ALMINE RECH

Sean Scully
Celtique

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Boisgeloup Opens its Doors to Scully,
or
Scully Opens his Doors to Boisgeloup

'Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur.' – Mark Rothko

'What makes him the most important abstract artist of his generation is his capacity to utilize [older] sources as a door to essentially unpredictable ways.' – David Carrier

'The door through. I am the door, the way, the entrance, the exit.' – Sean Scully

'I am the door.' – John 10:9

The image of the *door* or *doorway* offers an abiding metaphor, or unifying thread that can be traced through much of Sean Scully's work over the past decades. In his own words, Scully has "always been fascinated with the architecture, the architectural metaphor, of the door, of the passing through." Indeed, the door is most evidently visible, even palpable, in the projections, retractions, and clashing of orthogonal and parallel bands, constitutive of his iconic stripe paintings. The doorway often functions (like the window, another metaphor Scully is fond of) as a conduit between light and obscurity, outside and inside – "a way of looking at two things at once, a way of actually inserting another presence into a field."

Lingering a bit on the notion of this metaphor, the *door* can be interpreted through this exhibition as both a *referent* and a *reference*. It serves as a referent, in the sense that Scully's works have often been examined in their close relationship with the physical, material, and even textural structure of a door, i.e. its apertures and function as a spatial boundary. But the *door* also serves as a reference, in that, this exhibition *opens up* new relations within Scully's own oeuvre, in multiple ways in the present context. Let us look at some of these new *openings*.

While all of the works exhibited here have been executed over the past two years, they aptly conjure up half a century of the rich and enduring artistic career that has led Scully to the present point. Furthermore, this exhibition introduces, almost for the first time, Scully's pluralistic interest in exploring synchronously the practices of figuration and abstraction. The artist sees no contradiction here whatsoever, which certainly contributes to the uniqueness and cogency of this exhibition.

Many of Scully's paintings carry a double-bind function, half-way between the eternal and the ephemeral, as Baudelaire liked to enjoin himself "to extract the eternal out of the ephemeral." Echoing this paradox is Scully, who in a lecture commenting on Arthur Danto, wrote that he was intending to produce an art that "could embody the contradictory tendencies of now and be timeless." The present exhibition does just this: here at Château de Boisgeloup, Scully's art yields a poignant, poetic, weight. Boisgeloup (as it is commonly referred to by art historians) – which Pablo Picasso purchased in 1930 with the express intention of delving into a passionate creative journey centered on plaster sculpture – had remained vacant for decades, and now, lends its *doors, windows, and walls* to the work of another major artist, himself fascinated by all such interstitial spaces and separations. The Château de Boisgeloup, which has endured the test of time, will now temporarily embrace the ten artworks by Sean Scully showcased in this exhibition. This group of paintings and sculptures, exhibited for the first time, truly demonstrates Scully's capacity to fluidly and smoothly interweave various formal techniques, and supports (canvas, aluminum), as well as distinct media (mixed oil and pastel). Indeed, Scully here juggles different artistic languages: the abstract and the figurative, the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, all with utmost fluency, complete mastery, and obvious fun. The selection of works, comprised of eight paintings and two exceptional sculptures, testifies to the fact that Scully's artistic practice transcends cursory definitions. The present body of work displays a synchronicity, in which Scully's paintings and sculptures co-exist in a manner that is deeply relational. Without a need to justify his transition, Scully opens a door for himself and thus passes through the theoretical boundaries or confines of art history, unobstructed, unscathed, and jubilant. This exhibition takes the turn of a true celebration of polymorphous, creative forces – the total ease with which certain artists are able to pass through the door, from one media to the next, from one style to another – a trait Scully shares with the previous host of Boisgeloup, Picasso himself.

In his earlier career, Scully explored figuration and was particularly inspired by the palette and patterned flatness of the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists, the Fauves, and the German Expressionists – and continues to this day to be deeply engaged in the history of early modernism. To hear the artist speak about Monet, for instance, is arresting and elating. It is no surprise then, to hear that he keenly challenged the "Death of Painting" rhetoric that dominated the art world in the 1970s and 80s. No surprise either to see that in the present group of works Scully "returns" to figuration – in effect, his interest in early modernism (from impressionism onwards) had never abandoned him.

Actually, Scully's work has always inherently possessed a fluid, multi-stylistic quality, that could be described as transcendental or spiritually charged, and we see today in the present display of his most recent works, how this spiritual charge has been reactivated towards fascinating new directions. Indeed, the two representational works that, at first, may appear to some of us as unfamiliar or out of the ordinary, actually co-exist with his otherwise abstract works in a deeply organic way. They are consubstantial with the rest of his work. These two figurative paintings depict a mother and child scene. Both works, powerfully and movingly entitled *Madonna,* embody yet another binary. While not overtly religious, these works do speak to the eternal in conjuring up the relationship between a mother and child. These compositions are both forthright and simple, with the two figures sitting on the ground, while simultaneously, melancholic, mournful, somewhat sad. In one of the two paintings, the mother is wearing a head scarf, reinforcing the trope of the iconography of a religious *Madonna*: her head is tilted towards the ground, her eyelids closed, as though she might have been crying. The boy's face, however, is depicted frontally, his gaze directed at us (the viewer/the artist). At the same time, the "ground" on which the two figures are sitting is nothing other than a composition, made out of superimposed horizontal bands of color (with one intermediary band of non-color, where the aluminum support is left bare, with two thin lines crossing through the entire surface from left to right, and crossing through the mother's headscarf, and the boy's hair).

These two works conjure up earlier works, such as the *Wall of Light* series. In the *Wall of Light* series, there is a reoccurring formal struggle of perpendicular or orthogonal rectangles, each jostling or vying for their position on the canvas, imbuing us viewers with a haptic gift: it seems as though the paintings are there for us to encounter a profound spiritual truth. There is a physicality about them, a depth to the game that goes on within these bustling structures, these morphic units, which go right through us: we respond to these works/they respond to us.

The visual, almost bodily, presence of Scully's cogent swaths of color is reinforced by the poetic connotations in the titling of Scully's earlier works and series, which do resonate with the present group of works. Again, in *Wall of Light*, for example, there is a remarkable oxymoron that leads us to the nuanced, mesmerizing complexities inherent in these works: one expects a wall to be made out of bricks, mortar, stones; it stands before us, solid, impenetrable, resilient; light, on the other hand, is ever penetrable, ethereal, immaterial. Fascinated by Mayan architecture, on a few trips to Mexico in the 1980's, Scully referred to the permanent texture of the walls that he saw vibrating under the caress of light, as "a culture of walls and light." Then, as today, the superimposition and intercrossing of a gamut of pictorial shapes and bands energize the composition, and prevent our gaze to stay still for even a moment: this is particularly evident in the largest painting in the group, *What Makes Us*.

Today, more than ever, Scully's paintings preclude a purely formalist reading. The contradictory structures and variations in scale produce an internal struggle, while the compositions as a whole are marked by the resonance of different tonalities, which produce a general coherence – akin to a musical composition, made out of dissonant notes working towards a larger, harmonious unison (as in Schönberg's early compositions, for instance).

Deeply humanistic, rooted in early romanticism, Scully's abstractions are both a reflection and an extrapolation on the scenarios and structures of the physical world. Recent works, like *Landlines*, as a case in point, also mimic the division of the physical environment – the land, the sea, the sky – in broad horizontal stripes spanning the length of the canvas, and resonate with the two *Madonnas* discussed above. Two *Landline* paintings exhibited herein – *Landline Pool* and *Landline Star* - respectively feature nuanced, layered blues and pinks: hues that powerfully evoke our perceptions of the natural environment. At the same time, they obliquely make reference to Picasso's renowned Blue Period (1901-1904) and his Rose Period (1904-1906) – superbly staged in a recent exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay. Thus, these works deliver a reflection, an extrapolation, or *re-interpretation* of the history of early modernist painting, and continue the discrete dialogue (or parallel) between Scully and Picasso.

Indeed, Boisgeloup ties together Scully and Picasso in more ways than one. Picasso moved in to Boisgeloup when his son, Paulo, was about ten years old. Today, Scully's son is just over ten years old. This is not an incidental fact. Both artists, Picasso and Scully, continuously intertwined play and work: painting, while playing with each of their sons, Paulo, and Oisin. Scully happily discloses the fact that he spends a good deal of time constructing lego contraptions with his son – the analogy between lego blocks or bricks of color and the slabs of color inherent in Scully's vocabulary is noteworthy. In fact, in a recent discussion with the artist on the genesis of *What Makes Us*, a massive and fascinating painting with oil and spray paint on aluminum, the first words that came to the artist's mind were that this painting had to do with his son putting together lego constructions, with his father patiently helping him out, waiting for the fatal outcome where the whole construction would be smashed by Oisin's friends.

The artist then went on and elaborated the intense wealth of references and information inherent in the making of this large painting: there is something "encyclopedic" about this painting, says Scully: this is a painting that is about *everything*. It encompasses references to Suprematism and to the 'noise' on a blank TV screen, or a Windows computer. In his words:

'We live in a world of cannibalization, reuse, reinterpretation, simulation – that's the way the world is made... It is ephemeral, like layers on a computer screen, or a mise en abyme. This painting conjures up themes of fragility and ephemerality, the use of order in order to break order, simultaneity and syncopation. It's about legos, computers, madness, eclectic painting, the absence or the attack on stasis.'

Indeed, *What Makes Us* can be seen as huge doorway, an extra-long corridor linking the very incipient point of modernism to today, and to Scully's own position today as an artist, but also as a father, a partner. The central panel may well be alluding to Ad Reinhardt's earliest abstract compositions, whereas the right panel appears to thrust well into the 21st century, and all the tropes just described in Scully's own words, summing up a sense of totality.

There is an underlying sense of spirituality uniting this new group of paintings. The titles alone (*What Makes Us,* a synonym for the Creation, and the two *Madonnas*), but also the somewhat obvious referents to the Cross (as in the three *Wall* paintings, and in the sculpture *Cross Glass*) suggest a deep, if discrete, religious sentiment nurturing many of the works presented at Boisgeloup. In a recent conversation, the artist commented upon this aspect of his works. He defines himself as a Roman Catholic, and admits that "these paintings have that particular spiritual resonance." But he immediately went on to qualify this statement when asked whether "Madonna" was an open reference to the Virgin Mary. His answer was very interesting and moving: "Yes, of course, but 'Madonna' also simply means a woman. And there is something eternal and magisterial in the relationship between a mother and a child."

There is an intimate and autobiographical dimension underpinning this group of works. These works thus carry rich layers of connotations that go back to the very early years of the artist, being raised in a working class family in London after the war, down to his own personal life today, having lived in America since the 1970s. Looking at the two lovely small paintings on copper (displayed in the Chapel), the artist was speaking to his fond attachment for the materiality of copper, and recalled his growing attachment to metal in general as a factor of his working class upbringing. But then, this fondness for metal became more specific when, at the incipient point of his artistic career, he worked in a print factory, and discovered the joys and surprises of doing monotypes. Metal is also of course the medium of sculpture, of which Scully is very fond (he counts Brancusi, and Giacometti, in particular, among his heroes), and he presents two striking examples (besides *Glass Cross*): *Coin Stack*, bronze, and *30 too*, aluminum and automotive paint. Both works, made out stacks (16 very large coins, and 30 large aluminum plates, the size of a car engine) stand tall above their viewers, and appear both awe-inspiring and ludic at the same time.

Altogether the group of works displayed by Almine Rech today stand at a cross-roads of axes that embody much of Sean Scully's rich biography, from his birth as a young Catholic boy in Ireland, to his life today, married with a child who occupies a very important place in his world. What makes the present exhibition arresting, intoxicatingly beautiful, and compels us to want to return to it, is a kind of cross-semination between different forces, seldom seen at play together. We see what Scully refers to as "ascension and opulence" (which to his eye, evoke much of the Catholic spirituality), but also this notion of ascension is embedded within these new *Stack* sculptures, that recall his "fondness for metal"—an element that echoes his youth growing up, hard working in post-war England. In a few words (borrowed from the artist in a lecture he gave on Arthur Danto), one finds the present group of paintings and sculptures, blended together: "the romance of painting in correspondence with the brutality of a metal frame."

Joachim Pissarro