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Press Release

Sean Scully
Entre ciel et terre

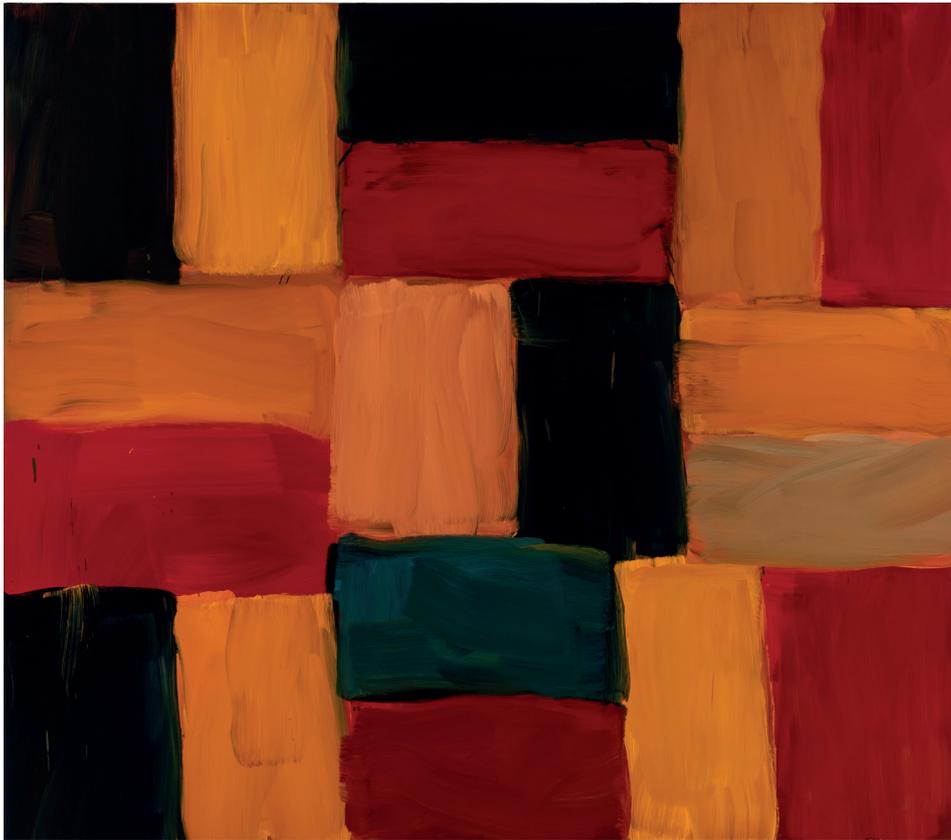
24 April—31 July 2021

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Thaddaeus Ropac
7, rue Debelleye
75003 Paris



Sean Scully, *Mirroring Green*, 2020. Oil on aluminium. 250 x 400 cm (98,43 x 157,48 in). © Sean Scully. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein



Sean Scully, *Wall Orange*, 2020. Oil on linen. 190 x 215.3 cm (74.8 x 84.8 in).

Entre ciel et terre is Sean Scully's first exhibition at Thaddaeus Ropac. Created for the most part during the pandemic, the paintings suggest a connection with nature and an inner world of memory in troubled times.

The exhibition presents for the first time Sean Scully's new *Mirroring* series. Painted in oil on aluminium, the large-scale works are divided into two sets of colour stripes that mirror each other with variations. Between each colour field, the artist has left the metal surface apparent. The overall composition with the rhythm of the horizontal bands bring to mind the pages of a book or a musical score. In the *Wall of Light* works the bands of colour are interlaced. They are painted in a warm or grey palette in different sizes and materials notably on linen but also aluminium and copper. The exhibition presents a selection of *Landline* paintings with layered greys and blues, and an Inset painting in which the horizon lines have been ruptured by a black square. This iconoclastic gesture may express the lack of perspective in darkened times.

Over the course of his fifty-year career, the Irish-born, US-based artist 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, Sean Scully is renowned for his poetic, expressive and spiritual use of colour and form, as he has stated: '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.'

As the translated exhibition title *Entre ciel et terre* [*Between Heaven and Earth*], indicates, Sean Scully's art hovers between two realms, that of the *terrestrial*, conveying a sense of materiality, rawness and sensuality and that of the *celestial*, by opening onto the infinite. The colours range from soft and sensual hues, such as a rose that references Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), to creamy and dark greys that allude to the melancholy

and grittiness of the cities the artist has lived in. Tints and shades associated with the earth and the sky are described by the artist as 'Cimabue brown', 'straw and water-lily blonds', or 'Nevada desert yellows and reds' and 'dusk blue'. When describing the exhibition the artist has said: 'The colours call to each other. [...] I will always make it complicated emotionally and fill it with something mysterious.'

The gradations of tone and combinations of colours allow for a sensorial and emotional impact, enhanced by the shimmering effect of metal. Sean Scully initiates a wave of emotions that transition between different states: from red to blue, from warm to cold, from red to orange to black, day into night, from one memory to the next. The paintings capture ever-changing landscapes, as if moving within the same pictorial frame. When discussing his use of greys in the exhibition, Sean Scully remarked, 'Again I think all that grey comes from memory. Streets of London. London fog. It comes from life.'

Although they are strongly abstract, Sean Scully's paintings are informed by life, experience and sensation: 'Nearly everything I have in my work is from memory. From my Irish gran and from work, working in a factory, working the baling machine, loading trucks, setting type, printing. So I took all this experience and learnt to make it into art.' The repetition in his work is not just formal, it also seems to translate the modern condition of work and its repetitive tasks. Yet the play on variations is emancipating as it celebrates infinite diversity and possibilities.

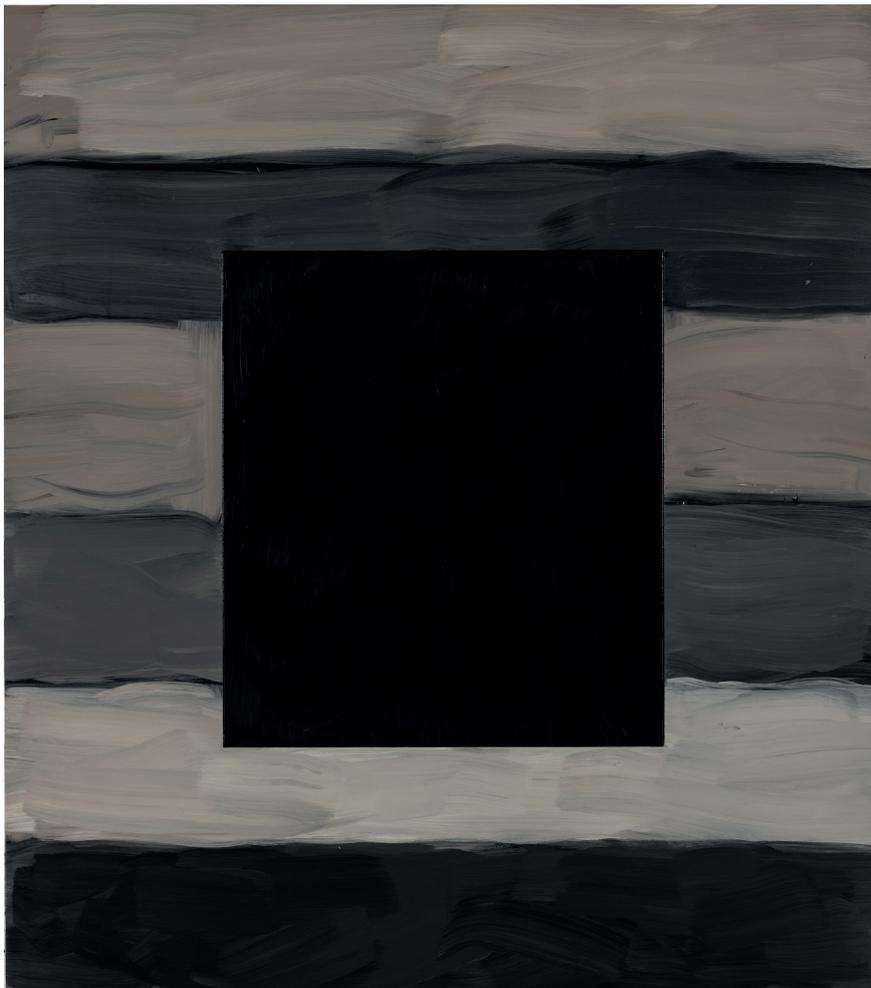


Sean Scully, *Landline Rising Blue*, 2018. Oil on aluminium. 300 x 190 cm (118.11 x 74.8 in).

The *Mirroring* series is linked to Sean Scully's early double canvases from the 1980s, two conjoined panels that create a sense of imperfect mirroring. In the new series, the paired composition is disrupted by areas of the metal surface left apparent. About the *Mirroring* paintings, the artist noted: 'They kind of look like pages of a book with margins.' He then recalls, 'I was sent to work in a printing factory when I was fifteen. The idea of printing is very strong in me, as is the idea of rows. It's all coming from my adolescence, when I used to set type. The idea of reflection is very present in my work.'

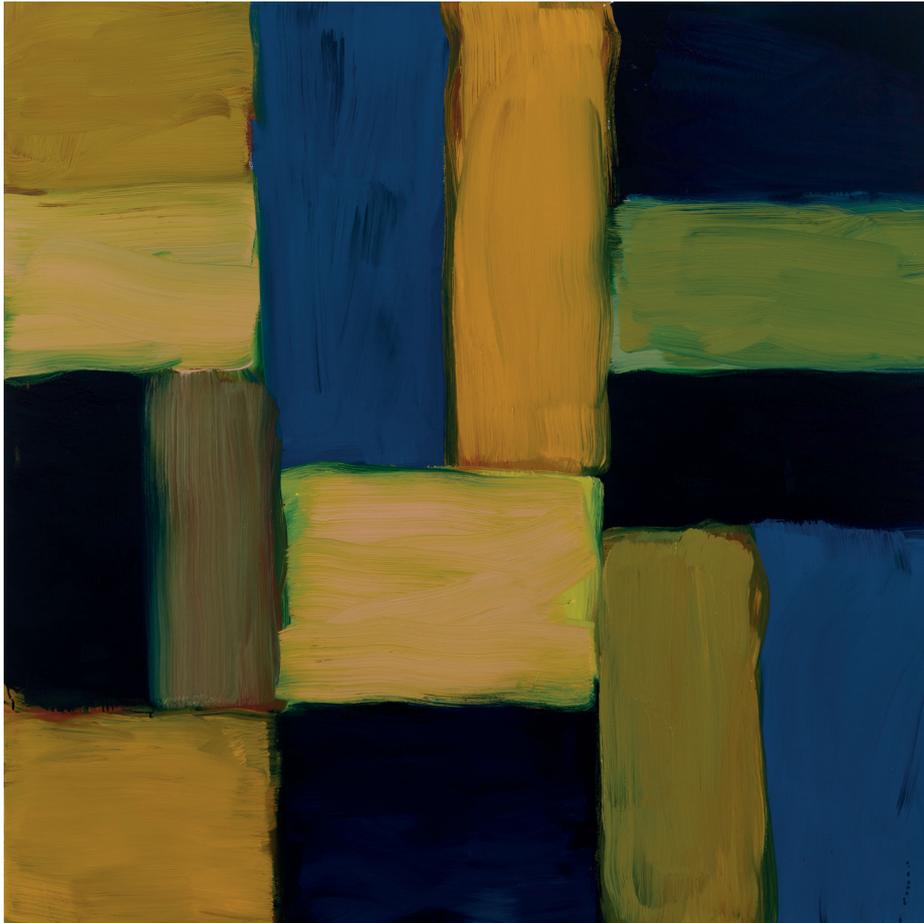
In the *Wall of Light* series, started in 1998, Sean Scully plays with opposites, as suggested by the title. The arranged colour blocks rendered with thick layers of paint could evoke solid stone walls, while the variations in hues and brightness emulate impressions of light. About the series, Sean Scully has observed, 'The wall is a barrier but what I'm doing is dissolving it. It is metaphysical, transformative. Much like Monet who turns stone into light with his *Cathedrals*.' While preparing this exhibition, he also hinted at a biographical connection to the brick motif: 'Again, I worked on building sites. I did all this physical labour. I was a plasterer labourer that's why the idea of bricks is very close to me. A friend once called me the bricklayer of the soul.'

Landline Rising Blue (2018) forms part of the *Landline* series that has been at the heart of Sean Scully's practice for the past decade. The works were originally inspired by a photograph that the artist took of a seascape from a cliff in Norfolk, England: 'I try to paint 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.' (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, exhibition catalogue, 2018)



Sean Scully, *Black Square Pale Land*, 2020. Oil on aluminium. 215.9 x 190.5 cm (85 x 75 in).

Two examples of Inset works are also on view, *Black Window Pale Land* (2020) and *Wall Landline Dark Yellow* (2021). Both composed of rectangular cut-outs, the paintings demonstrate Sean Scully's continuous architectural and sculptural approach. *Black Window Pale Land* features horizontal stripes with a window-like, black square inset, while *Wall Landline Dark Yellow* embeds a colourful *Wall of Light* painting. The use of a solid black square, recalling the Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), is a new form in Sean Scully's practice. It has emerged in response to the effects of the pandemic, as Sean Scully stated in April 2020 in *The New York Times*: 'We have what we idealistically imagine, which is represented by this seductive painting, and what we actually have, which is a blacked-out view, a very uncertain view.'



Sean Scully, *Star*, 2021. Oil on linen. 160 x 160 cm (63 x 63 in).

The works made this year - *Star*, *Wall Landline Dark Yellow* and *Wall Teal* (2021) reveal the artist's draw to painterly visions of the South of France through Vincent Van Gogh's (1853–1890) palette of yellows and blues as in *Star*, and to 'the solidity and moving light of Paul Cézanne [1839–1906]'. In the catalogue of the exhibition, art historian Pascal Rousseau presents a comparative study of Sean Scully and Paul Cézanne, 'Paul Cézanne's tangible handling of the brushstroke, in his *Montagne Sainte-Victoire* paintings [ca.1904–6] for example, finds resonance in Scully's abstract works.' The exhibition coincides with Sean Scully's project to settle in the South of France.

A catalogue accompanies the exhibition with a text by art historian Pascal Rousseau, Professor of Contemporary Art History at the Sorbonne, Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne.



Scully painting in his studio in Mooseurach, Germany. Photo: 2018 Nick Willing

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 neighborhood. 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); National Gallery, London (2019), among others. In France, his solo-exhibitions took place at the Jeu de Paume, Paris (1996); Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen (2000); Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (2006), and Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Saint-Etienne (2008). 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. A retrospective of his work is currently on view at the Hungarian National Gallery of Budapest until May 2021. Opening in June 2021, The Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, will present a major retrospective of Sean Scully's work from the 1970s to the present, which will then travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in spring 2022.



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