

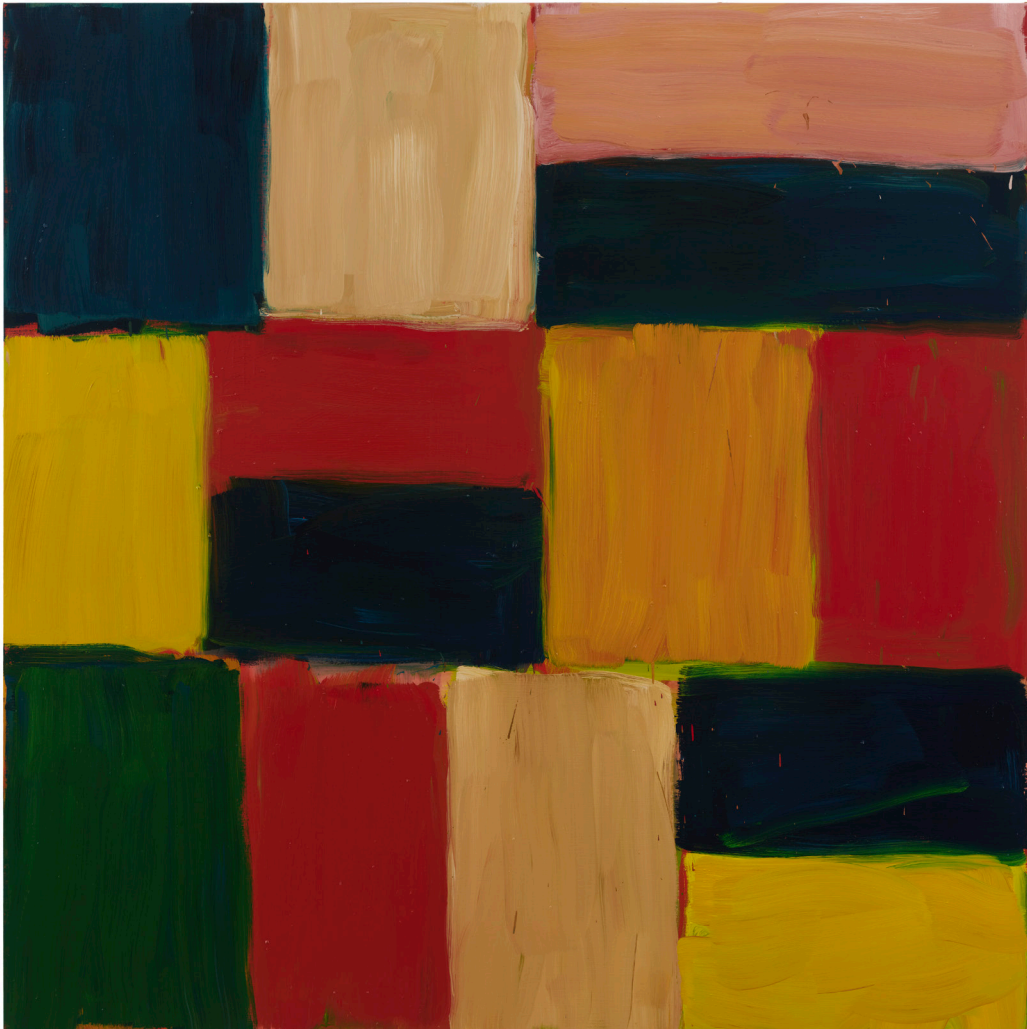
Press Release

Sean Scully

The Shadow of Figuration

23 July—24 September 2022
Opening 23 July 2022, 11am—1pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Salzburg Villa Kast
Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg



1. Sean Scully, *Wall Paris Blue*, 2021

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The Shadow of Figuration presents an exhibition of new works by the Irish-born American artist Sean Scully. Conceived for the gallery space in Salzburg, the exhibition brings together large-scale paintings from the artist's most formative series – including *Wall of Light* and *Landline* – as well as a selection of watercolours. Alongside paintings and works on paper, a monumental sculpture titled *Indoor Sleeper* (2020) will be presented in the gallery's outdoor space, offering an insight into Scully's sculptural practice.

The exhibition in Salzburg follows the critically acclaimed fifty-year retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA (until 31 July) and coincides with three further major institutional presentations of Scully's works – at the Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany (until 7 August); the Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, Italy (until 9 October) and the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, Poland (until 11 September).

A fully illustrated catalogue with an essay by Hans-Joachim Müller and a poem by Kelly Grovier will accompany the exhibition.



2. Sean Scully, *Landline Tierra Primavera*, 2022

Scully's works are characterised by the fusion of European painting traditions with the distinct character of American abstraction and, although strictly abstract, his artworks are always informed by experience and sensation. As he has stated: 'My work deliberately includes the roughness of life. [...] I'm always relating my work to the real world'. Structured around stripes or layered blocks of colour arranged on horizontal and vertical axes, the paintings in the exhibition attain the fine balance between calm reflection and an intrinsic vitality.



3. Sean Scully, *Wall Red Pale Yellow*, 2022

Every group of his paintings that Scully assembles has its own climate, its own emotional profile – maybe alluding to recent experiences, still-vivid impressions, older memories, or soul-shadows grown old. Painting does not come into being of its own accord or unaided. It has its reasons. [...] That is what makes it so exceptional. — Hans-Joachim Müller, 2022

For his *Wall of Light* series, begun in 1998, Scully arranges vertical and horizontal blocks of colour to form pictorial architectures reminiscent of the brickwork of solid stone walls. Dark tones, which evoke compact wooden beams, are alternated with contrasting, brighter colours, conglomerating to form erratic units within the compositions. Scully has observed, ‘the wall is a barrier but what I’m doing is dissolving it. It is metaphysical, transformative’. The variations in hues and brightness emulate impressions of light, while also creating a sense of tension or motion; the thick layers of paint ‘push each other, but at the same time make room for each other’, as the artist has stated. At the seams or fissures, where the fields of colour collide, deeper layers beneath the paint are exposed. The *Wall of Light* works in the exhibition feature a spectrum of colours, such as reds, blues and greens in varying intensities. They are characterised, however, by a strong use of yellow – a colour Scully has described as complicated, but which he has fallen in love with recently in light of the current state of the world: ‘I’m not sure I understand why, though maybe yellow offers a kind of protection against the cold.’



4. Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Yellow Fall*, 2021

I allow all the rivulets and the rivers and the borders and the doubts and the tolerance between the blocks to feature very strongly in my work. This is not a mistake. It is not like they are there by accident. They’re there for philosophical reasons. They’re there because I believe it is something very powerful.

— Sean Scully, 2022

While the *Wall of Light* works take inspiration from an urban context, Scully's *Landline* series – begun in 2013 – was originally inspired by a photograph the artist took in Norfolk, which captured the interplay between grassy land, the North Sea and an overcast sky layered in horizontal lines. This series shows a certain shift in Scully's practice, for the composition of these works is informed by the parameters of the natural world, marking a departure from the predominant geometrical structure. Painted in oil on an aluminium surface, the layered stripes of colour evoke the geometry of nature while highlighting Scully's distinct use of materials, which respond to paint in different ways: 'I think the forces in my work are very dialectical and very strongly related to the materiality of painting.' This connects with his interest in an artwork's ability to absorb and reflect meaning in its relationship to the viewer. For the work *Landline Tierra Primavera* (2022), Scully adopted a warm, rich palette, borrowing hues reminiscent of European painters such as Gustave Courbet (1819–77), while the varied green tones of *Landline Verdant Dark F.26.22* (2022) recall the colours of foliage or dark forests, reminiscent of the Romantic landscape paintings by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840).



5. Sean Scully, *Landline Verdant Dark F.26.22*, 2022

For his *Wall Landline* series, Scully combines the *Wall of Light* and *Landline* series by embedding a painting within a painting, thereby preventing a reading of the surface as unified. Rather, these works can be understood as the combination of two individual pictorial systems – a brick motif suspended or encased in thickly applied, horizontal stripes of landscape. Brought together through the interplay of colours, the series underlines his continuous sculptural and architectural approach to painting; 'the relationships don't make sense in terms of logic, they make sense in terms of feeling'. The gradations of tone and combinations of colours allow for a sensorial and emotional impact, enhanced by the shimmering effect of the metal.

The architectural presence of Scully's work is furthered by [...] the brick-like patterning of many works, and the physical cobbling together of multiple panels, including insets and overlaid pieces. One begins to think in terms of doors, hatches, coffers and windows, and yet there is often a sense of impenetrability, as if the walls suggest the possibility of passage yet limit egress. — Philip Kennicott for The Washington Post, 2022



6. Sean Scully, *Indoor Sleeper*, 2020

In recent years, Scully has increasingly turned to sculpture and in 2021 a solo exhibition at the Waldfrieden Sculpture Park in Wuppertal, Germany, was dedicated to this facet of his work. Scully creates monumental structures that engage with the unique energy of their locations, informed, as his paintings are, by life. In the case of *Indoor Sleeper*, which – as the title suggests – was created from repurposed railroad sleepers, it is also the material itself that carries the traces of its former existence: ‘The railway sleepers are made of wood that has already had a lifetime. They are not consistent. I got the idea for the staggered edge from a very unlikely source; from [Alberto] Giacometti. Giacometti’s figures are what is left after life is done with them, and the railway sleepers are what is left after life is done with them.’

In Scully’s inherently ambivalent works, the rational precision of geometric forms is imbued with a sensual, human quality, evoking a deeply emotive response. While remaining free of mystical connotations, the works portray the realities of cities or nature, of the individual and humanity; ‘I’m really in the business of unifying these two tendencies that have been at odds in our human history for a very long time: the logical and the romantic.’



7. Portrait of Sean Scully in his studio

About the artist

Sean Scully was born in Dublin in 1945, and his family moved to London four years later, where he grew up in a working-class Irish neighbourhood. He studied at Croydon School of Art, London, and Newcastle University, England, where he began experimenting with abstraction. Sean Scully's work has been exhibited in prestigious institutions worldwide, including Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City (2002); National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2004); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2005); Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (2006); National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin (2015); Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2018); and National Gallery, London (2019), among others. In 2015 he was the first Western artist to receive a major retrospective at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum and at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. An exhibition of over 40 works, including a monumental, colourful sculpture titled *Opulent Ascension*, was held at San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice in 2019. Institutional exhibitions of Scully's works are currently on view at the Langen Foundation outside Düsseldorf (until 7 August); the Centre of Contemporary Art Znaki Czasu, Toruń (until 11 September) and the Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (until 9 October). A major retrospective of his work from the 1970s to the present is currently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art until 31 July 2022.

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Images: **1. Sean Scully, *Wall Paris Blue*, 2021.** Oil on linen. 193 x 193 x 7.6 cm (76 x 76 x 3 in) © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. **2. Sean Scully, *Landline Verdant Dark F.26.22*, 2022.** Oil on aluminium. 152.4 x 134.6 x 5.4 cm (60 x 53 x 2.125 in) © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. **3. Sean Scully, *Wall Red Pale Yellow*, 2022.** Oil on linen. 106.7 x 121.9 x 5.1 cm (42 x 48 x 2 in) © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. **4. Sean Scully, *Wall of Light Yellow Fall*, 2021.** Oil on linen. 190.5 x 215.9 x 7.6 cm (75 x 85 x 3 in) © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. **5. Sean Scully, *Landline Tierra Primavera*, 2022.** Oil on aluminium. 215.9 x 190.5 x 5.1 cm (85 x 75 x 2 in) © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. **6. Sean Scully, *Indoor Sleeper*, 2020.** Jarrah wood. appr. 440 x 250 x 250 cm (173.23 x 98.43 x 98.43 in) © Sean Scully. Photo: Michael Richter. **7. *Portrait of Sean Scully*.** Photo: Nick Willing.

All images: Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac gallery, London · Paris · Salzburg · Seoul.