

1.

I came from an Irish background and started out life as an immigrant. I went to a convent school, and I was yanked out because my parents had a big argument with them and I was put into a state school, which was full of emptiness and violence. In other words, I moved from something very exotic and difficult—but rich and full of mystery and the belief in another reality, in a reality that we couldn't see, that we could only imagine—into something that dealt with just what you could see. What you could imagine did not even seem to be a question. I found the banality of it crushing and the shock profoundly disturbing. I think at that point, taking all of those things into account, at some early moment in my life I decided I was going to be an artist.

2.

And my work, for a very long time, has been based on the grid: the interaction of the horizontal with the vertical and the vertical with the horizontal. And I use those two forms, those primary directions that we can describe.

On one hand, I was powerfully impressed by the work of Mondrian. To me he represented the Old World and the aspirations of an artist trying to make work that is spiritual and profound through the use of the horizontal and the vertical. On the other hand, there was another artist that I was very impressed by, and that was Jackson Pollock. Pollock represented the New World and a kind of freedom.

So, I tried, in a single work, to locate myself in relation to these two artists.

### 3.

When I left London for New York; I also broke the grid. Or to put it another way. My grid, which wrapped the painting, became uncrossed. In retrospect it seems psychologically loaded. I left Europe and the order of Europe, and I went to New York, where there were no stabilizing verticals in any work. They simply disappeared, and I started to make the grey and black horizontal paintings where the lines just run from side to side. People tend to think of abstraction as abstract. But nothing is abstract: it's still a self-portrait. A portrait of one's condition. I took out the vertical, which was my column and my architecture, and what I was left with was the horizon. And so, I could begin my journey along it.

### 4.

The autobiographical narratives can be points of reference that help explain how paintings came to be. Artists do derive images, colors, and ideas from a personal narrative, a memory bank, that can build or be called a “myth.” But in truth the major goal of my art is that play between rhythm, the inner rhythm of things, and ideas. (I wrote my master's thesis on the rhythm transformed in Matisse's *Dance*.) Art is not really a question of conclusions or closed opinion. It is something that keeps us alive, and it becomes more vital as the world continues on its merry slide.

I'd like my work also to speak through the universal language of rhythm. Rhythm communicates in a primal way, directly and through feeling. You look at all my paintings, and you see different rhythms: it goes fast, then it goes slow

in different sections of a painting, and then the color changes—from idea to body, and then back to idea or back to spirit.

## 5.

It might be helpful if I explained why I have painted with stripes for twenty years up to this point – in ten years it will probably be thirty years. I think that it is because I am an obsessive artist, not a formalist. By that I mean that I am interested in content, or depth, subject-matter rather than experimentation – which means I would like to follow the examples set by Rothko and Mondrian. Even though my paintings have changed, the changes have come from a desire to address my views on content and subjectmatter. Changes have never come about because of play or from pure experimentation; I am not particularly interested in that. What I've done with the stripe is to reinterpret it over and over and over again. Yet I don't work automatically. I don't accept my obsession with a particular form without subjecting it to a lot of criticism. Thus I don't paint over and over again in the same way for many years without making radical changes. I try to subject my obsessive nature to a criticality so that I am always questioning it; and by doing that I force myself to constantly reestablish my relationship with the work.

## 6.

At the end of the eighties my paintings started to flatten out. And instead of making paintings figurative, figural, or with body, with the body of the box of the

painting, I started to put windows in. And the windows, the insets were painted separate to the painting and then put into the painting to disturb or violate or puncture the field, to make an intrusion in the field. And to make a figurative figure-ground relationship.

I would say that things change over time if you are in a way, in a sense, devoted. And I work in a way that's devoted. There's no space between me and the paintings. I'm making the paintings, thinking about the paintings, doing the paintings all the time. And yet the way that I paint has changed dramatically throughout my life, without really changing the element that's being painted. And this is really another possibility for painting.

## 7.

My sculpture is always a block. So that, the physical and conceptual argument of the work is consistent without and within. So that, the inside is the same as the outside. So that, when looking at the outside of the block, one can feel the inside without being able to see it. One can trust that it is made with a truth to materiality that is organized consistently throughout. The drawing in my sculpture is carried through to create a feeling of inevitability and utter contentment. Knowing that something is exactly what it appears to be, and not a simple appearance or façade. In a way these are the opposite of most other sculpture. They are not a narrative arrangement but a massive abstract figure that compresses time and the weight of material, in a cubed drawing. By pushing out space, I want to push out time: to offer an enduring now.

8.

I use oil paint because it has a disobedient and mysterious nature. I use it because it is an active, volatile material that, no matter how much one knows about it, one can never know completely. Oil paint and all its companion media that can be put in any order—put in any combination to make it dry fast, slow, shiny, matte, opaque, transparent—give painting an expressive range of possibilities (always slightly out of control) that cannot be matched by any other painting medium. It engages issues of alchemy and mystery that resist the deadening ambition of the modern world to control everything, absolutely.

9.

I take photos of surfaces. When I see how the surfaces of the façades tell the story of the passage of human culture and the power of time, I can't help but react. I have to grasp it as it looks. And the easiest way to do that is to take a picture. Most of the subjects I shoot are in the margins of the world, for in the streets made of humble buildings I have to react. At the same time, my level of comfort and identification with these surroundings is intimate: I started out in identical circumstances.

The fundamental difference, though, between my working methods and those of the painters of the nineteenth century who made travel sketches is that I don't use the images of what I've photographed, only the emotions.

The great limitation of photography is that it cannot (so far) overcome its imagery. With painting it's the opposite. When I make a painting the emotion is

embedded in the surface, and the mystery of its making has to be bigger than the image. It has to transform it into feeling every time the engine of the painting is restarted by the spectator.

## 10.

I was always looking at the horizon line – at a way the end of the sea touches the beginning of the sky, the way the sky presses down on the sea, and the way that line (that relationship) is painted. One day I was standing off Ireland, on the edge of Aran Island, looking out. Next stop, America. Standing on the Old World looking out at (and thinking of my new life in) the New World, as many people have done before... looking out at and hoping for an arrival in America. I think of land, sea, sky. And they always make a massive connection. I try to paint this, this sense of the elemental coming-together of land and sea, sky and land, of blocks coming together side by side, stacked in horizon lines endlessly beginning and ending – the way the blocks of the world hug each other and brush up against each other, their weight, their air, their colour, and the soft uncertain space between them. I'm putting these into paintings: Landline Sand, Landline Sea, Landline Blue.

## 11.

The nearly but not quite definable and understandable mystery of painting is more durable and desirable than explanation. The compressed, mysteriously

made surface of a painting, that attempts to hold onto a strange light that is always seeping out, is not an idea, but an experience.

In the history of art there are very few iconic artworks that are ironic. However, there are many that are sublime and emotional and sincere. And that is, quite simply, because we need sincerity more than we need irony. The majority of Art being made, and indeed shown, now, in our time, in our glorious new Art palaces, is ironic. However, I believe that this kind of Art will fall away over time, since it is witty and topical, and what will be left is what is always left. Art that embodies eternal or permanent human values. Art that is sincere.

I liken it to this: there is a story based on a race between a tortoise and a hare. The hare always wins in the beginning. Though to win in the beginning is not to prevail in the end. And in the end the tortoise always wins. The tortoise in this little metaphor represents sincerity and endurance.

## 12.

I started out as a figurative artist. I'm one of the few artists working abstractly that has worked his way through figuration, somewhat. I can't say I really have a badge of honour in figuration, but a badge of valour. I worked figuratively for a while, but then I arrived at abstraction through figuration. In other words, I didn't simply start out as an abstract painter.

So, the question was, why abstraction? Why give up the figure, which is the basis of all human life? The figure and the painting of the figure can never go out of style.

There is, however, another human impulse and need that is also constant, and that is the need for abstraction, which I believe is bound up with a need for spiritual ecstasy. I believe that there is an abstract rhythm and structure that runs parallel to all life. And that unconsciously binds us together. There are countless examples that are in cultures old and new, which you know probably as well as I do.



*These texts are the artist's own reflections on his work through a selection of quotes from his writings and lectures.*

1. **Interview with Eric Davis** © 1999, Journal of Contemporary Art, Inc., and the authors.
2. **The Sublime and the Ordinary**, Lecture Given at the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History, Albuquerque, New Mexico, February 12, 1989.
3. **Nothing Is Abstract**, Zurich. March 5, 2006. Published in "Inner. The collected writings and selected interview of Sean Scully", Hatje Cantz, 2016.
4. **On Mythology, Abstraction, and Mystery**, «Mitología y abstracción», Lecture Given at Universidad de Madrid, July, 2003. First publication in *American Art*, the Smithsonian Institution magazin, XVIII, n. 3, pp. 120.
5. **The Sublime and the Ordinary**. Lecture Given at the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History, New Mexico, February 12, 1989.
6. **Elson Lecture**, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. March 8, 2007.
7. **The Sculpture**, Mooseurach, June 22, 2009. Published in "Inner. The collected writings and selected interview of Sean Scully", Hatje Cantz, 2016.
8. **Oil Paint New York**, April 4, 1995. Published in "Inner. The collected writings and selected interview of Sean Scully", Hatje Cantz, 2016.
9. **On Photography**, Barcelona, Setember 2002. Published in "Inner. The collected writings and selected interview of Sean Scully", Hatje Cantz, 2016.
10. **Landline**, Mooseurach, July 10, 2001. Published in "Inner. The collected writings and selected interview of Sean Scully", Hatje Cantz, 2016.
11. **Zen**. May 16, 2006. Published in "Inner. The collected writings and selected interview of Sean Scully", Hatje Cantz, 2016.
12. **Elson Lecture**, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. March 8, 2007.