

Press Release

Sean Scully

Soul

3 September—9 November 2024

Thaddaeus Ropac
Seoul Fort Hill
2F, 122-1, Dokseodang-ro, Yongsan-gu, Seoul



Sean Scully, *Landline Drifting*, 2024.
Oil on aluminum. 152.4 x 134.6 cm (60 x 53 in).

Featuring a selection of new paintings, *Soul* brings together works belonging to Irish-born Sean Scully's celebrated *Wall of Light* and *Landline* series, marking the artist's first solo presentation with Thaddaeus Ropac in Seoul. Drawing upon an Irish tradition of wordplay, the title of the exhibition references both the city in which it takes place and the soulful nature of the work itself. 'Soul means your spirit,' says the artist. 'The only thing you really own is your spirit. Everything else is only rented, including your body.'

The exhibition conveys the significance of place to Scully's ongoing formal investigation of the stripe and block motifs that structure his distinct approach to abstraction. The new paintings trace his recent return to London. The steel-grey undertone of their colour palettes evokes the brooding light of the city that surrounds his studio in Kentish Town – an area of North London referenced in the *Wall of Light* painting *Kentish Town Blue Red* (2024).

In tandem with the influence of the urban environment, Scully cites ‘the muscular light of Constable’ as a key inspiration for the paintings, sharing the English landscapist’s preoccupation with capturing the specific atmospheric conditions of a particular place in a particular moment. The high contrast interplay of darkness and light characteristic of John Constable’s pastoral scenes is reimagined within his own abstract language. Subtly variegated blocks or stripes of blue, red, green and purple are laid down on copper, aluminium and linen. Their tonal modulations imbue the paintings with a luminosity resonant with the European landscape tradition that he draws upon, demonstrating the enduring influence of art history on his own painting practice. ‘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,’ he has said, ‘the logical and the romantic.’

The expression of light through chromatic nuance is at the heart of the pivotal *Wall of Light* series, commenced by the artist following his observation of the way natural light animated the stacked stones of ancient Mayan walls in Yucatán, Mexico. Vertical and horizontal blocks of colour are arranged in irregular formations with slivers of space left between the individual blocks, as if gaps in a wall through which light might filter. Recent works in the series reflect the artist’s increasingly expressive, freer handling of paint, which reveals underpainted layers beneath the overlapping brushstrokes. Making visible the processual nature



Sean Scully, *Wall London Green*, 2024.
Oil on linen. 172.7 x 157.5 cm (68 x 62 in).

of painting, Scully encapsulates the transient and ever-changing quality of natural light so that, as art critic Hans-Joachim Müller describes, each painting ‘has its own climate, its own emotional profile.’ While *Wall London Green* (2024) lays down sunshine yellow next to spring green and rose pink to evoke the warm light of a summer’s day, the peaches and oranges that simmer between the blocks of *Kentish Town Blue Red* evoke the burnt out colours of sunset.

The new *Landline* works find revitalised inspiration in musical serialism – a method of composition that repeats musical elements with variations achieved through tone, dynamics and timbre. Translating the method into painterly abstraction, the *Landline* works repeat the motif of the horizon line five or six times, finding their variations through tonal modulations of colour and the gestural range of the artist’s brushstrokes. While formally evocative of the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, Scully asserts a fundamental distinction between the invocation of the sublime pursued by the American Abstract Expressionists and his own practice, which addresses contemporary existential relationships with the environment through an invocation of land through horizontal lines. As he notes, ‘by abstracting our relationship with nature we’ve made it more



Sean Scully, *Landline Grey Blue Pink*, 2024.
Oil on copper. 70.1 x 70.1 cm (27.6 x 27.6 in).

remote. So, what I've done with these paintings is move it more towards nature without giving up abstraction.'

Together, the works on view encompass the artist's evocative expression of light through his attuned

sensitivity to colour. Shaped by his deeply felt relationship to place, they represent the close entwinement of personal experience and formal investigation that continues to underpin his artmaking practice. 'Your sense of colour is like your singing voice,' he says, 'it comes out of your spirit.'



Sean Scully painting *Wall Melancholia*, 2018. Photo: Nick Willing.

About the artist

Over the course of his 50-year career, Sean Scully has created an influential body of work that has marked the development of contemporary abstraction. Fusing the traditions of European painting with the distinct character of American abstraction, his work combines painterly drama with great visual delicacy. In 2022, a major retrospective of his work from the 1970s to the present day was held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Further solo exhibitions have been held in numerous prestigious institutions worldwide, including at Houghton Hall, Norfolk (2023); Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen (2022–23); Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (2022); Benaki Museum, Athens (2021); Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden, Wuppertal (2020); National Gallery, London (2019); and Hirshhorn

Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2018). Scully's work is also well represented in major institutional collections internationally.

A solo presentation of Scully's work is on view at Église Saint-Nicolas, Caen until 22 September 2024 as part of the Normandie Impressionists Festival. Until 6 October 2024, Château d'Oiron, Plaine-et-Vallées are exhibiting the artist's sculpture, painting and works on paper and will install a permanent monumental stone tower sculpture, commissioned by the Centre des monuments nationaux, later this year. *Sean Scully: Away from the Sea* is on view at the He Art Museum, Foshan in China until 27 October 2024.

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