in this way, and I was extremely fortunate to meet him at that moment, though this wasn't clear, at least to me, at the time.

When Scully arrived in New York from London in 1975, it was still possible for a young, impecunious artist to find a large Manhattan loft. When in the 1980s I visited him in the Duane Street, Tribeca, loft mentioned in the interviews, that neighborhood was still largely undeveloped. In the evening, Tribeca was lifeless. Underneath Scully's second-story studio was a hardware store. Once, on the way out, he gave a big book about his painting to the man at the store, who had expressed curiosity about his upstairs neighbor. Scully always was passionate about explaining his work. Then, thanks to massive gentrification, life in New York City quickly became much more expensive. The same was also true of London after Scully left that city. By the time that he moved his New York studio to Chelsea, in 1999, an expensive (and very noisy) restaurant was down-

stairs. Chelsea, in turn, soon became trendy. And by the time he moved his main studio to the countryside, it had become the center of the Manhattan gallery world.

In the late sixties, I was trained as an analytic philosopher at Columbia University, where my teachers included Arthur Danto, who also became a close friend of Scully's. At that time, I didn't know anything about contemporary visual art or the art world. And Danto was not yet writing art criticism. My doctoral thesis dealt with aesthetic theory. But in the 1970s, when I was teaching philosophy in Pittsburgh, reading *Artforum*, then the leading American publication devoted to contemporary art, inspired me to take up writing art criticism. And at that point, for me the most important new art writer was Joseph Masheck, editor of *Artforum*. He had studied art history at Columbia University and was a very important early champion of Scully.

In the late seventies, Masheck published in *Artforum* a sequence of brilliant theorizing essays that offered a dramatic new way of interpreting contemporary abstraction. These essays, so it seemed to me, provided a marvelous alternative to formalism, the previously dominant way of thinking, linking abstraction to premodern European icons. The influence of Clement Greenberg, who had been the most important and influential American art critic associated with Abstract Expressionism, was very much on the wane. In the sixties, he championed the Color Field painters, Morris Louis and others, who were no longer especially promising. He had ceased to write about younger artists. And so a whole host of other critics were contending for attention. Two who became very well known were Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss, both former friends of Greenberg, but there were many others. Krauss, in particular, was influential because she was one of the founding editors of *October*, a renowned journal whose editors broke off from *Artforum*. Both Fried and Krauss, who are successful academics, have more recently focused on art history, as their critical influence too has waned. To be a successful critic, you need to have a sense of the artistic zeitgeist.

But just as it wasn't clear in the late seventies which new art mattered, it also wasn't obvious which younger writers were most significant. Although Masheck's visionary essays have not often, at least not yet, been commented on by art historians, they had (and continue to have) an enormous influence on my intellectual life. I wrote to Masheck out of the blue, proposing to discuss his methodology; this, after all, was how philosophers worked. He very generously made a better suggestion, proposing that I write criticism myself. And so I did, writing first about a young contemporary artist, Sharon Gold, to whom he had introduced me. Indeed, she also was a friend of Scully; sometimes the New York art world seemed very small. And then I published academic philosophy and art criticism, practicing what were two distinct activities. My colleagues in philosophy didn't know much about my art writing, which I expect struck them as a modestly eccentric hobby, like growing roses. And the artists I met were unlikely to read my essays and books on academic aesthetics.

The same division between philosophy and art writing, it's worth noting, is also found in the publications of Danto, who in the eighties became a very important friend for Scully. He had been a well-known philosopher since the mid-sixties. When he became a famous critic, writing for *The Nation*, most of the artists who admired him never looked into his academic writings. I became very close to Danto, but his ideas about Scully's art always were very different from Scully's, and also from mine. And as you will see, Danto's much-discussed view of Andy Warhol was rejected by Scully, who offers a very different historical perspective. One of Scully's great strengths is his ability to engage a variety of otherwise very diverse critics who have been attracted to his work. Danto and Masheck have different perspectives, as do a multitude of other significant writers, many of them who are just mentioned in passing in these interviews.

To understand these interviews, it's often important to know some significant differences between academic writing about philosophy or art history, and art criticism. As Scully explains, when he was an art student in England, he studied art history. And as a practicing artist, he engaged in intensive discussions with a number of philosophers, including Danto and a very famous German, Jürgen Habermas. But usually the distance between the ways that an artist thinks about their work and the ways that their commentators describe it are vast.

In New York in the eighties, many of the artists I met felt they had to theorize their work, often by borrowing from French post-structuralist philosophy, which (in translation) was very popular. There used to be a great bookstore in SoHo, Jaap Reitman, where you could see what was fashionable. Scully, however, always set himself against bookish ways of thinking, as he indicates forcefully in these interviews. His account of his artworks was based directly upon his activity. Many of the artists I met were focused almost entirely on the relation of their art to other contemporary work. Scully, however, always had a larger historical perspective. He often relates his art to the Old Master paintings he admires.

This discussion brings up yet another important point, important for Scully and also for me: the differences between academic philosophers and art historians. I never formally studied art history, and so had to learn about that discipline on my own. Analogously, although Danto was friends with some distinguished art historians, at Columbia and elsewhere, he always very much identified himself as a philosopher and art critic, but not as an art historian. Sometimes philosophers of art and art historians study the same artifacts, but their concerns are distinctively different. For Scully as a writer, and as an artist, however, these differences were not important. His account of his own work and the other art he admired draws on both philosophical and art-historical concerns. And, as he makes clear, it centrally draws upon his own working experience.

Masheck's suggestion that I, a philosopher, learn to write criticism on my own was not as eccentric as it may seem. Unlike academic philosophers, we art critics are almost all entirely self-taught. Critics learn on the job, which means that it usually takes a while to find your footing.

In particular—and this is especially important for understanding my many writings about Scully, starting in the eighties and continuing up to the present—I initially thought that I needed to theorize his art. But then, in stages, I developed a very different style of art writing. These interviews develop a more intuitive, a more immediate way of thinking, which owes a great deal to my relationship with him, and also to my long experience of his art.

Masheck played an important but very different role in both Scully's artistic career and my writing. As Scully explains in our interviews, Masheck bravely chose to include his game-changing painting *Backs and Fronts* (1981) in a show, titled *Critical Perspectives*, that he curated at P.S. 1. The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., to give it its full name, was (and is) an important *Kunsthalle*, housed in a former school building in Queens, just a short subway trip—two stops—from Manhattan. At this transitional moment, eight critics with very different perspectives were each allocated one gallery and asked to choose their artists. Scully finished *Backs and Fronts* without having a place to show it, and so this manifesto painting, which attracted attention, played an important role in establishing his career. His timing could not have been better. And mine was good as well, for this was the right moment to meet him. We both had good entry points.

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When, a couple of years ago, the art historian Joachim Pissarro and I published an interview with Alanna Heiss, who directed P.S. 1 at that time, I gained a new perspective on this history. More recently, that institution has been run by the Museum of Modern Art, and so has turned into a museum-like space devoted to contemporary art. In 1982, it was a rougher site and was not, I think, as tightly organized. Indeed, the mimeographed catalogue from 1982 is more basic than typical present-day exhibition catalogues. Some of the other seven artists in Masheck's show have gone on to distinguished careers. But others have disappeared. In ways I didn't understand at all at the time, but which are discussed by Scully in the interviews, art-world life could be very tough for a young artist. That catalogue, too, is revealing, for it shows how many deeply opposing ways of thinking were alive in New York in 1982. An emerging artist like Scully needed a lot of stamina to succeed, as these interviews clearly reveal. Many good painters simply disappeared.

In his catalogue essay, Masheck spoke of "a virtually moral commitment to the humane, affirmative, even generous, possibilities of abstract painting. In my opinion, that remains a perfect characterization of Scully's painting. It was a great moment for me when Scully's art and Masheck's critical support came together. I remember, as if it were yesterday, walking into P.S. 1 on a cold winter's day and seeing *Backs and Fronts*. It was the largest painting in the room. At that point Scully didn't have a New York gallery, so this was the first time I'd seen his work. I was bowled over; I thought this enormous painting—eight feet tall, twenty long—was just tremendous, and so of course I wanted to meet its creator. I looked him up in the phone book and immediately arranged a studio visit. I've had many exciting experiences in the art world, looking

at contemporary work and also Old Master art, reviewing shows in China, Europe, New Zealand, and the United States. But never again have I had an experience quite like this. My long career as a critic really began with *Backs and Fronts*.

At that time, abstract painting in New York was beleaguered. Many art-world people felt contemporary art should engage immediately with political concerns. And, under the spell of Andy Warhol, it was often claimed that visual art should employ appropriated images from mass culture. As an abstract painter, Scully not only resisted these common ways of thinking, but also, in his own serious and distinctive way, became a passionate political spokesperson. Both of these concerns are discussed at length in the interviews.

When Scully and I first met, I was a beginner art writer and he was just starting his career in the United States. We were both starting out. And so I often developed my ideas about how to proceed in collaboration with him. Today, if some young scholar seeks to write about Scully, they will need to take account of a vast body of literature in order to make sure they don't reinvent the wheel. But in 1982, little had been written about his work, which for me was both challenging and exciting. As an art critic, I am always especially interested in writing about work that has, as yet, not been discussed. Learning to think for yourself, forming your own judgments without regard to any authority, is an important challenge. I was indeed lucky.

Scully and I are very near close contemporaries, for I was born just a few months before him. As he explains in the interviews, in the late seventies it was initially extremely difficult for him to develop a career in the United States. Senior artists can sometimes move relatively easily from one country to another. But for young artists, such transitions have almost always been more difficult. My life was never as difficult, for I always had a stable job. Scully, too, needed to support himself, which at first was not easy. Until his career took off in the early 1980s, he had part-time teaching jobs. That he was Dublin-born, then grew up in London, and in his mid-thirties moved to the United States made him highly sensitive to the challenges of immigration. Once, when I had dinner with him and an Irish television crew that was making a movie about him, I realized how much his background in that country had meant to him. They joked, "When he said he was born on such-and-such a street, they asked, 'But on which side, the north or the south side?'"

Around the mid-twentieth century, some New York art writers supported themselves (just barely!) with their writing. At that time, down-and-out life in that city was still inexpensive. Indeed, in 1972, when I was a graduate student at Columbia—and supported by a fellowship, so certainly not down-and-out—I had an apartment in the West Village for ninety-two dollars a month. That was the highest rent, I should add, in my building. Even so, it would have been very hard to support yourself as an art critic then. By that time, critics frequently had academic jobs. It's impossible to understand some details of Scully's early career without recognizing how different from the present life was in the eight-

ies, when the monthly rent for his large, well-situated loft was 400 dollars.

When I became a critic, I supported myself by teaching philosophy in Pittsburgh. And I came to New York on visits, sometimes staying with Scully or other artists who were very generous to me. I would call him (no cell phones then!), he would toss down a sock with the key inside, and I would unlock the front door to go upstairs. We often talked at great length over meals or in his studio. In 1985, Scully had his first American museum show in Pittsburgh, for which I wrote one catalogue essay. When he visited, we talked and looked at the banal domestic architecture in my city. He was a very memorable visitor. Sitting in our house, watching my wife and myself reading, he said, "Why, you're grazing." Scully and his art matter because they can change the way you see the world. That's consistently been my experience.

To become a successful artist, you need to make original work, find a supportive gallery, and gain some interest from writers. This, as the interviews explain, is what Scully did in the eighties. To become a successful academic, you need to publish and teach; and to become a successful art critic, you need to find your voice and identify artists worthy of attention. And this is what I did in the eighties. Although Masheck's *Artforum* essays provided my essential entry point into the world of art criticism, they didn't provide the right basis for my practice as a critic, which I developed very much in collaboration with Scully and some other artists.

In a marvelous discussion published in my earlier book about Scully, when I asked him whether the account I published was his creation, which I had only recorded, or just mine, he in turn asked me, "When you and your wife raised your daughter [Liz, who was born in 1984], who decided how to raise her?" Here he nicely pointed out the ways in which the successful creation of such a way of thinking is, like parenting, a collaborative process. Recently I have coauthored two books with Joachim Pissarro, who has written brilliantly about collaboration: see his *Cézanne/Pissarro, Johns/Rauschenberg: Comparative Studies on Intersubjectivity in Modern Art* (2006). Although it doesn't mention Scully, Pissarro's book provides a valuable perspective on my lengthy working activity with Scully.

Sean Scully has been much written about and frequently interviewed. When I published my Thames & Hudson book on him in 2004, we offered a reasonably complete account of his career. But a great deal has happened since then. He has developed his painting in new directions, created sculptures, moved to the countryside, and painted figurative works. He has changed and I have changed, too. And so late spring 2020—when neither of us could travel—seemed like the right time to develop a new comprehensive portrait. There is a great deal of recent work to discuss, and this art often offers a novel perspective on his earlier career. I have had the opportunity to review several recent exhibitions. And it was the right moment for us to talk about politics.

This book is, in effect, the sketch of a biography of Sean Scully. Or, more exactly, it is the sketch for an autobiography, since nearly all of the words are his. Biographies of artists—a special genre of writing—are not easy to get right. What’s needed is to describe the life in ways that make the art accessible. There is a tendency for biographies to be very long books, as if the accumulation of personal details would explain the art. Here, however, it’s possible for the art writer to learn from Scully’s paintings, which are convincing because they get to the point.

I was always aware that Scully is a marvelous storyteller. But only just now did I realize how closely that activity, very much a product of his important Irish heritage, is linked to his painting. For this reason, in this book I’ve tried as much as possible to preserve the rhythms of his speech. Almost all of this material was recorded between the last week of May 2020 and mid-June, and then edited by me. There are, however, a number of small additions of material taped by me in Morocco in May 1996. On that trip, accompanied by Scully’s German dealer and New York accountant, we talked at length about art history. This material has not been previously published. Also, some parts of a recent interview published in the *Brooklyn Rail* (“Sean Scully with David Carrier,” March 2018) are reprinted with permission. And, finally, at a number of points our discussion alludes to some of my recently published criticism that is available online; these items are listed in the bibliography.

Had I never met Sean Scully, I probably still would have become an art critic. But I am sure that I would now be a rather different critic. I thus owe an enormous amount to his friendship. His greatest gift, perhaps, is that while he was always patient and supportive, good at listening as well as talking, he never once, not even for an instant, tried to govern my thoughts. What I learned from him was how to become myself, which is an important lesson. And so I am very pleased that this book provides a perspective on his amazing achievements.

Interview One

In the Beginning

David Carrier This is recording now.

Sean Scully I can only do the interview when I'm not looking after Oisín, my kid. I like to do it fifty-fifty with Liliane. She was in the studio this morning, and I'm in the studio this afternoon. I'm revisiting the *Mirror* paintings in this contemplative time. And I'm finding beautiful things in them, with a more expressive brushstroke, which has gradually increased over the years in my work, starting from the early work Joe Masheck wrote about, until we get to this kind of expressive color. Life with Oisín has transformed the surface of my paintings. These works that you see behind me are small *Mirror* paintings; thirty-two by twenty-eight inches. Some are linen, some are aluminum. They don't have titles yet.

DC Let's start a little at the beginning. No one in your family had ever been to university, is that right?

SS My parents were on the run when I was born. It would be instructive actually to have a picture of my birth certificate in this book. It proves that I'm not elaborating my story. On the certificate for my father it says: "Occupation: Traveler," that's a euphemism for "gypsy." In Ireland they're called "Travelers." They've suffered a lot of prejudice and racism.

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DC They were one of the groups exterminated by the Nazis.

SS The Nazis wanted to exterminate what they called the "Slavs," which is in fact Liliane's people, the Hungarians. They were considered impure. I think that the Nazis killed about half a million of them.

DC The Gypsies are from India originally?

SS Yes, but the Irish Travelers are a distinct group. They're not the same as the Roma, who are closer to Liliane's people. Sometimes humorously I like to say that as a couple, we are rubbish upon rubbish, which I find very beautiful. I love to cross over all of those social barriers, to just fly between them. But still, one can't ever get away from one's roots entirely. One's journey is very defining. My journey was one of great roughness and I'm very attracted to it.

My parents were deserters.

DC Your grandfather was hanged?

SS He's not my grandfather by blood. My father was illegitimate, so I guess that's my illegitimate grandfather. I'm the only one that carries his name though, so that name survives by a very thin link to Oisín Scully. I feel very close to this man John Scully. He was arrested for desertion in 1916 and sentenced to be shot. He wouldn't allow them to do that so he

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