
Sean Scully: Flying by the seat of his pants

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Sean Scully: Flying by the seat of his pants

by Charles Asprey • 13.06.2019

There was a film out recently, 'Unstoppable: Sean Scully and the Art of Everything', directed by Nick Willing and produced by Michelle Camarda. It is both brilliant and worrying. If you type 'Scully movie' into Google it brings up *Sully: Miracle on the Hudson* starring Tom Hanks. Despite both films entailing a lot of flying (Scully has his own private jet) the one under review here follows Scully in his studio and on a global tour of his museum openings, fifteen in all, over a period of roughly one year. The sort of fly-on-the-wall documentary you hope the lead protagonists will come to regret; surely no safe landing on water for his career after this.

Scully is a painter, sculptor and printmaker who was born in Dublin in 1945 but moved to England in 1949, becoming an American citizen in 1983 and taking his so-called Irishness everywhere he went. He has been making geometric works in grids and stripes for decades [FIG.1](#). They are easily recognisable if a bit bland, thoughtful if not thought-provoking [FIG.2](#). Based on this uncontroversial style, one might imagine Scully to be a retiring sort of fellow, introverted, perhaps even hermetic, obsessed by the ritual of creating his oily grids and uncomfortable with the global art market pizzazz. And yet it turns out that Scully is a wannabe playboy, a pseudo mover and shaker in slacks, who gives the impression of being a mountebank. It is a jaw-dropper because the film initially seems a joke, like Ali G got in on the game for laughs, with Scully oblivious but playing along. Unfortunately, it is all excruciatingly real. It is fair to say Scully is, unexpectedly, a bit of a prick.



Fig. 1 *Robe Magdalena*, by Sean Scully. 2017. Oil on aluminium, 215.9 by 190.5 cm. (Private collection; © Sean Scully; courtesy the artist; exh. National Gallery, London).

MULTIMEDIA <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p076648w/player>



Fig. 2 *Landline China 8*, by Sean Scully. 2018. Oil on aluminium, 300 by 190 cm. (Private collection; © Sean Scully; courtesy the artist; exh. National Gallery, London).

So brilliant is this exposé and so ghastly is the lead role that if I owned this artist's work I would never be able to erase the fetid stench that now surrounds it and it would swiftly find its way to auction, where, as current market values stand, it would do annoyingly well. No more landscape references to contemplate, no more wholesome stillness of controlled, heavy brushwork. In its place, the film presents an ersatz expressionist philandering with a mid-century American tradition. So hollow is the work and so greasy is the machinery that promotes it that it is a candidate for the art world equivalent of fake news. The Abstract Expressionist legacy that Scully is so desperate to be seen to inherit reminds you how much is at stake art historically if these artists are not challenged (see also the Henry Moore/Anthony Gormley project).¹ And frankly, it is creepy there is not more outrage about the far-reaching implications of this work being accepted into the pantheon. This is not about taste, but about a profound obligation that art world elites – by which I mean museum directors, curators and professional art historians and critics – have to sift the great from the second-rate, find the pearls among the buttons. I suggest

some are failing in their duty.



Fig. 3 *Arles Abend Deep*, by Sean Scully. 2017. Oil on linen, each panel 215.9 by 190.5 cm. (Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris; © Sean Scully; courtesy the artist; exh. National Gallery, London).

MULTIMEDIA <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07664b3/player>

Thinking there must be more to the work than I had allowed for, and not entirely believing that the man in the film was the same who produced these works, I headed to the nearest exhibition which happens, at the time of writing, to be in London. *Sea Star: Sean Scully at the National Gallery* (until 11th August) is on view at the National Gallery because 'foremost contemporary artists' are invited to respond to the collection and Scully has often referenced his love for Turner and the 'dead light' use of colour by Masaccio and Cimabue. This all sounds interesting and we should try to forget, for a moment, the personality behind the pictures and focus on the work itself. And if you can force yourself to look at the work before you watch the film, then you will swiftly deduce that he is not the A-lister he so desperately wants to be. For all the Turner Prize's faults, its committees of 1989 and 1993 were not prepared to give the award to Scully.

So to the display, in the National Gallery's basement. The first room is the now-generic holding pen showing a short film about the artist's life, black-and-white images of a smiling young Scully, softening you up before you enter. When you do, instead of a painting there is an eight by six-foot digital print of one of Scully's brush-marks, glued to a free-standing wall, blocking all sight of the room beyond.



Fig. 4 *Triptych*, by Sean Scully. 2012. Etching, aquatint and spitbite on paper, each panel 38.1 by 29.8 cm. (Private collection; © Sean Scully; courtesy the artist; exh. National Gallery, London).

Three rooms follow, hanging with oils and works on paper. Wall texts abound but tell you very little. The vagueness of phrases such as ‘each work uses a limited range of colours that evoke mood and movement, permanence and impermanence’ and ‘the title for this exhibition, *Sea Star*, hints that his works have a deep relationship with the tradition of painting’ only highlight the emptiness of the work itself. The concept of the show is to reveal how Scully, an abstract painter, has been influenced by certain figurative ones. His favourite painting by Van Gogh is apparently *Van Gogh’s Chair* (1888; National Gallery), and you can see Scully’s response to this masterpiece in *Arles Abend Deep* **FIG.3**. But there is nothing in Scully’s canvas to stir the soul in the way the Van Gogh can, none of the Dickensian pathos of an empty chair, nor a hint of Van Gogh’s personal battle with subject and material. This work is stone cold, dead like poor old Vincent, and lacks emotional intelligence.



Fig. 5 *The Evening Star*, by Joseph Mallord William Turner. 1830. Canvas, 91.1 by 122.6 cm. (National Gallery, London).

As for the works on paper, etchings and aquatints, the less said the better. One group of three, framed together and helpfully titled *Triptych* **FIG.4**, would not get a second glance at a minor art fair. The highlight of the show is the J.M.W. Turner painting Scully has borrowed from the Gallery's collection. It is hung on the reverse of the entrance wall in order to make the rather crass point that Scully and Turner are both masters of applying oil with a brush. It takes seconds to burst that bubble. *The Evening Star* **FIG.5** is a typically atmospheric work by a visionary artist. Two thirds of the canvas is sky, the remainder a sandy beach in early evening, light fading, where a child plays one last game with his dog before heading home. At the top of the painting is the star, and it is a star in every way. Two dabs of lead white, one in the sky, the other reflected in the sea, each no more than 3mm in size, are more audacious and emotive than all the acres of Scullian oil [fig.06]. The only thing that links Scully to these artists is, to state the blindingly obvious, that they are all painters. Returning to the oversized digital print at the entrance, one realises he clings to his large brush-marks like one of the sailors clinging to Géricault's raft.

In a recent review in the *Spectator*, Martin Gayford paired Scully's show at the National Gallery with a Leon Kossoff exhibition at a commercial London gallery.² He calls Kossoff 'a truly great painter' and goes on to suggest that he has been overlooked by the market, and thereby cruelly by society. Of course, some artists are ahead of their time, but Kossoff has probably had the attention his work merits. By no measure is his work in the same league as his contemporaries Bacon, Freud and Auerbach. People know it and the fact that he has not had a major museum survey in recent years does not mean that he is being overlooked. This is the system working well. By making a link between Scully and Kossoff, Gayford bizarrely suggests that Scully too has been under-recognised, but unwittingly confirms that both artists have a certain something in common.



Fig. 6 *Landline Pool*, by Sean Scully. 2018. Oil on aluminium, 215.9 by 190.5 cm. (Private collection; © Sean Scully; courtesy the artist; exh. National Gallery, London).

It is time for the art world to stand up and call the bluff of artists like Scully. The ‘Donald Trump of the art world’ – as Scully describes himself during the film – could be the subject of ‘Chequeless Reckless’, a song by the Dublin-based punk rockers Fontaines D.C.: ‘A sell-out is someone who becomes a hypocrite in the name of money, an idiot is someone who lets their education do all of their thinking [. . .] Charisma is exquisite manipulation and money is the sandpit of the soul’.

Exhibition details

Sea Star: Sean Scully at the National Gallery
 National Gallery, London
 13th April–11th August

Footnotes

- 1** C. Asprey: 'Editorial', *Picpus* 3 (2010), n.p.
- 2** M. Gayford: 'A beautiful exhibition of a magnificent painter: Sean Scully at the National Gallery reviewed', *The Spectator* (20th April 2019), available online at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2019/04/a-beautiful-exhibition-of-a-magnificent-painter-sean-scully-at-the-national-gallery-reviewed/>, accessed 4th June 2019.

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