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Structure in Abstraction  
With reference to the music of Arnold Schoenberg  
and the paintings of Sean Scully

by  
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## INTRODUCTION

*All art constantly aspires to the condition of music.*

Walter Pater (Gombrich, 1979,  
p.285)

Since the development towards abstraction in painting from the nineteenth century on, comparisons and analogies between painting and music have occupied a good deal of the attention of artists, aestheticians and art historians. A philosophical tradition exists which emphasises music as the most powerful and indeed the most 'abstract' of the arts: powerful in the sense that music seeps into the consciousness of the hearer, producing some effect; abstract in the sense of being removed from reality. Music did not seem to depend on direct associations with real-world objects and this, essentially, differentiated it from painting. Links with real-world objects were tenuous in music and subject to one's imaginative process. In Western music a high level order was in evidence. Order was an essential part of the overall structuring principles of music and was an integral part of the various elements: rhythm, melody and harmony. Painters also engaged in methods and systems, with no more orderly system to be found than that of perspective which dominated art from the fifteenth century on.

The act of construction is an act common to both the visual artist, and the composer of music. The manner in which they formalize is different, yet both composer and artist strike a balance between a logical approach (discriminating according to the rules of logic) and a subjective one, where personal experience, emotion and intuition all play a singular role. The product of such activity, whether visual or aural, frequently has many characteristics in common. Both musical and visual works concern themselves with structure (the manner of building: the arrangement of parts) and form (the mode of arrangement). Indeed, the word 'compose' is closely related to that of 'composition', and both words are used with reference to both art and music. Harmony too is to do with the fitting together of parts so as to form a connected whole (in music it is related to a vertical system of fitting together) and a close association of unity, and, while we constantly refer to the harmonies of a musical work, in art, harmony denotes a state of completeness and order in the relation of things to each other.



This thesis concerns itself with structure and therefore must also concern itself with harmony in the sense of the balance between the subjective and the objective. In human terms, harmony suggests a balanced relationship between body and mind and, in musical terms, it is the logical system which balances melody (foreground material) and accompaniment (background material). In visual terms, it is represented by a comparable balance of objective / logical decisions and intuitive emotional ones. Despite the quite persistent belief that the arts are concerned mainly with the communication of feeling, they exhibit a very striking 'unity of logic' and they present, according to Suzanne Langer a 'fair field' for systematic thought. (Langer, 1976, p.4)

When abstract painters dispensed with perspective as a governing system, and as Modernism became synonymous with individual expression, painting was in serious danger of becoming associated with a presence without form, structure, logic or order.

This thesis explores the work of Arnold Schoenberg who is taken as representing abstraction in musical terms and it emphasises his replacement of one ordering system, that of tonality, with another, his twelve tone method, arguing that the complex and very structural nature of his method of composition did not interfere with its expressiveness. Schoenberg worked on his system, partly out of a sense of duty to the future of music. The work of Sean Scully, a contemporary artist who has been involved with abstract painting since 1967, reveals a comparable commitment to formal concerns and his recent work reveals a strong inclination towards the inclusion of a subjective element. Scully uses the grid (although he is not the first artist to do so). His place in the history of abstraction in painting is, however, significant as he strives to include certain elements which he claims had been excluded in the 1960s and 1970s. Schoenberg and Scully are remarkable for the success of their marriage of formal/structural concerns with subjectivity.

In looking at Scully and abstract painting from the point of view of music, in particular Western music, and because I see music as very effective in producing a response, I am drawn towards an examination of its historical evolution, although not all abstract painters have used the musical paradigm. This introduction looks at some of the



philosophies which emphasise music as the most important of the arts; it examines the growth in complexity in Western music with its emphasis on structures, and refers to the development of forms within that evolutionary process. Adherence to the structures in vogue at any one time in music's history has not discouraged composers' desire to be expressive.

Music like language, attempts to articulate meaning and Suzanne Langer's claim that sounds are easier to, 'produce, combine, perceive and identify than feelings' (Langer, 1976, p.27), suggests that as a means of communication of feelings, it has the advantage over other forms. Its associations are not fixed although, at certain times, attempts were made to associate general meanings with particular means, i.e. keys, rhythmic idioms and articulations. Tonality provided one of the main means of sustaining the listener in that it incorporated dissonance in its language, and in the tonal system dissonance always resolved to consonance. Schoenberg, in his elimination of the dominance of one tone over the other, freed the expressive potential of music even further. In serialist technique, a cell of a particular twelve note series (which might never again be used in other series) was unique to that work, assigning to it one particular meaning, which was frequently reinforced by vertical as well as horizontal arrangement.

*'Music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the Primal Unity, and therefore symbolises a sphere which is beyond and before all phenomena. Rather are all phenomena, compared with it, merely symbols.*

Nietzsche (Hofstadter and Kuhns,  
1976, p.517)

Fredrich Wilhelm Nietzsche stands in a long line of philosophers who place music as the highest form of art. According to his theories, Beethoven's use of the voice in his Ninth Symphony gives expression to the composer's urge: an urge brought on by the sheer power of the music itself. The words do not necessarily increase the impact of the music on the listener. Music, Nietzsche writes, does not need 'the picture and concept' but merely endures them (Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1976, p.517).



The elevation of music above the visual arts did not begin with Nietzsche but goes all the way back to the writings of Plato. His theories filtered down relatively unmodified through St. Augustine, Leonardo da Vinci, Arthur Schopenhauer and into this century in the writings of Clive Bell and Theodor Adorno. The basis of the belief is that sound and rhythm touch the soul regardless of what, if anything, they represent. Indeed Clive Bell has stated that, 'Every sacrifice made to representation is something stolen from art' (Bell, 1928, p.55), thereby dispensing with the validity of any form of artistic pursuit, aural or visual, that is not abstract. In accordance with this belief much of music's development took place along lines where no narrative was perceivable or required. The visual arts, on the other hand, have long been seen to represent something. Many people cannot 'appreciate' visual art unless an identifiable object /representation lies before them.

According to Plato, the painter is a creator of appearances. He (the painter) imitates perceivable reality, which itself is an imitation or copy of the ultimate reality beyond the visual. The painter, in Platonian theory, is an imitator of that which others make. Imitation, he writes is thrice removed from the truth. In more revered tones, Plato speaks of music. Musical training, he writes, is a more potent instrument than any other because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, 'on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace' (Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1976 p.28). Plato dislikes artistic imitation for misleading those seeking truths.

St. Augustine also places music on a philosophical pedestal. In his view, those human arts which participate least 'in the sensible' are the best mirrors of Divine Order, in line with the Platonian idea that there are fundamental realities of which the things we encounter in this world are imperfect or impure renderings (Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1976, p.172).

Schopenhauer, the German nineteenth century philosopher, wrote widely on the concept of 'Will'. It was possible, he believed, for humans to go beyond the patterned sensations of the human mind to know the 'ultimate reality' in Platonian terms, described by Schopenhauer as 'the Will'. That reality is what man is seeking, causing restlessness and discontent. Through art the restless will in man is stilled. Art,





Schopenhauer believes, surpasses nature in its presentation of truth showing the ideas of the world as they are in perceptible form but music, he claims, directly represents the will itself.

*In it we do not recognise the copy or repetition of any idea of existence in the world.*

Schopenhauer (Hofstadter and Kuhns, 1976, p.447).

He adds that music is deeply and entirely understood by man in his innermost consciousness as a perfectly universal language, the distinctness of which surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself.

When Plato refers to the inferiority of the visual artist for his 'imitation' of something that is itself an imitation, in essence he argues in favour of abstraction in visual terms, the development of which has been the single most important achievement of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century avant-garde. In the sense that Sean Scully's paintings since 1967 are primarily compositions which explore horizontal and vertical bands of colour, Scully, in his paring down to essentials, follows the early twentieth century Dutch exponent of abstract painting, Piet Mondrian. His recent paintings, for example his *Catherine* painting of 1993, allow the art of the visual to reach that deep area of the consciousness which philosophers have hitherto indicated to be the exclusive realms of music. Abstract painting has many of the characteristics of music and it is not surprising that some abstract painters emulate music, although among other sources of inspiration to early abstract painters, such as Mondrian and Kandinsky, has been theosophical beliefs.

The history of music, as indeed that of art, has traditionally been perceived as progressing in a linear fashion. 'Progression' is seen to have been orderly, as with all evolutionary processes. There is a possibility, of course, that Man's inclination toward categorisation may well have imposed order where was none. Certainly, the lines along which the various elements considered essential to music have moved seem to have been logical and methodical, a succession of stylistic innovations, each responding to its immediate precursor. Earliest manifestations of the creative musical urge can only be



guessed at but Westerners see the 'primitive' music as being prompted by the ability of sounds to inspire, calm, sadden and gladden and incite. Characteristics of earliest music making, it is believed, include those of irregular rhythms, intervals not precisely defined, a limited range of melody and no attempt at harmony. The evolution of each of these elements, insofar as they can be traced, is one of increasing complexity, made possible or accommodated, it would seem, only by their accompanying regulative and orderly systems.

It is believed that by the time of the ancient Greeks, intervals relating to pitch had been defined with a certain precision. This was indicated in the existence of a system of modes, referred to in some of the writings of the ancient Greeks. The modes each had expressive significance. A similar system was later adopted by Medieval theorists who even used Greek names to label their six modes. That composers of this era were not averse to the regulative nature of such a system may well have been enforced by the feeling in Medieval times that Man's task was to bring order to an inherently disorderly world. Renaissance 'enlightenment' led to the system of perspective (emerging in the treaties of Uccello, Leonardo and Durer) in painting and the beginnings of the move towards tonality in music.

In modal music (and this attitude is similar to that still evident in Oriental music today), expression is allied with sound organisation to form a unified whole. The particular organisation of the sounds is fundamental to the music's impact on the listener. The belief, however, that certain modes express certain emotions has clear associations with the ideas of Kandinsky and Scriabin who, in this century, developed theories in relation to sound, colour and mood and the connection between sound and colour.

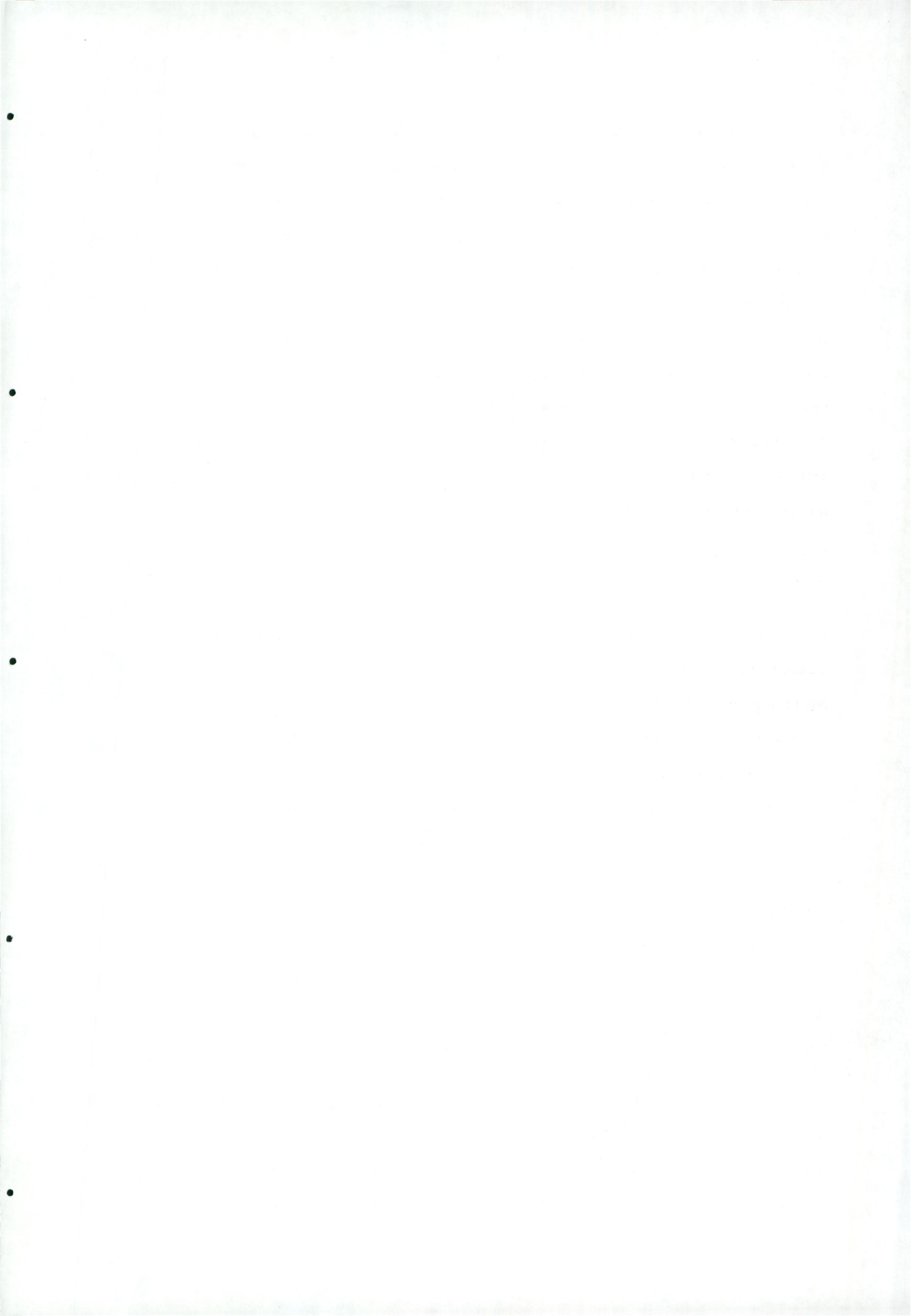
Before 1600 it seemed that the modal system prevailed. However, a complete system of major and minor keys related by harmonies, tonality, began to evolve in the seventeenth century and was more finely tuned around 1700 with unequal temperament giving way to equal temperament. This development can in part be attributed to the increasing use of science in the examination of the acoustical properties of musical instruments and to their specific progression. Whatever the contributing



factors, once established, dependence on the system of major and minor keys seems to have provided motivation and coherence for most Western art music since the seventeenth century. It was in the work of composers like Debussy and Schoenberg that this prevailing system was to be challenged. But more of this later.

Of rhythm and harmony, the former seems to have suffered most at the hands of Western civilisation (use of harmony, the musically-significant simultaneous sounding of notes, came into existence with the development beyond the primitive). Some of the eighteenth century predictability has to be attributed to the ordering of rhythmic motifs and the constant use of particular rhythmic idioms in key places, i.e. leading up to the final cadences. These rhythmic idioms, frequently combined with almost set chord progressions, take from the expressive impact of the music of Handel, for example. His compatriot Johann Sebastian Bach, however, was far more innovative and exercised inventiveness in his complex harmonic progressions, yet in general, the rhythmic content is quite contained. Henry Purcell's final aria of 'Dido and Aeneas' is exceedingly moving for music of that era, with the semitonal line of introduction in the lower strings, a forerunner of nineteenth century chromaticism. Yet in rhythmical terms, Purcell uses rhythmic idioms in the characteristic manner of the time. The freeing of rhythm from the regularity of pulse and metre to which it had become allied, was not to happen until the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Forms used in Baroque, Classical and Romantic music went through an evolutionary process also. The early suite, for example, began as a collection of dances and developed to become a sonata, around which the idea of Sonata form was conceived. Sonata form is still found in music of the late nineteenth century and even the twentieth century. Other structural schemes used included Theme and Variation, the Rondo, the Fugue and a modification of the Sonata form, Sonata-Rondo form, all of which regularly contributed towards composition of large scale works. In short works, binary and ternary forms were used in varying ways, but always allowed for both repetition and contrast, which as discussed later are strongly characteristic of the twelve-tone compositions of Arnold Schoenberg and is paralleled in the abstract paintings of Sean Scully. In all compositions of the period from 1700 to the late nineteenth century these structures combined with the tonal system, where all movement gravitated



towards a fixed point-the tonic- and all notes related to the tonic. Nineteenth century composers had a more adventurous approach to their adaptation of existing formal schemes and also to prevailing harmonic possibilities, but in general they neither overturned nor rejected the old forms or the old harmonic system.

One particular development of the nineteenth century, that of Program music (music that tells a story), needs mention here. Program music invaded orchestral music of the nineteenth century very extensively in the symphonies of Berlioz and Mahler and the symphonic poems of Liszt and Richard Strauss. However the idea suggested by the program or title was frequently expanded by purely musical methods. Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, for example, has a construction that makes perfect sense when viewed as 'pure' music. However it does have titles for individual parts which help us identify specific 'objects' such as the call of the cuckoo and the nightingale. Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*, where the symphony is given a cast of characters, is enjoyable as music without its program but program details can enhance enjoyment. The 'idée fixe' which runs through the entire work, is associated with the character of the beloved, and is as unifying in a purely musical way as Schoenberg's series of twelve notes.

It seems strange that at a time when painting was moving outwards from purely illustrative functions, that music was engaged in inclusion of extra-musical influences, in particular those of literature. The apparent contradictions here are acceptable, however, when one sees that the arts during the nineteenth century were looking beyond what was traditional in their specific disciplines, to other disciplines, to find valuable modes of operation which might push developments in their own fields still further. This moving out to other arts was probably responsible for each artistic discipline's close inspection of those elements unique to its own discipline, expressed in Symbolist poetry's emphasis on its own 'abstract' elements of metre, rhyme, assonance and alliteration. Just as poetry was to re-examine its 'abstract' elements, so painters could not see why the elements of painting, colour and form, could not be just as sound a structural foundation or as expressive a vocabulary as music, which hitherto had 'touched the soul' in its expressiveness, while yet being a model of organisation.





Arnold Schoenberg represents, in the story of music's evolution 'the straw that broke the camel's back' in his pushing of boundaries beyond what had ever seemed possible before. Certain facets of what had been synonymous with musical construction for centuries were off-loaded by him at a time of great change. Examination of the emotionally loaded pieces of his middle phase leaves little doubt in my mind as to his interest in self expression, but his relentless pursuit of a 'method' which would not be repressive and by which large works could be composed and yet be cohesive, indicates a clear appreciation on his part of the absolute value of and necessity for structures. Form is essential to unity but form without feeling is of no value whatsoever in the musical arts.

Sean Scully's crusade to 'invent compositions that make it possible for human feelings to become visible' (Poirier, 1990, inside cover) places his aims on a par with those of Schoenberg although his particular urge grew of an era when anything was possible in 'painting'. The pushing of boundaries which had taken place already in relation to Scully's time and place, had left painting in danger of losing key elements, including those of feeling and form. Adopting a means of expression which corrects the tendency of 'past' painting to overestimate the role of resemblance in representation, Scully imbues his work with the spirit and many characteristics of music. His paintings, against the current backdrop of figurative, ironic Postmodern commentary, themselves challenge the mind in not always giving their precise meanings too easily, but they have a contemplative quality and an emotional content, while at the same time being icons of orderliness in a disorderly society.

Sean Scully shares with Schoenberg a striving towards an idea of unity with which order is inextricably linked. Both these artists achieve a balance between the subjective and the objective, through facing the specific problems of their respective times and media. The conclusions reached by them in their finished works are not dissimilar. The process of abstraction is born of a need to express. Of its very nature, it emphasises aspects we think of as formal.



## CHAPTER ONE     ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

*When I compose, my decisions are guided only by sentiment, by the sentiment present in form. It is this which tells me what to write, everything else is excluded. Every chord is created and played under compulsion, the compulsion of an expressive need, but perhaps also of an inexorable, but unconscious, logic of harmonic construction.*

Schoenberg (Rognoni, 1977, p.13)

Arnold Schoenberg's goal was to compose music that was expressive. To formalise a complicated system was not his primary task. Rather it was, ultimately, to be the crucial means to an end. In the words of the composer himself:

*The method of composing with twelve tones grew out of necessity.*

(Schoenberg, 1950, p.216)

This chapter sets out to explore the relationship between structure/objectivity and expressionism/subjectivity as evidenced in the music of Schoenberg. It looks briefly at the richness of his musical heritage and its influence on the composer, and outlines the three main periods of composition in his life, over which his method of composing evolved. Outside formal systems, those of poetry and prose, are seen in relation to Schoenberg the composer who seeks expression through form, and formal systems already in use in musical composition are seen in terms of their being adapted for his own specific needs. The Twelve Tone system which he developed, is seen as a highly complex one, a fact which has produced varying interpretations and indeed misunderstanding and rejection. The short period in which Schoenberg indulged in painting is examined in terms of its revelation of his ideas vis-a-vis abstraction and the Platonic notion of 'going beyond', and the unique (in music) relationship between the horizontal/melodic movement and the vertical/harmonic function is looked at in relation to the domination of the picture space by the horizontal and vertical axes in the paintings of artists such as Mondrian and Scully. Finally, some of his works are referred to in more detail, in particular, *Pierrot Lunaire*, which of all his mature compositions is one of the most performed.



Born at the end of the nineteenth century and living for much of his life in Vienna, Schoenberg was the inheritor of a great musical tradition which, as his subsequent work illustrates, he had a marked respect for. While he is accredited with having 'freed' music from its centuries old western tradition of tonality, his was in all probability, a logical conclusion of an evolutionary process which had evolved on the bases of order, logic and pattern. Immediately preceding Schoenberg's innovations was the chromaticism of the nineteenth century, the leitmotif of Wagner, the increasingly diverse moves from the tonal centre in the music of Mahler and Richard Strauss and the whole tone scales of Debussy. Nevertheless, Schoenberg made a deliberate and concentrated effort to develop a new system, which by his own admission, was 'waiting' to be formulated. Schoenberg claims that mildly progressive works of art, literature and even music are, in fact, only evolving artistic possibilities (Schoenberg, 1950, p.249). The possibilities have always been there, in much the same way as propositions on the orderliness and laws of the universe.

*To use here the old resources in the old sense saves trouble- the trouble of cultivating the new- but also means passing up the chance of enjoying whatever can **only** be attained by new resources when the old ones are excluded !*

(Schoenberg, 1950, p.207)

Perhaps it was because of the unparalleled vigour with which the arts, and in particular music, had flourished and developed in Vienna that Schoenberg felt the necessity to seek the cultivation of the new.

Until about 1908, Schoenberg's music is still tonal although, as with the music of such composers as Mahler and Richard Strauss, it is often in a dissonant idiom, with expression the guiding force of the forms. While harmonic function is present in such works as *Transfigured Night* (1899) at issue is, not so much keys and themes although they exist as, feelings and psychological characters. This symphonic poem for string sextet is an example of combining hitherto conventional forms with the newer type of sound vocabulary as heard in Wagner. It brought new harmonies into chamber music, something which had not been done before. According to Stanley Sadie,



*Transfigured Night* 'set the pattern of his (Schoenberg's) music in its heavy emotional load and its density of feelings in conflict' (Sadie, 1985, p.428).

From 1909 to 1922 'free' chromaticism and dissonance are prevalent in his music with the sense of tonality gone. Works of this period tend to be short and emotive. Of his works of this period, and of those written by his two devoted students, Webern and Berg, Schoenberg wrote in 1941 that they had discovered 'our sense of form was right when it forced us to counterbalance extreme emotionality with extraordinary shortness' (Schoenberg, 1950, p.217). These characteristics, extreme brevity combined with extreme expressiveness, are those foremost in works of Schoenberg's middle period. Examples of works from this period include his *Six Little Pieces for Piano*, (Opus 19, 1911) and many of his vocal works including, *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, (1909) and *Pierrot Lunaire*, (Opus 21, 1912). In these, the division of the overall work into short songs of concentrated and intense but often varied emotions, allows the feeling to be intense, yet brief, while still facilitating the composer to think in terms of larger scaled works. Certainly, some feeling of movement and progression is relinquished in the absence of tonality where music no longer progresses towards a tonic. The lack of an obvious goal is a difficulty which at this time Schoenberg overcame by using words to create form. Indeed, David Boyden points out that in Schoenberg's experiments leading from one period to another, he often wrote songs or piano solos in the smaller forms, even in miniature forms (e.g. Opus 19), to 'clarify a new type of expression with the simplest means' (Boyden, 1971, p.417).

From 1915 on, Schoenberg was consciously working towards a system for creating more extended works of composition. Arnold Whittall suggests that his (Schoenberg's) musical inheritance and his creative instinct combined to convince him that the diversity of a complex extended form must be the ultimate goal of any worthwhile compositional technique (Whittall, 1988, p.121). Paul Griffiths claims that Schoenberg, holding to the Austro-German tradition with uncompromising tenacity, could only unwillingly allow metaphysics and chromaticism to lead him away from structural coherence (Griffiths, 1978, p.20). Schoenberg's 'Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another' was devised as a working structure to 'facilitate construction' (Schoenberg, 1950, p.213). The final period of his





composing life produced works devoted almost entirely to twelve tone composition, although there was some return to tonality in the compositions of his final years in the United States. Included in the works of this period are his *Variations for Orchestra* (Opus 31, 1928), the unfinished opera *Moses and Aaron* (1932), his *Violin Concerto* (Opus 36, 1936) and his *Piano Concerto* (Opus 42, 1942). These large scale works all employ forms used by composers long before the twentieth century; they no longer rely on words to give them structure (except perhaps in the case of opera, but opera has always been conditioned by factors other than music) and they demonstrate well the capacity of the twelve tone series to be extended and developed, that as a facilitator of construction, it works, just as the system of tonality had worked for many centuries.

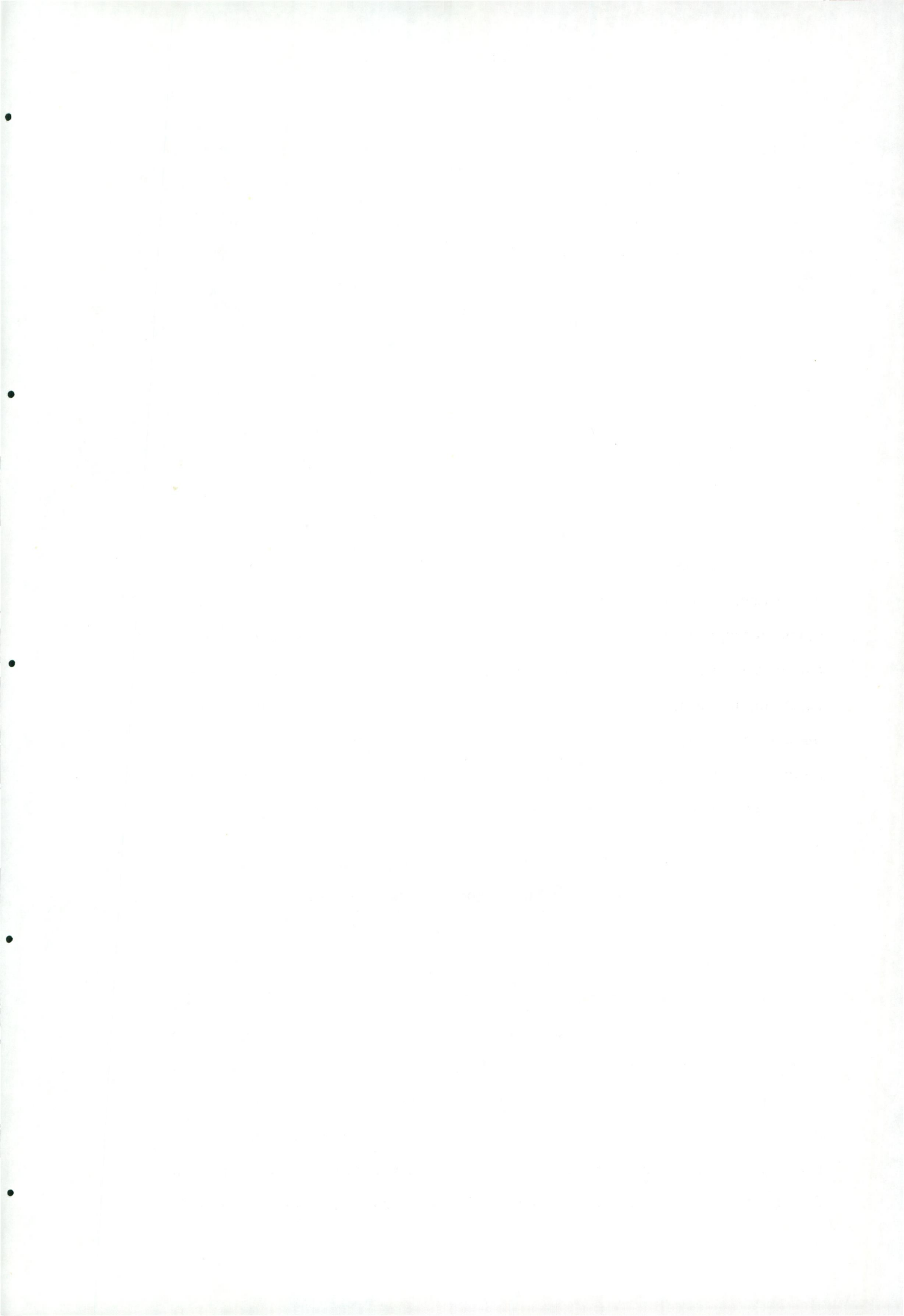
What draws me to the music of Schoenberg is the fact that, to a large extent the order that is present in it, is frequently inaudible to the listener. (The paintings of Sean Scully are in direct contrast to this where the grid structure obviously underlies many of them.) On closer inspection of Schoenberg's music, involving examination of its written format, it is clear that the structures which he used in its composition are so well adapted that they become an integral part of his expressive idiom and therefore essential to it. I would suggest that the use of terms such as 'free atonality' in association with the music of his middle period, and the alleged 'freeing' of dissonance attributed to him, mislead the casual listener in suggesting that the work is without structure. It is also evident from the composer's writings that some of the terminology used in relation to his methods was not approved of by Schoenberg himself. He did not like the term 'Atonality', feeling that relationships always exist between tones one to the other (Schoenberg, 1950, p.210). However, if the structures are inaudible then one should perhaps assume that this was the intention of the composer, who used form as a means to an end, the end being the expressionistic impact of the work. Schoenberg's writings confirm that he believes the form of a work grows out of the presentation of the creator's idea and out of whatever mood he is 'impelled to evoke' (Schoenberg, 1950, p.215). Form should not dictate the music, rather the musical idea should dictate the form.

In David Boyden's introduction to *The Larger Forms Used in Music*, he claims that every work of art must be organised to give it coherence (Boyden, 1971,



p.55). Patterns that serve to organise and give coherence to an art work are collectively its form. One of the difficulties with music is that, because the music is heard over a period of time, its form is not immediately perceptible and therefore cannot produce an immediate response, as is often the case with a visual work of art. The predictability of the music of the Baroque era may, in fact, be due to the forms in common usage being derived from forms of dance, where predictability was essential to its usage. Schoenberg's period is far removed from this early source of form (dance) but he does, particularly in the works of his middle period, use forms from both literature and poetry to assist in making his music comprehensible when it no longer relied on traditional harmonic progressions resolving to a centre of gravitation. Dance forms have been used by him i.e. his *Passacaglia* (No. 8), and *Journey Home* (No. 20), in *Pierrot Lunaire*.

Opera is the best example of a musical form conditioned by other factors, its entire history being dominated by a struggle between those who believe the music should be prioritised and those who feel the text is of primary importance. It is no accident that opera, choral music and vocal music constitute a significant portion of the entire body of Schoenberg's compositions. It could be argued that it was as much the influence of Wagner, and his ideas about the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (a work that embraces all the arts in one complete piece), the influence of the programmatic nature of the nineteenth century, and the product of Schoenberg's personal experience of working with the *Urbrettl* theatre in the early 1900s, that sent Schoenberg in this direction but, given that he constantly refers to his interest in form as a necessary factor of expression, it seems likely that Schoenberg recognised the obvious advantages, structurally, to using the words of both poetry and prose to give form to his music. He has written that at first it seemed impossible to write pieces of great length (without tonality), and refers to his use of poetry to construct larger forms, the difference in size and shape of the parts of writing and of character and mood being 'mirrored' in the shape and size of the composition, in its dynamics, tempo, figuration, accent, instrumentation and orchestration (Schoenberg, 1950 p.27). At all times in his writings Schoenberg emphasises the need of art to be different to science, stating that art is more inclined to choose according to variety than to system (Schoenberg, 1950 p.214). Frequently then, when Schoenberg uses words to direct the composition, it was the mood of the first line



alone which inspired the character of the entire musical setting. Ultimately he relied on his response to a musical idea, and this musical idea, once in existence, dominated the entire section, text or no text. The sound in Schoenberg's music changes with every turn of the music: emotional, structural or other, and such changes tend to occur in a more rapid succession than usual, rendering them more difficult to perceive and sometimes making them more difficult for the listener to enjoy.

In later works when Schoenberg no longer relied so heavily on text, he was still evidently concerned with organisation and patterns of organisation, although rejecting tonality in its traditional sense. In works which use his twelve tone method of composition, there is frequent use of the older forms, including sonata form, although this was adapted so that the music no longer arrives in a certain key at a certain place. The centuries-old tradition of announcing a musical idea, elaborating on it and returning to its almost original format (as a means of attaining unity) was recognised by Schoenberg as an effective means of ensuring its comprehensibility. His *Orchestral Variations* written in 1928 adopt a form, theme and variations, which had been immensely popular as far back as the sixteenth century, and which was one of two significant methods used by early composers to create works of some length. Indeed the twelve-tone method itself could be described as the development and variations of a theme, and could therefore be described as a new method born of an old one.

The dual purposes of achieving comprehensibility and unity, both with strong links to logic, order and pattern, were significant in the system, or method of composing with Twelve Tones, devised by Schoenberg and used by him and some of the great composers of this century, in particular Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Their use of the Twelve Tone method, with quite differing results, proved it to be as flexible and full of possibilities as Schoenberg had pronounced, when he said that the possibilities of evolving the formal elements of music — melodies, themes, phrases, motives figures and chords- out of a basic set are unlimited (Schoenberg, 1950, p.226). Schoenberg speaks also of the desire for conscious control which arises in every artist's mind, forcing the composer along a road of exploration to find, if not laws or rules, at least ways to justify (Schoenberg, 1950, p.218). Hence the seemingly regulative order of his method.



Because the actual working of the twelve-tone method of composing, where all twelve tones existing between the octave are given equal importance, is perceived by musicians to be regulative and indeed highly complex (as it is), it is not surprising that writers have contrary notions about Schoenberg's attitude to form and structure. His own personal musical development began with lessons from the composer Zemlinsky, described by Jane Kallir as 'free form at best' and she claims Schoenberg had a healthy disdain for book-learning (Kallir, 1984, p.16). However, contrary to this view of Schoenberg's attitude to book learning, with an implicit suggestion that he was adverse to traditional structures, Schoenberg the teacher (one of the occupations he engaged in, necessitated by his need to support his family) was strongly insistent that before embarking on composition with twelve tones, one needed to be well versed in the traditional functions of harmony. It is quite significant that he wrote the book *Harmonielehre*, published in 1912 (the same year as Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), with this end in mind, and constantly referred to the necessity for the composer to compose as always first and use the method of twelve-tone composition then i.e. the inspiration of mood and expression direct the very nature of the particular series used by the composer.

What differentiates Schoenberg in his attitude to form from, for example, the early classical composers, is the fact that they, in their search for coherence in an extended work, frequently allowed the form to dictate everything so that expressive qualities were often lost. Schoenberg's work is at all times expressive, even when in transition. The nature of that expression is not always calm and beautiful but is marked by interest in the human psyche (and often the dark side) prevalent at that time. Everything that Schoenberg has written is the result, first and foremost, of the urge of his need to express, and this is what dictates the form, bringing forth some almost unconscious logic. Feeling and form become inextricably linked, one with the other. Without the feeling, the form itself is nothing.

Schoenberg's urge to express was, it is believed by many, deeply influenced by the difficulties and troubles he experienced in his personal life. The vocal work *Pierrot Lunaire* consisting of twenty one brief poems and expressive of a lost soul, delivered by the soloist in Sprechgesang (a delivery between song and speech), is





exciting to the listener, but it is also at times harsh, disquieting and even macabre. The piece was written by the composer at a time of personal upheaval and trauma. His marriage was unhappy and indeed he was struggling to survive the fact that his wife had briefly eloped with the person he had believed to be one of his best friends. That 'friend', Richard Gerstl, a painter, had in 1908, committed suicide and in 1911 Mahler, both friend and financial supporter of Schoenberg had died. Side by side with these personal tragic events went the general lack of acceptance by the Viennese public of his music. In December 1908, for example, the first performance of Schoenberg's second quartet led to powerful protests, laughter and 'a great deal of disturbance' and the singer of the soprano part in the last two movements of this work sang in tears (Stuckenschmidt, 1977, p.97). Contentment and peace could hardly be the hallmarks of the music of one whose daily existence could, at best, be described as difficult. Indeed Jane Kallir believes that the close temporal relationship between Schoenberg's final break with conventional tonality and the Gerstl affair is no coincidence and that if Schoenberg had feared what would have been the next step in the logical evolution of his work, the rupture of his marriage in some strange way gave him the necessary courage (Kallir, 1984, p.28).

The *Second String Quartet*, mentioned above, was dedicated to his wife. In it he reaches the very limits of tonality. Kallir refers also to the quotation of the folksong 'Ach du lieber Augustin' in the second movement of the quartet, and the lyrics of which include the line 'All is lost' (Kallir, 1984, p.29). Does this refer to the composer's marriage or his impending break with tonal tradition? It is ironic that throughout his lifetime, Schoenberg's music was constantly rejected by audiences, while his writings convey his continual striving towards comprehensibility in his music.

Schoenberg's decision to forego painting as a means of expression, after a number of years of intense interest and success in this pursuit (in the period 1908 to 1912) relates, I believe, to his realisation that there was more to being as artist than the simple expression of emotion. Behind feeling, whatever the medium, should be the presence, to a greater or lesser extent, of form. Composition in Schoenberg's paintings is not strong. It would seem that paint was used by Schoenberg at that time when his musical creations reflected a period of transition. However, one concludes that he came



to the realisation that his years of laying the foundations of his musical craft and his assimilation of the hitherto standard functions of harmony were to be the very means by which he would unlock his progressive means of expression. His paintings were convincing because of the rawness of their expressiveness, but Schoenberg's unerring instincts led him back to the medium in which he had most grounding. Deep knowledge of this craft, combined with inspiration and dedication, secured the future of the evolution of tonality.

Contemplation on Schoenberg the painter gives some further clues to his approaches and ideals. He had a preoccupation with self-portraiture, of which about one fifth of his total output of paintings consists. This was not unusual given the time and place of his endeavours and given that, recently, Freud's writings on the unconscious had recently been published. Austrian painters of the time, including Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, showed some preoccupation with self-portraiture too. [Plate 1] What is particularly interesting about Schoenberg's portraits is that they show little evidence or concern for the outward inevitable process of ageing. What seems to concern Schoenberg the painter are those qualities that persist [Plates 2,3 and 4]. Schoenberg wrote:

*Who a hundred years hence will be able to judge the resemblance? -but the artistic effect will always remain, and this is so because we are addressed not by a real man, the apparent subject of the portrait, but rather by the artist, who having expressed himself in the portrait, must be considered its true subject.*

(Kallir, 1984, p.55)

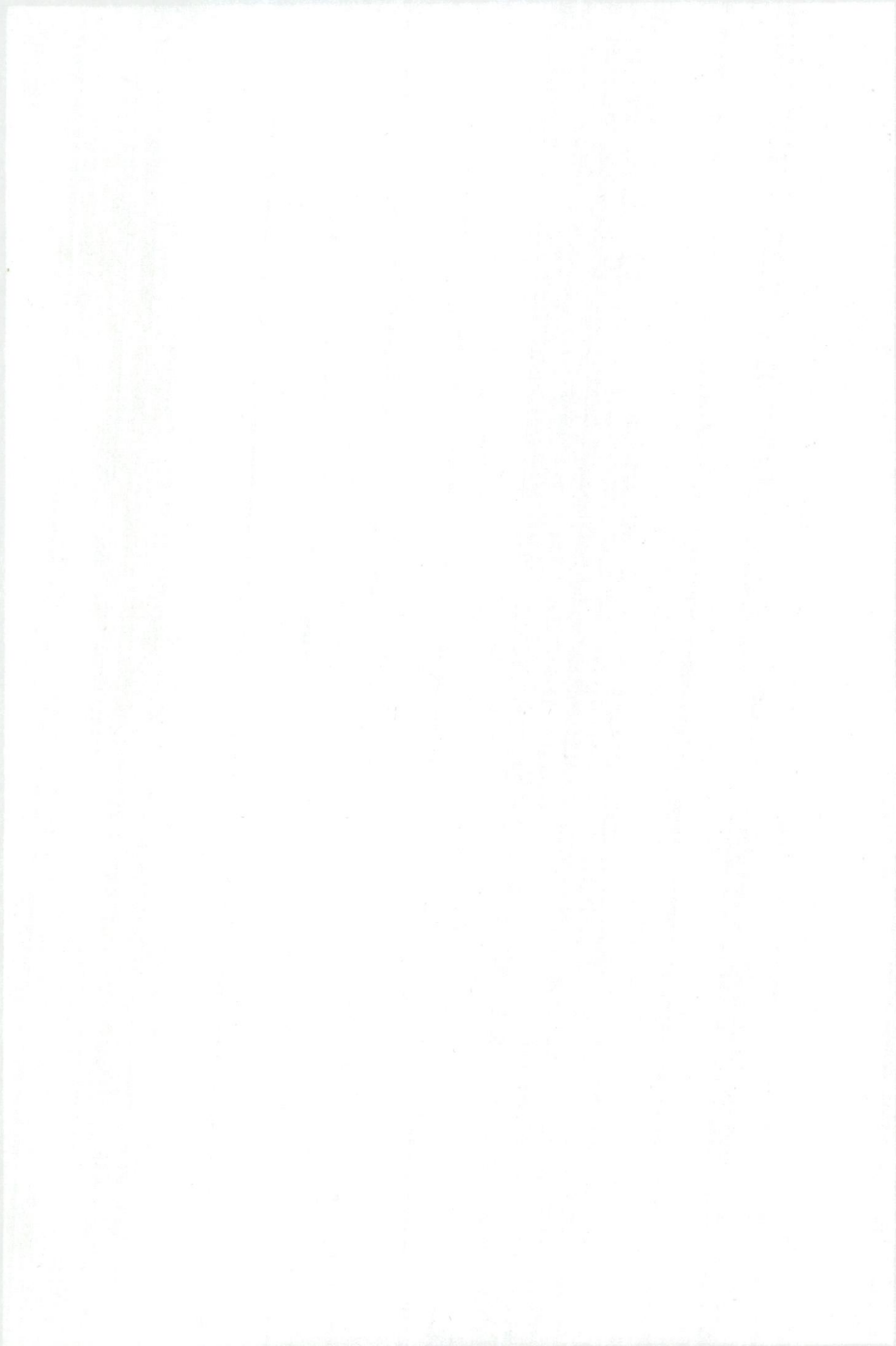
Schoenberg's portraits, self or otherwise, show little concern with transitory states. They portray people with relatively expressionless features and seem more concerned with catching some inner essence that remained constant.

He also tackled subjects that were themselves totally abstract as in the painting *Thinking*, where he bravely attempts the portrayal of a mental state. According to Kallir, paintings such as this are among the first entirely abstract painted works ever created, done as they were in advance of Kandinsky's 'discovery' of abstract painting around 1913. The view that painting does not, of necessity, have to be objective is one





Plate 1. Egon Schiele: Self-portrait in Jerkin with Right Elbow Raised. 1914. Crayon, watercolour and gouache on paper. 18¾" x 12¼".



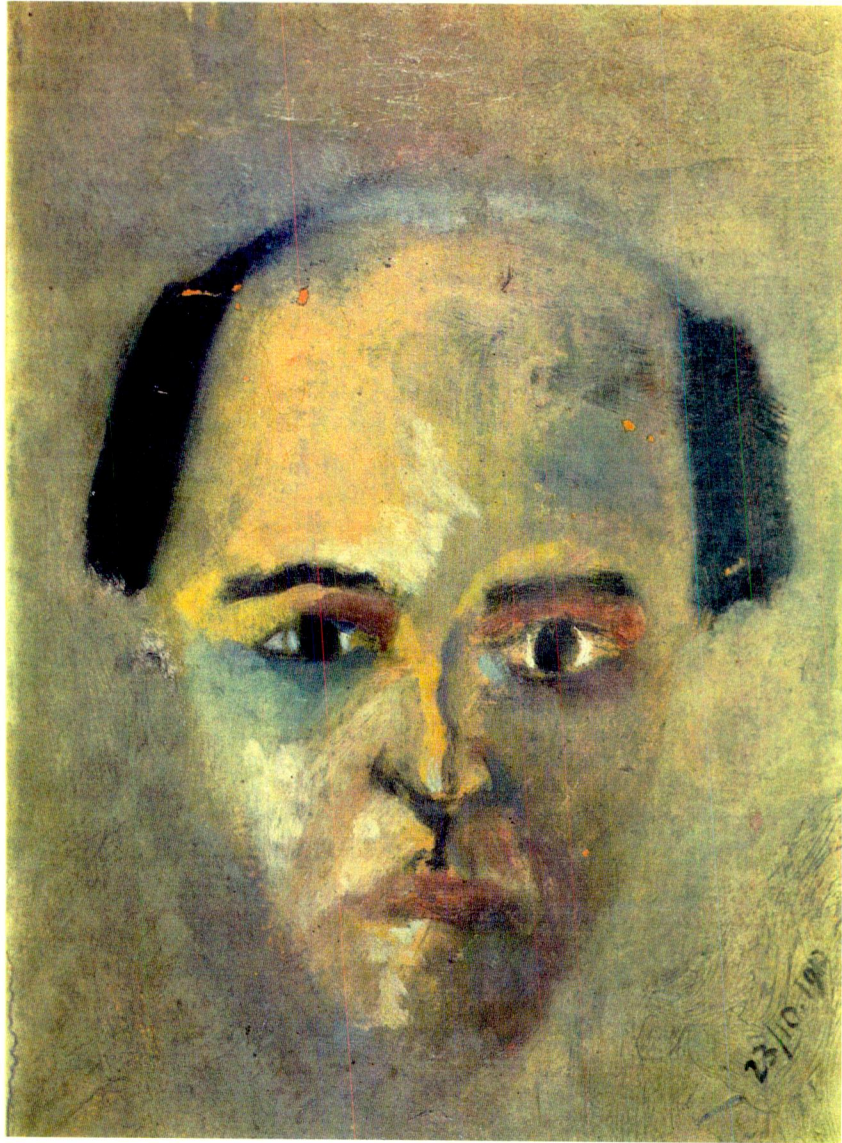


Plate 2. Arnold Schoenberg: *Green Self-portrait*. 1910.  
Oil on wood. 13" x 9½"





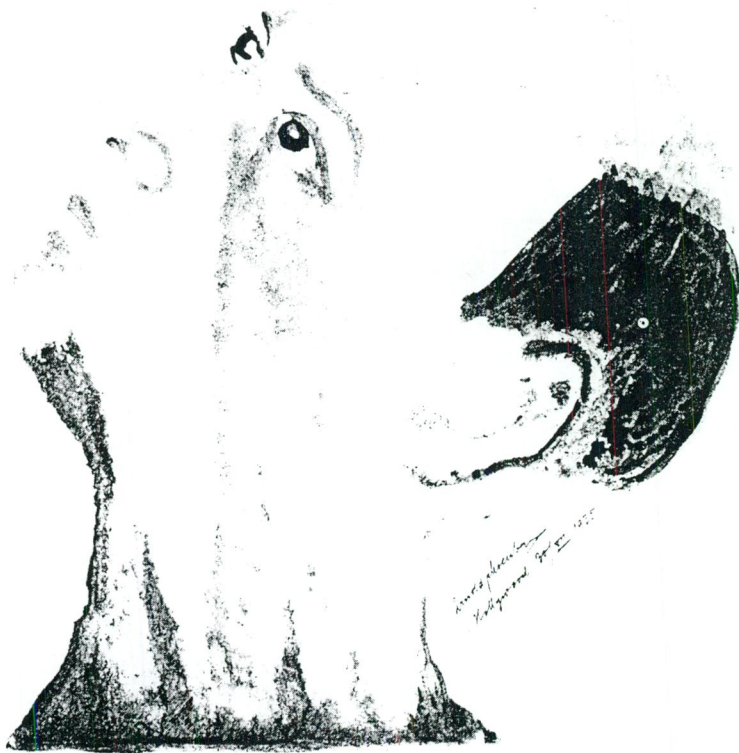


Plate 3. Arnold Schoenberg:  
*Self-portrait*. 1935.  
Brush and ink on paper.  
11½" x 9¼".

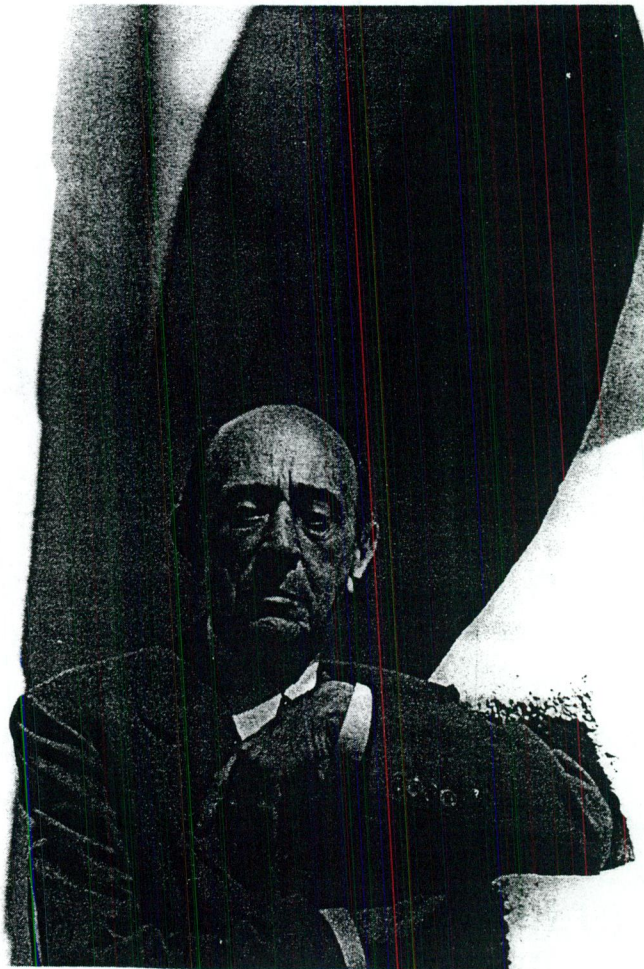


Plate 4. *Photograph*  
*of Arnold Schoenberg*.  
1940.



attributable to Schoenberg. Because our eye constantly perceives objective things, imagination tends to suggest objective things to us. Schoenberg himself suggests the ear has an advantage in this regard (Kallir, 1984, p.58). Certainly Schoenberg's experience as a composer, dealing with a medium which never relied exclusively on a connection with real objects, allowed him the freedom to transfer abstraction as a quality to a different medium, which previously had been the domain of objectivity. For although two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects are to some degree abstract, their nature is that of weak abstraction. More than anything else, what Schoenberg's paintings reveal is his interest in going beyond that which is actually visible. Narrative, when used in his music has strong links with the world of ideas, just as his abstract painting *The Thinker* is figurative in that the form of a 'figure' exists on the canvas, but what the painter is attempting to convey goes far beyond the physical resemblance of the form to the person.

Some similarities exist between the domination of the picture space by horizontal and vertical axes in the works of Mondrian and Scully and the keen sense of the connection between the horizontal and the vertical line in the music of Schoenberg. Arnold Whittall refers to a letter of 1915 where Schoenberg explained how he was consciously seeking ways of founding musical forms 'on a unifying idea' which produced not only all other ideas, but regulated also their accompaniment and the chords (Whittall, 1988, p.120). Prior to this there had been little or no connection between the two except, perhaps, in the frequent existence of the tonic in the upper and bass lines to mark the ending of a work. The twelve-tone method no longer harmonised sounds in the traditional manner, but three and four note cells taken from the series of twelve tones were played simultaneously (vertically) with other sections of horizontal /melodic movement. Therefore, if the first three notes of the series played consecutively, were C, E and F# (the shape of which suggests its own mood and feeling), C, E and F# might frequently be played simultaneously as a chord, having the dual effect of unifying the horizontal sounds with the vertical but also strengthening the particular relationship between those three tones. New 'harmonies' would appear in every work as the actual twelve-tone series varied in every work and the many possible combinations were capable of inducing the myriad of emotions within the range of human experience.



Evidence of this type of thinking is to be found in some of Schoenberg's early non-tonal compositions, before he had fully established his method. An example is to be found in the *Piano Piece* (Opus 11, No. 1) of 1909. In the sense that melody has traditionally been thought of as 'foreground', with harmony taking the role of 'background', strong links between the two serve to remove the distinction between them, and in that sense also provides characteristics in common with the paintings of Scully. A whole new principle of harmony had been founded.

*Pierrot Lunaire* (*Moonstruck Pierrot*, Opus 21), is a musical setting of twenty one surrealist poems, divided into three groups of seven, and lasting thirty three minutes in total. It was first performed in 1912. The text was written by the Belgian symbolist, Albert Giraud, and translated by Otto Erich Hartleben, and the poems have neither coherent narrative or argument, nor any evident design in the sequence of poems, which concentrate on contrasts of mood and are united by references to the moon and the pantomime characters of Pierrot, Columbine and Cassander. Stuckenschmidt refers to the attraction the poems of *Pierrot Lunaire* must have had for Schoenberg as in the form of thirteen lines, the first comes back like a motto as the seventh and again as the last line. The second line is also repeated as the eighth, giving a formal scheme similar to the reprise, therefore a musical form translated into a poetic form (Stuckenschmidt, 1977, p.198).

In the poetry of Giraud, there was clearly a need for the musical to be novel, hence the medium used by Schoenberg is unusual and delicate. *Pierrot Lunaire* is scored for a reciter (female), who half declaims, and half sings in the manner described as Sprechstimme or Sprechgesang, and an accompaniment of five instrumentalists altogether playing eight instruments : flute/piccolo, clarinet/bass clarinet, violin/viola, cello and piano. The reciter, declaiming the text is present in each of the 'songs', which on average are hardly a hundred seconds long apiece, with some e.g. *Song of the Gallows*, as short as thirteen seconds, but the instrumental variations intensify the contrasts of mood which exist between pieces [Plate 5]. Consequently unity is provided for by the voice, diversity by the instrumentation and imaginative and inventive application of the composer's knowledge of tonal colour, and emotion in Schoenberg's response in terms of musical idea to the text.



# 12. Galgenlied.

Sehr rasch (♩ = ca 120)

Piccolo.

Bratsche.

Violoncell.

Rezitation.

Die dür - re Dir - ne mit lan - gem Hal - se wird sei - ne letz - te Ge -

5 accel.

Pic.

Br.

Vel.

5 accel.

lieb - te sein. In seinem Hir - ne steckt wie ein Na - gel die dür - re Dir - ne mit

(♩ = 144 - 152) 10 accel. bis zum Schluß

Pic.

Br.

Vel.

(♩ = 144 - 152) 10 accel. bis zum Schluß

lan - gen Hal - se. Schlank wie die Pi - nie, am Hals ein Zöpfchen, wol - lü - stig wird sie den

f cresc.

Pic.

Br.

Vel.

f cresc.

ziemlich lange Pause, (im Takt)  
dann folgt: Enthauptung.

Klavier.  
Baß-Klarinette.  
Bratsche.  
Violoncell.

Schelm un - hal - sen die dür - re Dir - ne!





Certainly Schoenberg is attributed as being the first composer to exploit Sprechstimme so effectively (Austin, 1966, p.177). His instrumental writing needs particular mention also. The beautiful flute writing in *The Sick Moon* (No. 7), where the reciter is accompanied by solo flute in a very slow haunting duet contrasts greatly with writing, for the same player, this time on piccolo in the short *Song of the Gallows* (No. 12) or yet again in *Journey Home* (No. 20), a number which utilises flute with such modern techniques as flutter tonguing to create quite different musical effects [Plates 6 and 7]. Schoenberg's musical setting of these poems was written close to the time of his writing his *Harmonielehre* - his first book on harmony. William Austin refers to some personal reminders and speculation of the original manuscript of this, many of which were not actually published. These include the following :

*Too many non-essential things press into the foreground, obscuring the essential...*

(Austin, 1966, p.203)

Schoenberg also wrote at this time that any chord and any progression is possible (Austin, 1966, p.203). What appears to be deemed by Schoenberg as essential in *Pierrot Lunaire* is the effective use of the tonal colour of the instrumentation, combined with the freedom inherent in his 'harmonies' expressing varied emotions with a literary format used to provide structure. The tonal colours and subsequent atmospheres evoked are comparable to the colour complexities in the paintings of Sean Scully and their indubious effect on the emotional impact of the works. The 'essential' in each of the twenty one pieces of *Pierrot* comes about often through his reading of a single word of text, which fires his imagination and engenders the musical idea from which all subsequent instrumentation, melody and rhythm flows. Of the text of *Pierrot*, Schoenberg wrote in a letter to Marya Freund :

*I am not responsible for what people want to read into the text. If they were musical, they would not bother about the text. They would whistle the melodies. But today's musical public understands the text at most, while it is absolutely deaf to music.*

(Austin, 1966, pp.202-3)



# 7. Der kranke Mond.

Sehr langsame  $\text{♩} = 96-100$

Flöte.

Rezitation.

Du näch-tig to-deskranker Mond dort-auf des Himmels schwarzem

Pfühl, dein Blick, so fie-bernd ü-bergroß, bannt mich, wie frem-de Me-lo-

die. An un-still-ba-rem

Lie-bea-leid stirbst du, an Sehnsucht, tief erstickt, du näch-tig to-deskranker

Mond, dort-auf des Him-mels schwarzem Pfühl.

Den Lieb-sten, der im Sinnenrausch gedankenlos zur Liebsten geht, be-lustigt deiner Strahlen Spiel, dein

rit.

(im Ton genau so wie der vorhergehende Takt) (dieser Takt anders, aber doch nicht tragisch!!)

bleiches, qual-ge-bor-nes Blut, du näch-tig to-des-kran-ker Mond!

Schluß des I. Teils.



Fl. Flatterzunge

Kl. (A)

O. pizz.

Vcl. pizz.

⑩ drauffährt Pier-rot gen Sü- den mit gu- tem Rei-se-wind.

⑩ pp

Plate 7. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: *Journey Home (No. 20, Pierrot Lunaire)*



The musical forms that are taken, whether those of brief emotional outbursts, i.e. No. 12, or of the *Passacaglia* (originally a dance in which a theme is constantly repeated), are born of freedom, the freedom to which Debussy refers when he states :

*I would like for music a freedom which it can achieve perhaps more than any art can, not being limited to a more or less reproduction of nature, but to the mysterious correspondences between Nature and Imagination*

(Griffiths, 1978, p.11)

None of the forms used in *Pierrot* utilise form for its own sake but produce extraordinary 'sound images' as those heard in the *Passacaglia* or *Night*, to which Stuckenschmidt refers to the 'responsible use of every single note' which increasingly became a sign of Schoenberg's greater maturity (Stuckenschmidt, 1977, p.198). *Moonspot* (No. 18) uses, according to Stuckenschmidt, 'all the arts of refined contrapuntal technique', and despite some very complex structures within this writing, retains its colouristic and expressive nature [Plate 8]. In this number, there is what is described as a good example of 'mirror writing', where at bar 10, the movement goes 'through the mirror' between the declaimer's words 'richtig' and 'einen weisse fleck'. At this line the image unites (einen) with its reflection. It is also the half-way mark of the 19-bar piece.

Schoenberg has the same interest in colour as Scriabin had, although Schoenberg confined himself when writing music, to the 'colours' of the instruments and their particular combinations, with no prescriptions for the 'colour organ' of Scriabin. While the coloristic interest and ideas about free tonality are evident in Scriabin's last five piano sonatas, he never quite found new forms for his new ideas, and his style eventually evolved into what Eric Salzman describes as an exotic modality (Salzman, p.28).

In *Pierrot Lunaire*, Schoenberg faces up to the difficulty of harmonic and melodic organisation in the absence of tonality, and finds, in the loosening of tonal relationships, that rhythm, phrase, dynamics, accent and tone colour gain an importance which before had only been given to melody and harmony. Consequently, extreme dynamic





Pic. *cresc.* *pp* *div.*

Kl. *cresc.*

G. *pp* *mf* *pp* *f* *p*

Vcl. *f* *pp* *pp* *pp* *mf/p* *pp*

sieht sich rings und findet richtig-ei-nen wei-ßen Fleck

10 10

Plate 8. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: Moonspot (No. 18, Pierrot Lunaire)

Fl. *dim.* *molto dim.*

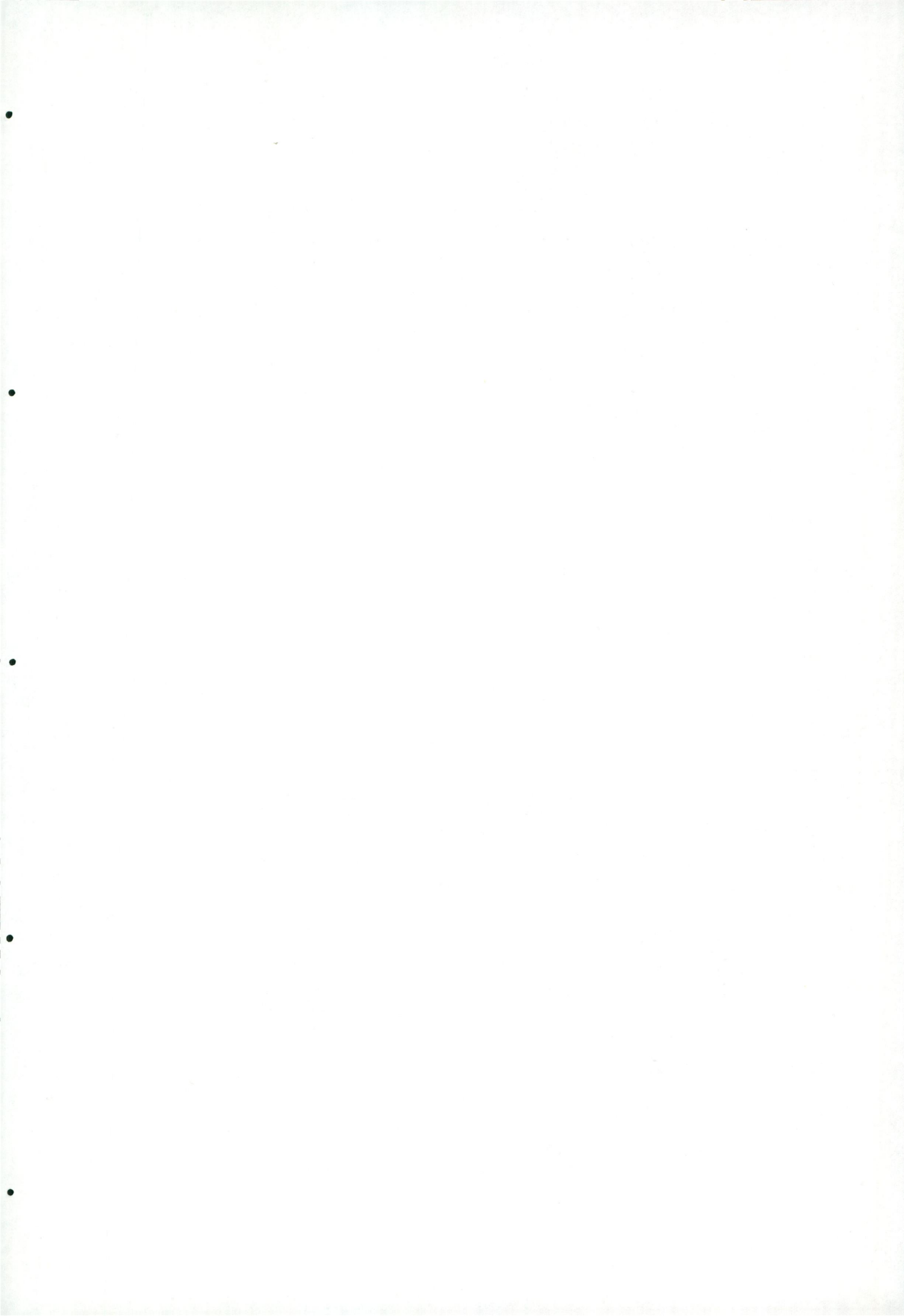
ppp

Lie-bea-leid stirbst du, an Sehnsucht, tief erstickt, du näch-tig to-deskranker

Mond, dort auf des Him-mels schwarzem Pfühl.

15 20

Plate 9. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: The Sick Moon (No. 7, Pierrot Lunaire)



markings, such as in *Sick Moon* (No. 7), bar 15, where the flute began at pppp, is then told to 'dim' and by bar 16 to 'molto dim', are in order [Plate 9]. Tone colour produced when strings often play at the bridge, or with the wood of the bow, or when they glide or when they play with indeterminable squeaks or when the Sprechstimme wails, is varied and exciting. Phrases are totally irregular, as in the flute, clarinet and violin parts of *A Watery Pallor* (No. 4), and accent has quite interesting uses in *Parody* (No. 17) [Plates 10 and 11]. All in all, however, *Pierrot Lunaire* (Opus 21), was leading to the development of the twelve-tone method in that Schoenberg was investigating structures which could be incorporated into an expressive idiom not founded on tonality. In this particular work, however, he had not yet relinquished words and literary structures although there is an abundance of reference to traditional musical forms. The text, in much of the work, once it incited a musical idea, could just as easily have been discarded but for its inclusion in the Sprechstimme, which is as much a colouristic effect as a communicator of ideas, and which is produced in whispers as well as in full voice. *Pierrot Lunaire* (Opus 21) represents a solution to the problem of deriving meaningful form out of new materials generated by an expressive upheaval, grown organically out of the new material.

The use of the twelve-tone series as a method of composition, used for a complete piece for the first time in the *Suite for Piano* (Opus 25) of 1924, while enforcing the orderliness of the making equal of the twelve tones, did not dictate a particular structure, which is why, for his larger works, Schoenberg used various traditional forms. In large scale works he made extremely good use of these. In for example, the first movement of the *Fourth String Quartet* (Opus 37, 1936), changes of tempo, dynamics, texture or theme are all used to bring about sectional divisions which would previously have come about through the working of tonality [Plate 12]. This movement is composed entirely in twelve-tone technique, and while the basic series is used in inversion and retrograde forms, it recurs as a theme, easily recognised by its rhythm and with particular effect at the beginnings of the main sections of the movement [Plate 13]. At the beginning of the development, the inversion of the basic series is recognisable, partly because of its distinctive rhythm in the cello part [Plate 14]. At the start of the recapitulation, the opening theme, the basic series, returns at a



Tempo  
nimmt wieder Piccolo

Fl.  
Kl. (A)  
Br.

(25)  
Der Mond, der bö-se Spöt-ter, äfft nach mit sei-nen Strah-len

hervor

Pic.  
Kl. (A)  
Br.

nimmt Geige

Strick-na-delu, blink und blank.

30

30

Überleitung zu „Mondfleck“

Pic.  
Kl. (A)  
G.  
Vel.

nimmt Klarinette in B

folgt ohne jede Pause:  
Der Mondfleck.

Sehr voll und gewichtig.

rit. - - -  
attacca

Plate 11. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: *Parody (No. 17, Pierrot Lunaire)*



224 *H arco* *f* 225 226 *p* *H*

227 228 229 *f*

230 231 232

233 234 235 *p*

236 237 238 *RIT...* *mf*

... POCO MENO MOSSO

239 240 241 *H* *ff*

242 243 244 245 *ff*

246 247 248 *H* *ff*

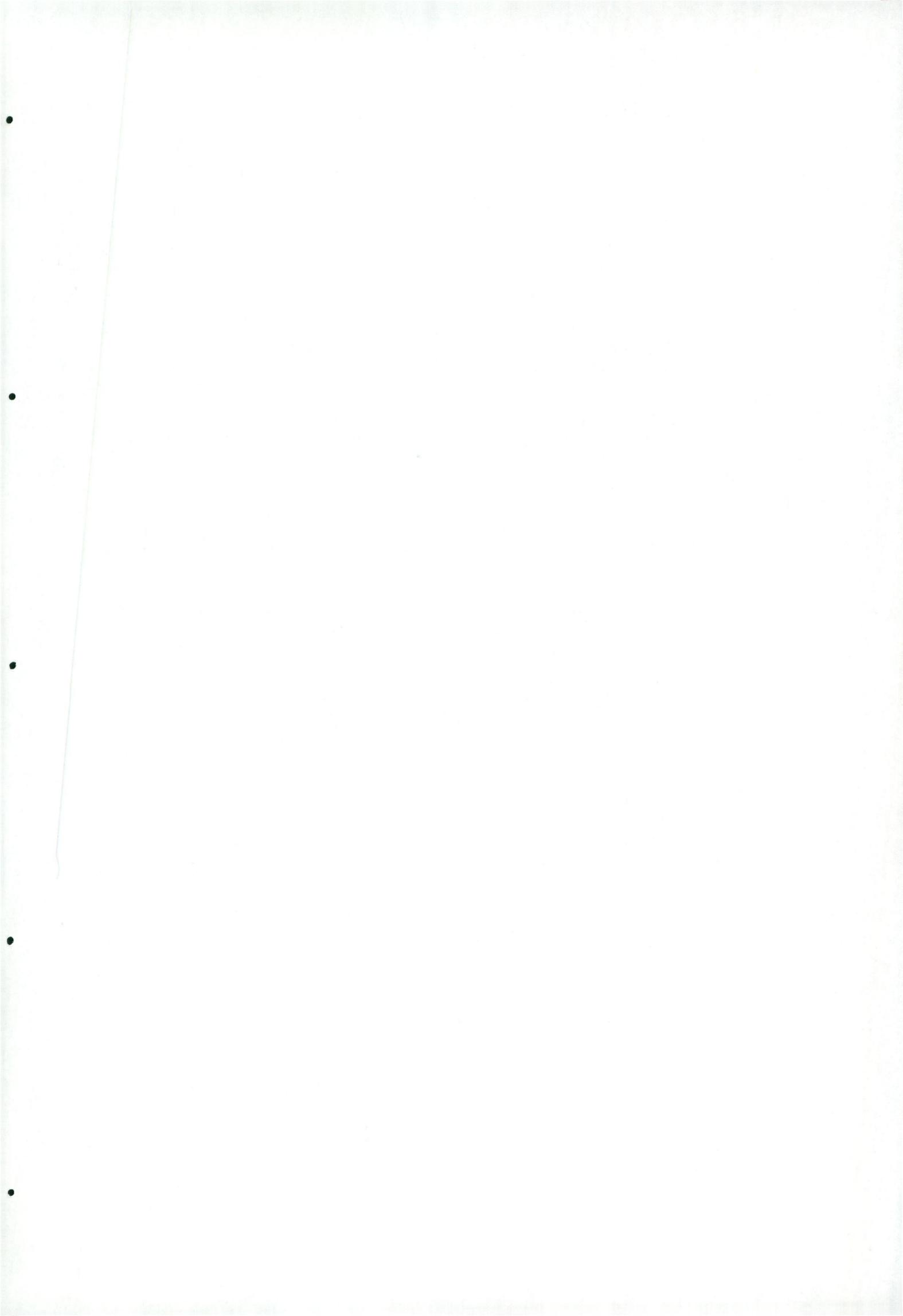
249 250 251 *f* *mf*

252 253 254 *f* POCO A POCO CALANDO

Plate 12. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: *Fourth String Quartet (Opus 37)*. 1936.

Violin I : bars 224 – 254.





# Fourth String Quartet

Arnold Schoenberg, Op. 37

Violin I

## I

ALLEGRO MOLTO; ENERGICO (♩ = 152)

The musical score for Violin I consists of six staves of music, numbered 1 through 25. The tempo is marked 'ALLEGRO MOLTO; ENERGICO' with a quarter note equal to 152 beats per minute. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The score includes various dynamic markings such as *f*, *ff*, *pp*, and *pp dolce*. There are also performance instructions like 'H' (hairpins) and 'V' (accents). The notation includes complex rhythmic figures, including triplets and sixteenth-note runs. A double bar line is present between measures 23 and 24, with a 'V' marking above measure 24.

Plate 13. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: *Fourth String Quartet* (Opus 37). 1936.  
Violin I : bars 1 – 25.



80 *arco* *f*

81 82

83 84 85 86 *pp*

87 88 89 *trém.* *p*

90 *sul ponticello* *pp* 91 *ff* 92 *pp*

93 94 95 *ff* *TEMPO IMO*

96 97 98

99 100 101 102

103 104 105 106 *pp*

107 108 109 *p* *f*

110 111 112

Plate 14. Arnold Schoenberg: Detail: *Fourth String Quartet (Opus 37)*. 1936.  
Cello I : bars 80– 112.



different pitch, this time in the first violin part. The sections of this movement are clearly defined using resources previously referred to, and using marked contrasts between use of 'first subject' and second subject.

It has been suggested to me that Schoenberg's music is not particularly representative of abstraction, an argument with which I totally disagree. Presumably at the heart of this is the supposition that because Schoenberg frequently used words, which sometimes narrate a story, his musical settings were almost translations from one medium to the next. Such was not the case. On examination of his music and of material written by the composer himself, and that written by others about him, certain characteristics come to the fore, confirming my belief that his music, as with absolute music, deals essentially with elements that are abstract. While he used words, particularly in the middle phase of his composing life, his music is not illustrative. His aim was never the depiction of a story or a scene. Rather it strove to go beyond the tangible to that more mysterious world of thought, both conscious and subconscious, and of feeling. In view of the fact that he chose to validate many of the old forms, including sonata form, because of their overriding qualities in terms of thematic development, and that his twelve-tone method of composition was essentially concerned with thematic development also, it seems likely that if one characteristic element of construction were to be selected in relation to the music of Schoenberg, it would be that. This, ironically in terms of the common view of Schoenberg, gives him much in common with composers such as Cabezon and Frescobaldi of the sixteenth century, and indeed places his concerns close to those of all the 'Classic' composers.

The reason Schoenberg's music was difficult to accept is that his particular constructing device gives no one tone dominance over another, nor does it make any one tonal relationship more acceptable than the other. Consequently, his music is difficult to listen to (the idea of consonance having been dismissed), jagged in its chromatic lines and mighty leaps, dissonant in its harmonies which are often derived from the horizontal line of the melody and sometimes thick in texture, where older contrapuntal forms acquired new sonorities when composed without reference to tonality. Examination of the short, emotionally-loaded pieces of Schoenberg's middle period leaves the listener in no doubt as to the subjective nature of the composer's



idiom. His committed pursuit, however, of a composing method which would allow for individual expression but which would also facilitate thematic development, still allowing for use of the best of the old structures for composing on a grand scale, indicates the composer's absolute respect for order and structure in musical composition.

Tonality in its traditional form presented a principle of order in musical thought. If tonality was to be excluded as a guiding principle then some new guiding principle needed to be devised, so that significant works, in terms of length, could be created, but in a manner where extremely regulative processes could be balanced by the composers subjectivity. Ultimately, Schoenberg's music incorporates both subjectivity and objectivity.





## CHAPTER TWO SEAN SCULLY

*We have more than one soul.*

Scully (Hugh Lane Memorial  
Lecture, 4/11/94)

Sean Scully's work is not concerned with pure formalism despite the fact that since 1967, his paintings have been primarily compositions of horizontal and vertical areas of colour. If formalism was a preoccupation in the early years of his 'stripe' paintings, his work from 1980 on indicates if not a complete change of heart, at least the culmination of a change. In Scully's later works emotion and interpretation are significant features. Prior to this visible change Scully made a deliberate and conscious decision to 'put back into painting', in his own words, 'some of what had been taken out' in the painting of the sixties and seventies. Concerns include those of composition, colour, contrast, brush stroke, but above all, emotion. It is this attribute that makes Scully's paintings atypical of the late twentieth century. In the words of Hans Hofmann:

*In the passage of time, the outward message of a work may lose its initial meaning: the communicative power of its emotive and vital substance, however, will stay alive as long as the work is in existence.*

(Hofmann, 1967, p. 48)

The subjective nature of Scully's later work, along with his relentless use of horizontal and vertical bands of colour suggestive of an underlying grid structure, makes him a compelling subject for discussion. The commitment he shows in relation to his pursuit of his study of relationships within a painting, can be placed in relation to Schoenberg in his dedicated application to composing with twelve tones.

This chapter is concerned with the abstract paintings of Sean Scully and with his move from an early interest in pattern and visual effects to work which addresses the need for balance of intellectual and emotional concerns. It looks at the presence of the 'grid' as a structure which is fundamental to the paintings of Scully and reflects the influence of Mondrian. In discussing the influence of other artists on Scully,

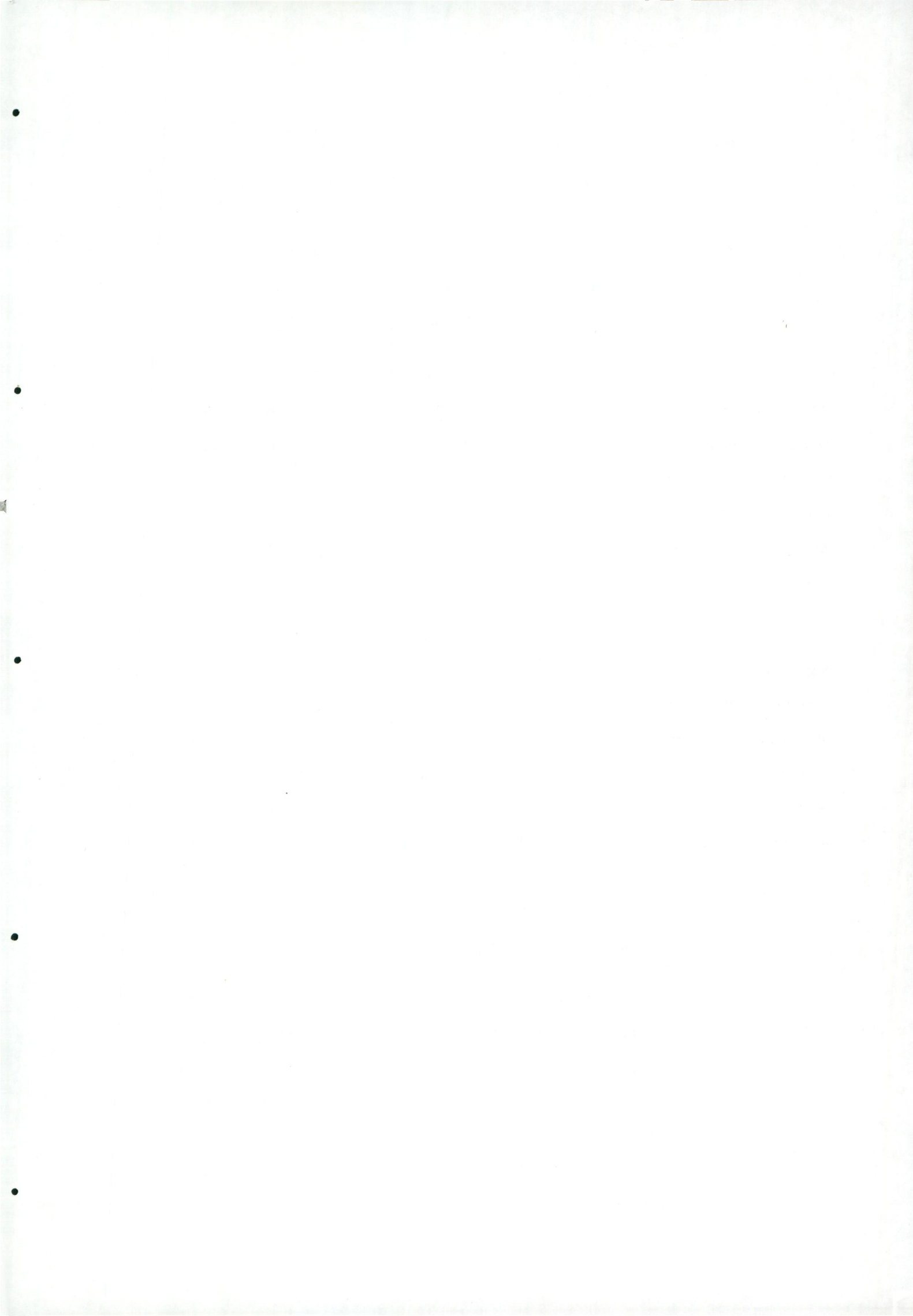


there is reference to the fact that Scully, while being very aware of his time and place, is very concerned with the physical process of painting. His is a disciplined approach to art-making and, in the simplicity of the forms of stripes and more recently, checkerboards, he shows an inventiveness in his complex colour combinations and in the structural manoeuvrings in which he engages. An examination of the contradictions which exist in his work follows on from this, with particular reference to the strength of his compositions and the sensitivity of his mark-making.

Charles Harrison claims that we must countenance the possibility of representation in the absence of resemblance in the search for meaning (Harrison, 1993, p.200). Sean Scully's paintings, despite the apparent simplicity of their format, bear the hallmarks of one who has been particularly influenced by the past and is influenced by the artistic situation of the present time, but whose work is quite unique and bears above all else, the emotional input, even tragedy, of his own personal life. His cycle of *Catherine* paintings are testament to this. Poirier quotes Scully as having said that he wishes to 'invent compositions that make it possible for human feelings to become visible' and the artist refers to his own work as an 'abstract narrative of thought and emotion' (Poirier, 1990, inside cover).

I believe that Scully's compositions are in fact his physical attempts at balancing the conflicting forces of thought and feelings, also evident in his life history. The quote at the beginning of this chapter referring to 'more than one soul' may refer to the fact that he was born in Dublin, moved with his family to London at the age of four and has spent much of his adult life in New York, acquiring along the way a myriad of varied artistic influences. Under these influences, the cool clarity of his earlier works has given way to the subjectivity which is strong in his paintings from the 1980s on.

While the structure that pervades the music of Schoenberg is inaudible to the listener, Scully makes no attempt at all to hide the presence of the grid, which is the backbone to at least sections of all his paintings. In this respect one feels Scully is mindful of Piet Mondrian, one of the leading figures of abstraction at the beginning of this century, who developed his study with theories about the horizontal-vertical axes and who was the main exponent of Neo-Plasticism, a type of geometric painting, in



which he limited himself to rectangular forms, the primary colours, black, white and grey. Mondrian, influenced by Theosophy and the spiritual dimension of abstraction, limited his means of expression to the bare essentials. Certainly, those with interest in the symbolic nature of shapes would suggest that horizontal and vertical lines and shapes have some specific impact. At a simple level, a horizontal line suggests passivity and tranquillity, while the vertical line suggests the opposite, activity or the upsurge of emotions. Colour can have a further influence on these shapes, according to David Fontana in his chapter on 'The Power of Symbols' (Fontana, 1993, p.34). The square comprised as it is of equal horizontal and vertical sides, would convey order and balance.

That colour, shape and direction are used in a symbolic way by Scully in his later paintings is confirmed by the titles. This is not necessarily true however, of his early abstractions. In the work of the late sixties and early seventies the presence of the underlying grid is very obvious, and is in fact sometimes deliberately exposed as in his painting of 1973: *Inset 2*, (Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 96 inches). Rosalind Krauss refers to Mondrian's exploration of the grid as sustaining him to such an extent that he was impervious to change (Krauss, 1979, p.51).

This was not so with Scully, whose early works are like a type of 'play' with pattern, colour and structure but with exclusion of feeling, emotion and spirituality, all of which have re-entered his painting vocabulary. It seems that many of his early works were responses to visual stimuli, where what he saw, i.e. in Morocco on a visit in 1969, led to his first visible manifestations with the stripe. His work entitled *Morocco* (1969), is one of these and Poirier refers to his interest in the colour relationships of tent and sand (Poirier, 1990, p.16) [Plate 15]. It is also believed that the work *Wrapped Piece* (1973), harks back to the Moroccan visit [Plate 16]. Photographs taken of huts, hovels, and doors by Scully in Mexico in the late eighties show that certain visual stimuli still elicit a response from the artist, despite the symbolic nature of his painting at the time [Plates 17 and 18].



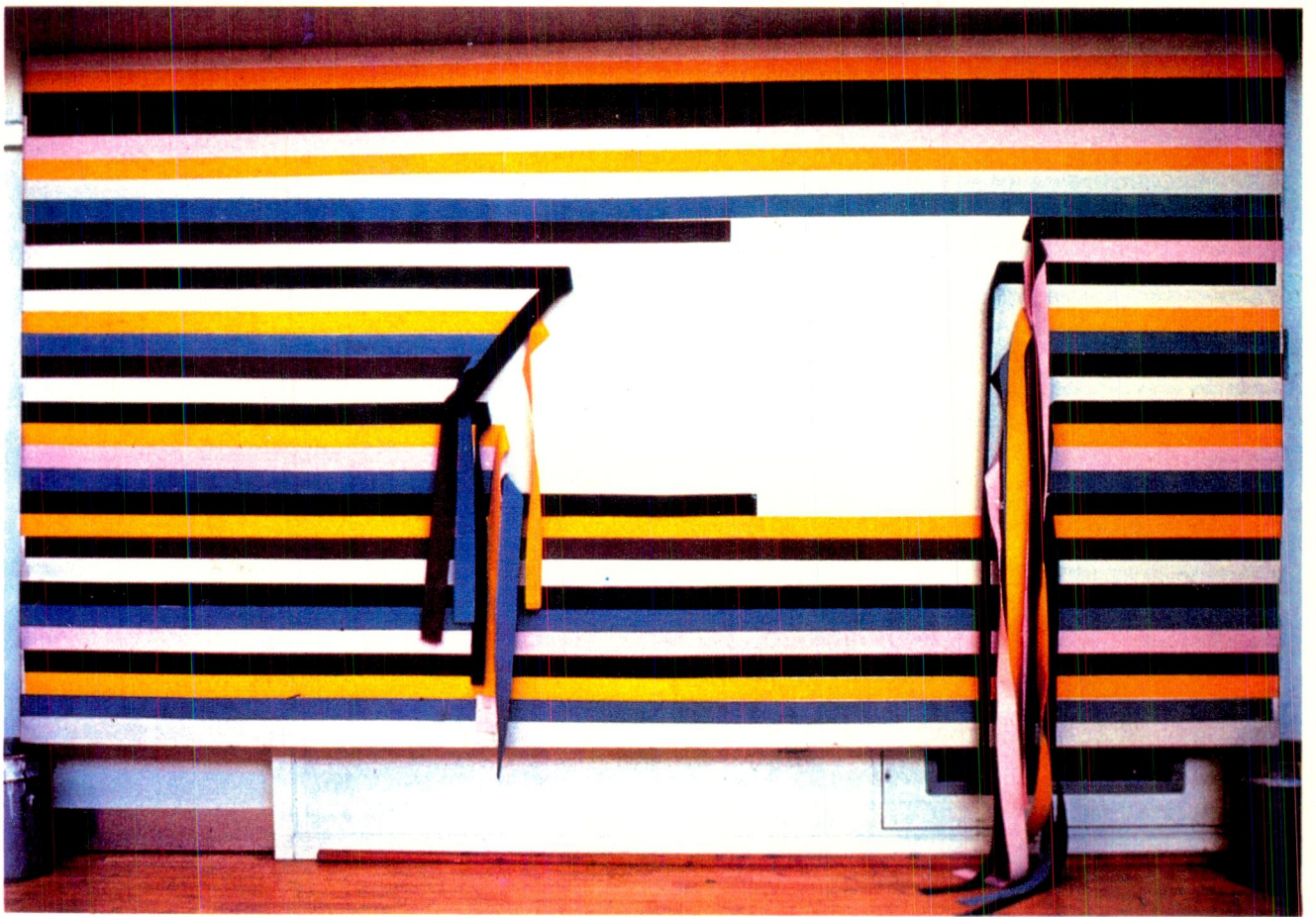


Plate 15. Sean Scully: *Morocco*. 1969.  
Acrylic on canvas. 72" x 144".





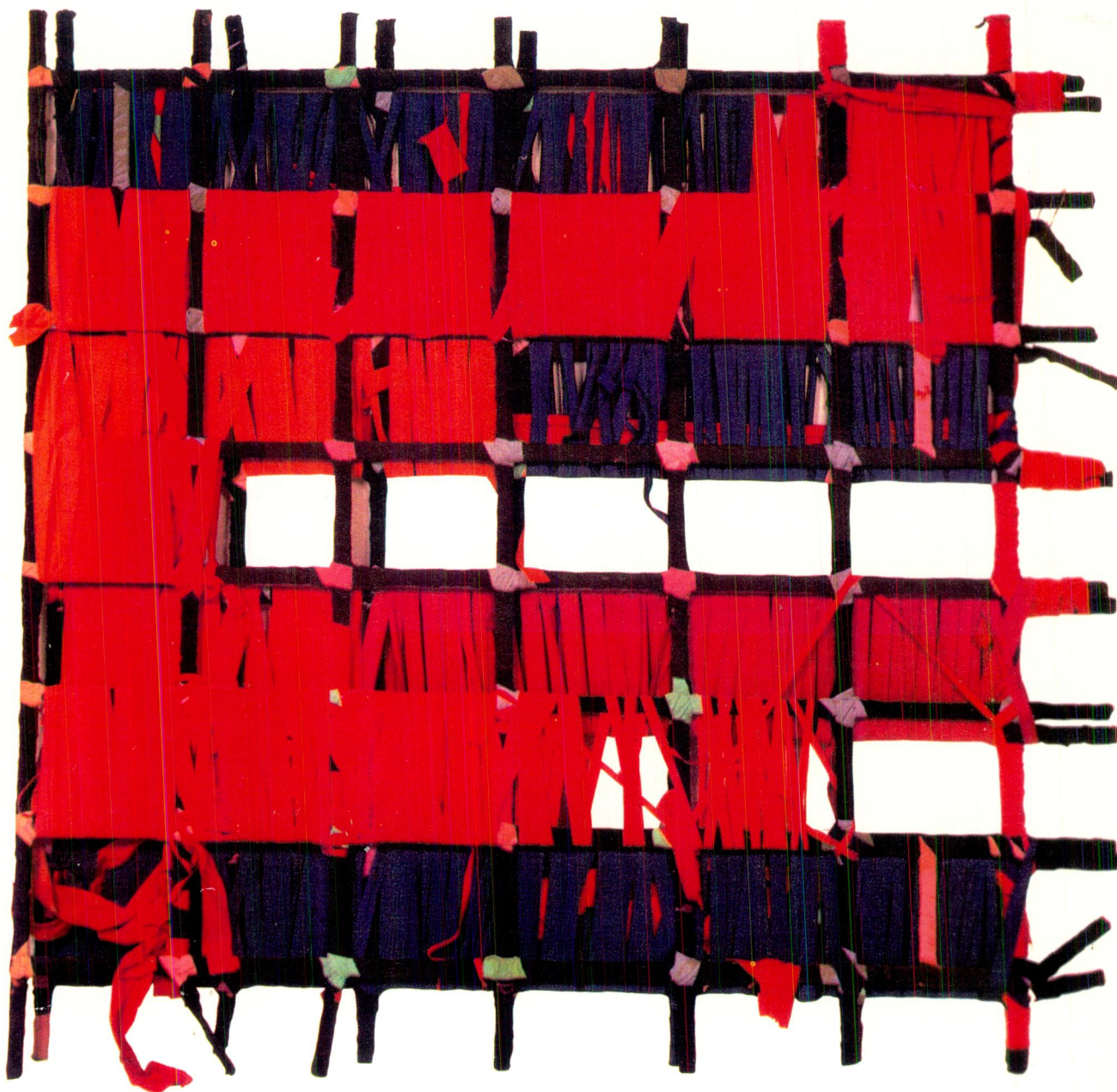
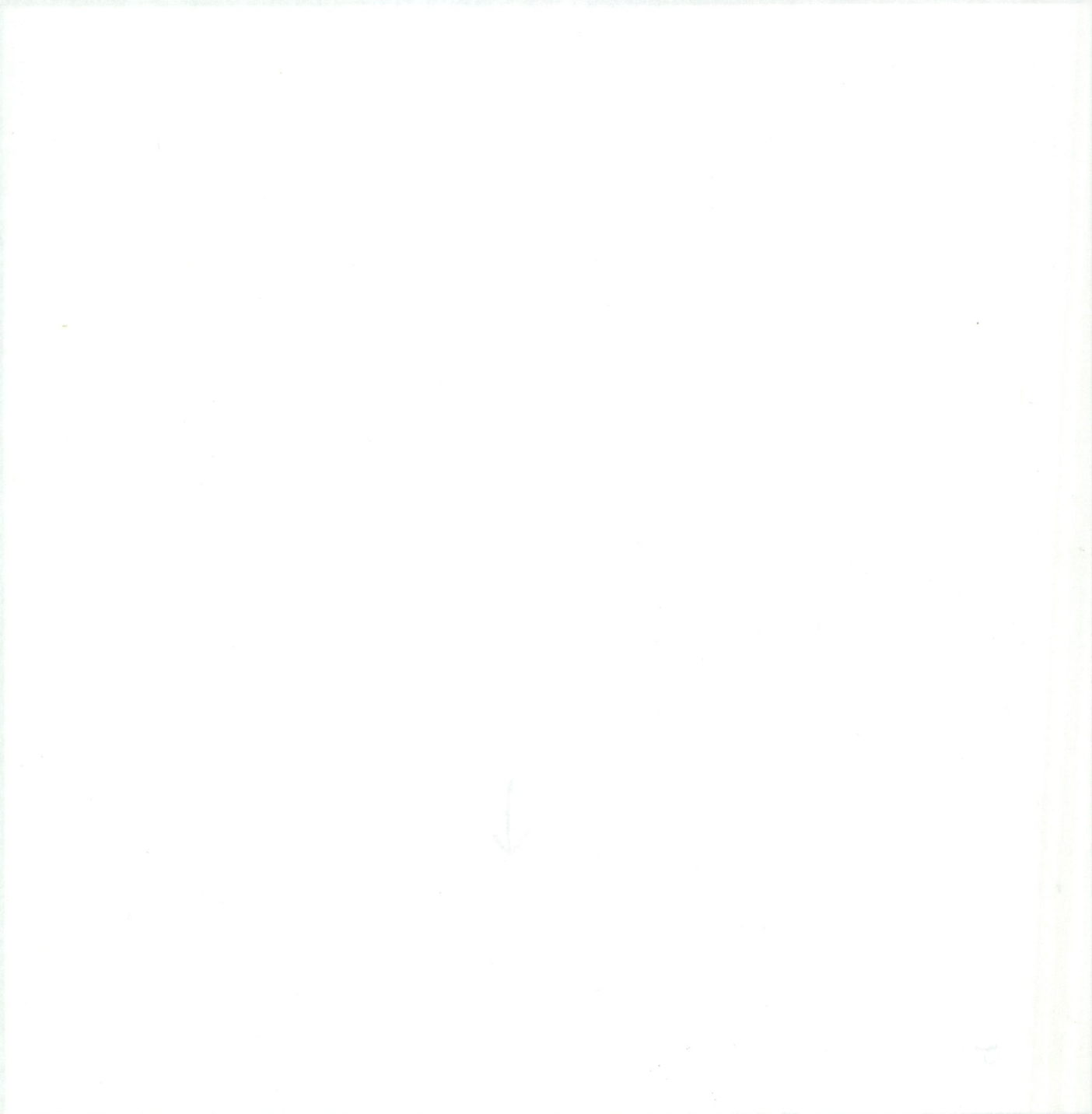


Plate 16. Sean Scully: *Wrapped Piece*. 1973.  
Acrylic, fabric and wood. 82" x 82".



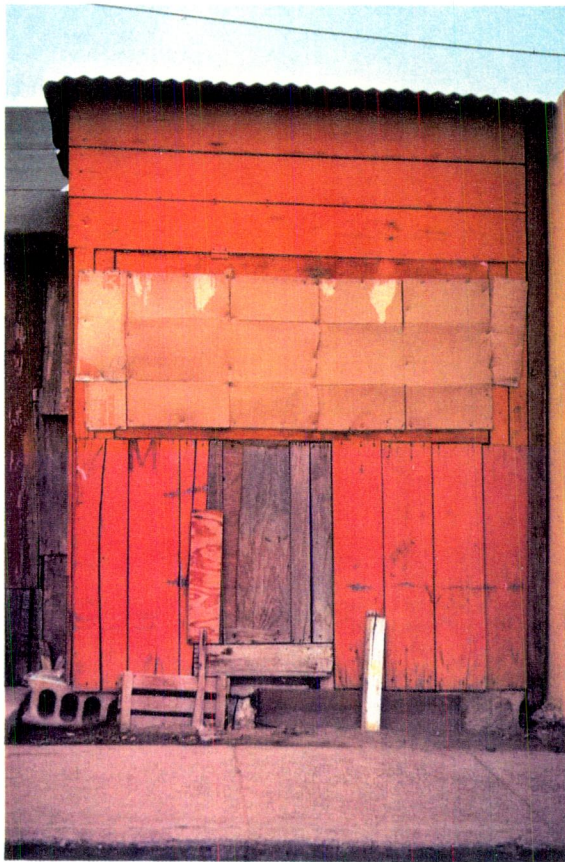


Plate 17.  
Plate 18.

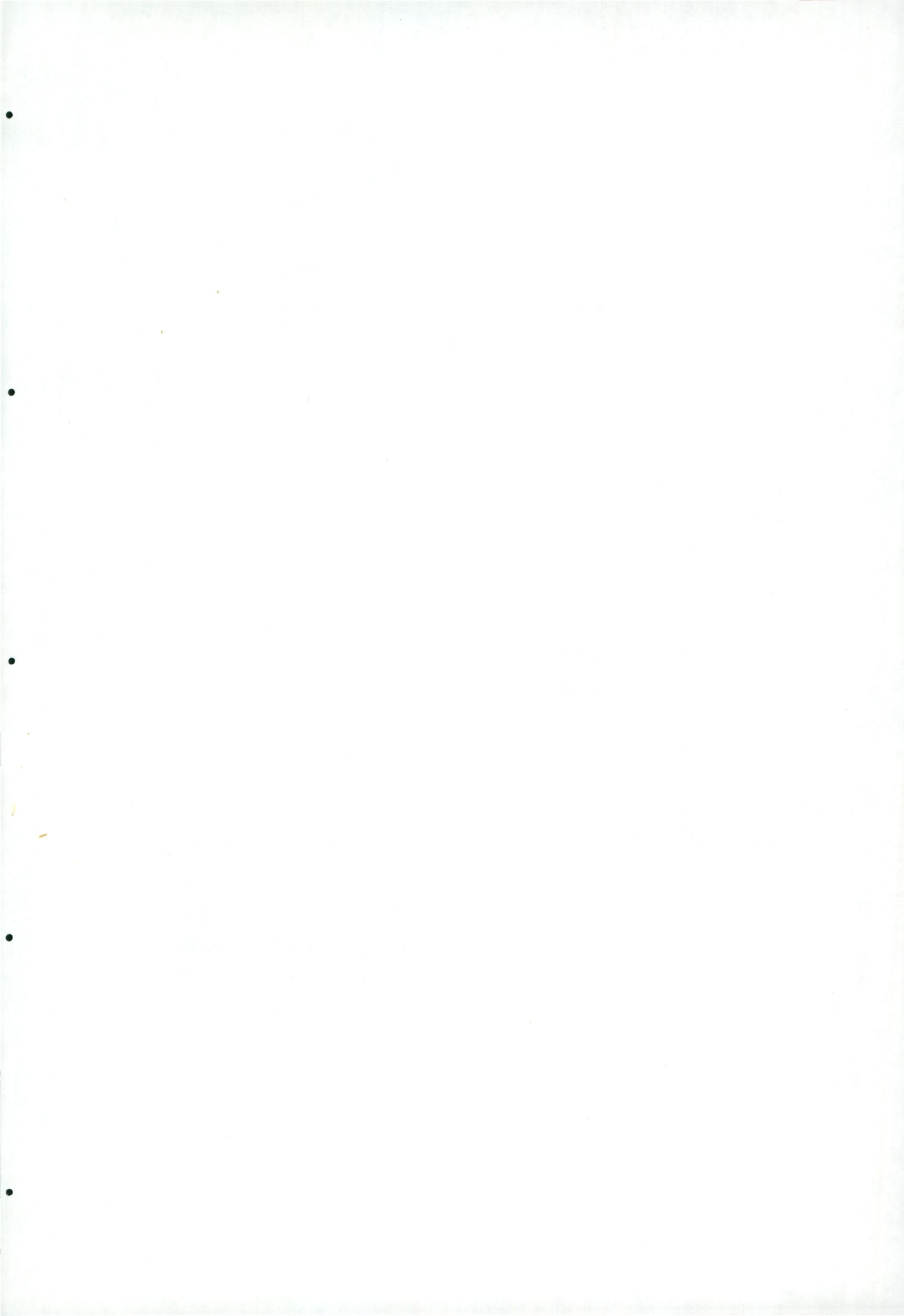
Sean Scully: *Mexico*. 1987. Photograph.  
Sean Scully: *Oaxaca, Mexico*. 1988. Photograph.



Since his childhood interest in Picasso's blue period painting of *Child holding a dove*, certain paintings and artists have had a profound effect on Scully (Poirier, 1990, p.24). As a contemporary artist, Scully's inheritance is perhaps less clear-cut than that of Schoenberg. Not only has he had more than half of the twentieth century behind him, but he also had the experiences of living in and being influenced by different cultures.

It was the paintings of Rothko (and these only viewed as reproductions in a catalogue) that convinced him of the power of abstract painting initially. Indeed to enter a room of large Scully canvases produces an effect not unlike that produced by a selection of Rothko works. They are works to be meditated on. To Scully, Rothko's paintings 'seemed primitively truthful in their simplicity and unpretentiousness' (Poirier, 1990, p.15). This simplicity is a characteristic which Scully has adopted with success in his own personal expressive style.

Scully's work bears the influence of, and indeed titles directly refer to, many artists including Duccio, Van Gogh, Derain, Mondrian, Rothko, Kelly and Brigid Riley. His *Newcastle Boogie Woogie* acknowledges his indebtedness to Piet Mondrian and his famous work *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. *Maesta*, painted in 1983, was named in homage to the central panel of Duccio's fifty four panel masterpiece of 1311 (Poirier, 1990, p.102) [Plate 19]. *The Bather* of the same year is one of numerous paintings (Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and early Modernist) by different artists on that title [Plate 20]. *Red, Blue, Yellow, Green* (with repetitive strokes), and *Square* of the same year show the influence of painters like Mark Tobey, while Brigid Riley and Gene Davis were influential in his 'stripe' paintings, although compositional schemes of parallel stripes e.g. *Blue* (1977) were not dynamic enough to satisfy him for long [Plate 21]. Scully's constant references to the influence of other artists show him to be very aware of his time and place. In the sixties and early seventies, what he was doing was not dissimilar to what was 'going on' in art in the United States. Indeed when I first saw a work by Sean Scully it reminded me a little of the 'flag' paintings of Jasper Johns. Perhaps the symbolism of flags is appropriate to convey the universality of the medium of abstract painting. Scully's work may be unique, but he does not work in isolation or



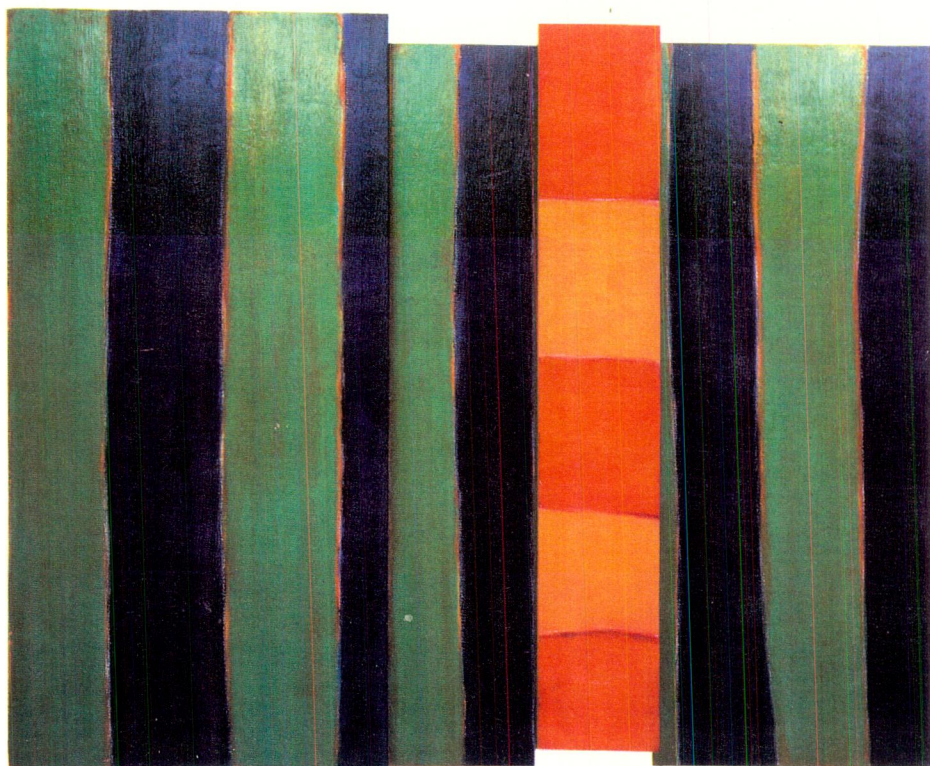
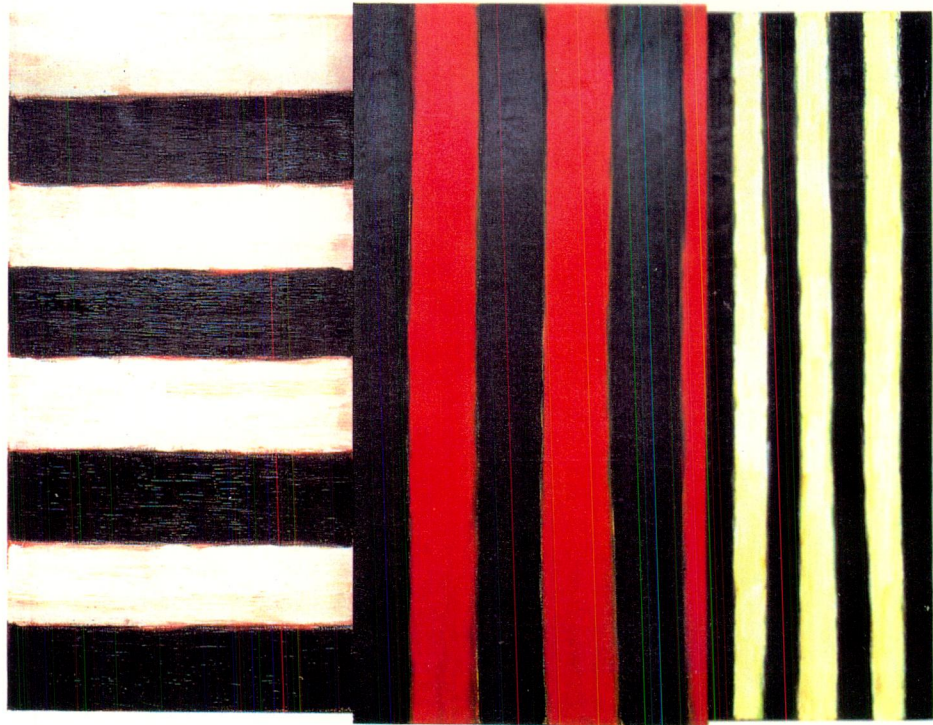
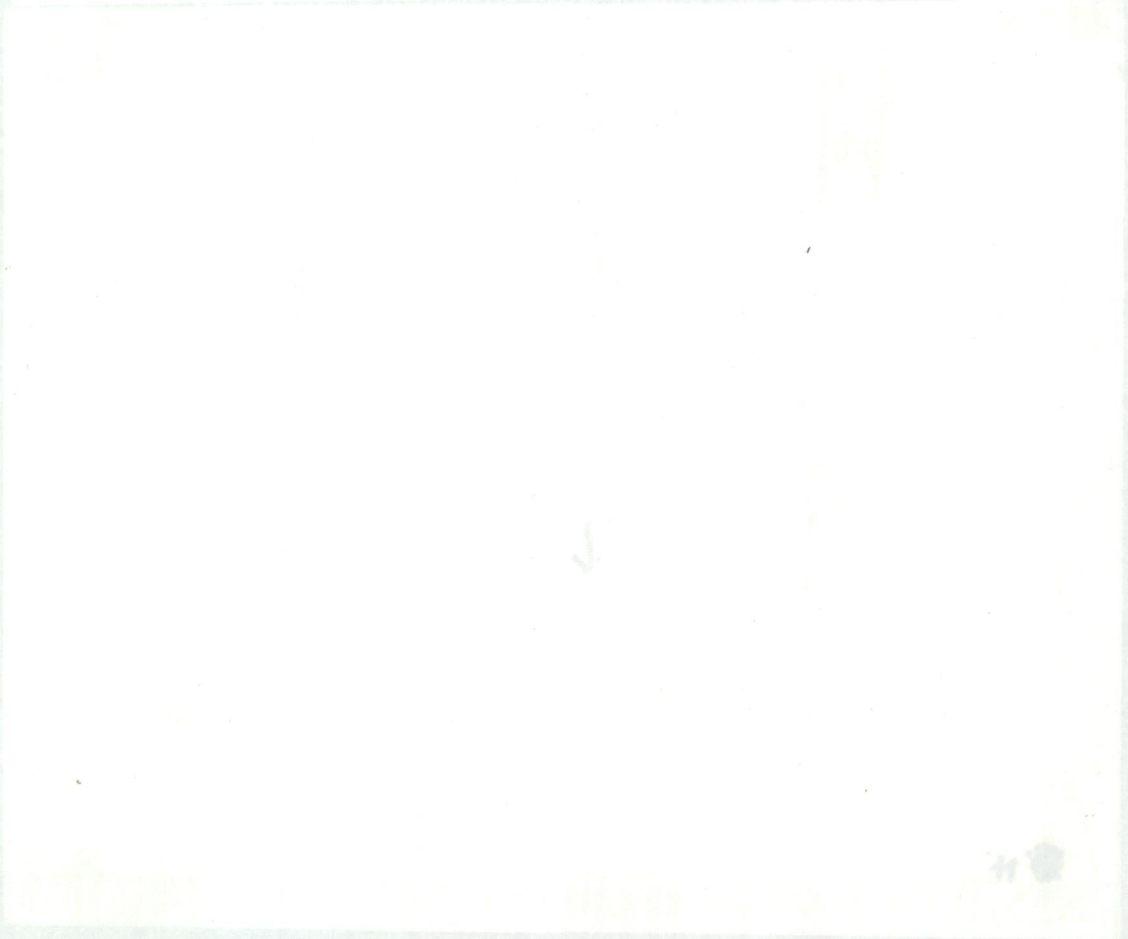
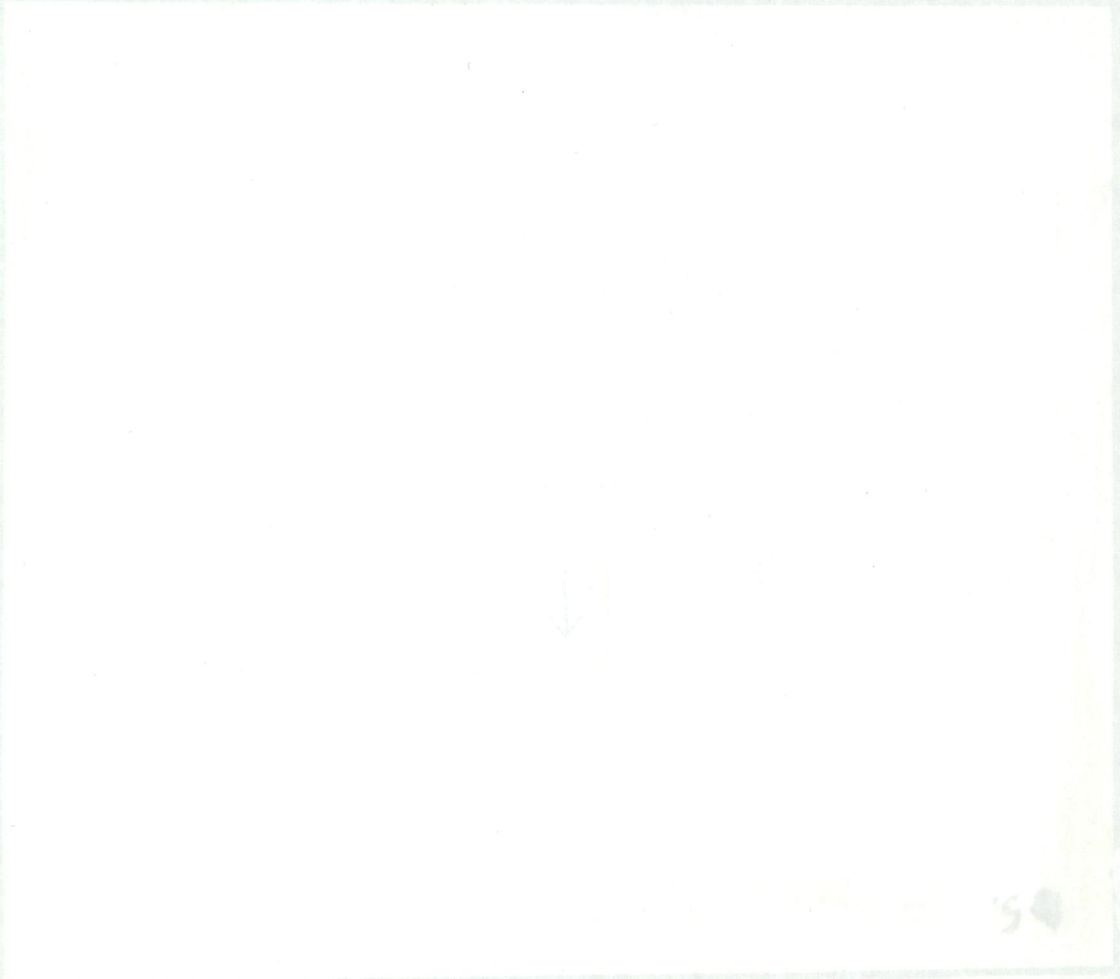


Plate 19. Sean Scully: *Maesta*. 1983. Oil on Canvas. 96" x 120".  
Plate 20. Sean Scully: *The Bather*. 1983. Oil on canvas. 96" x 120".





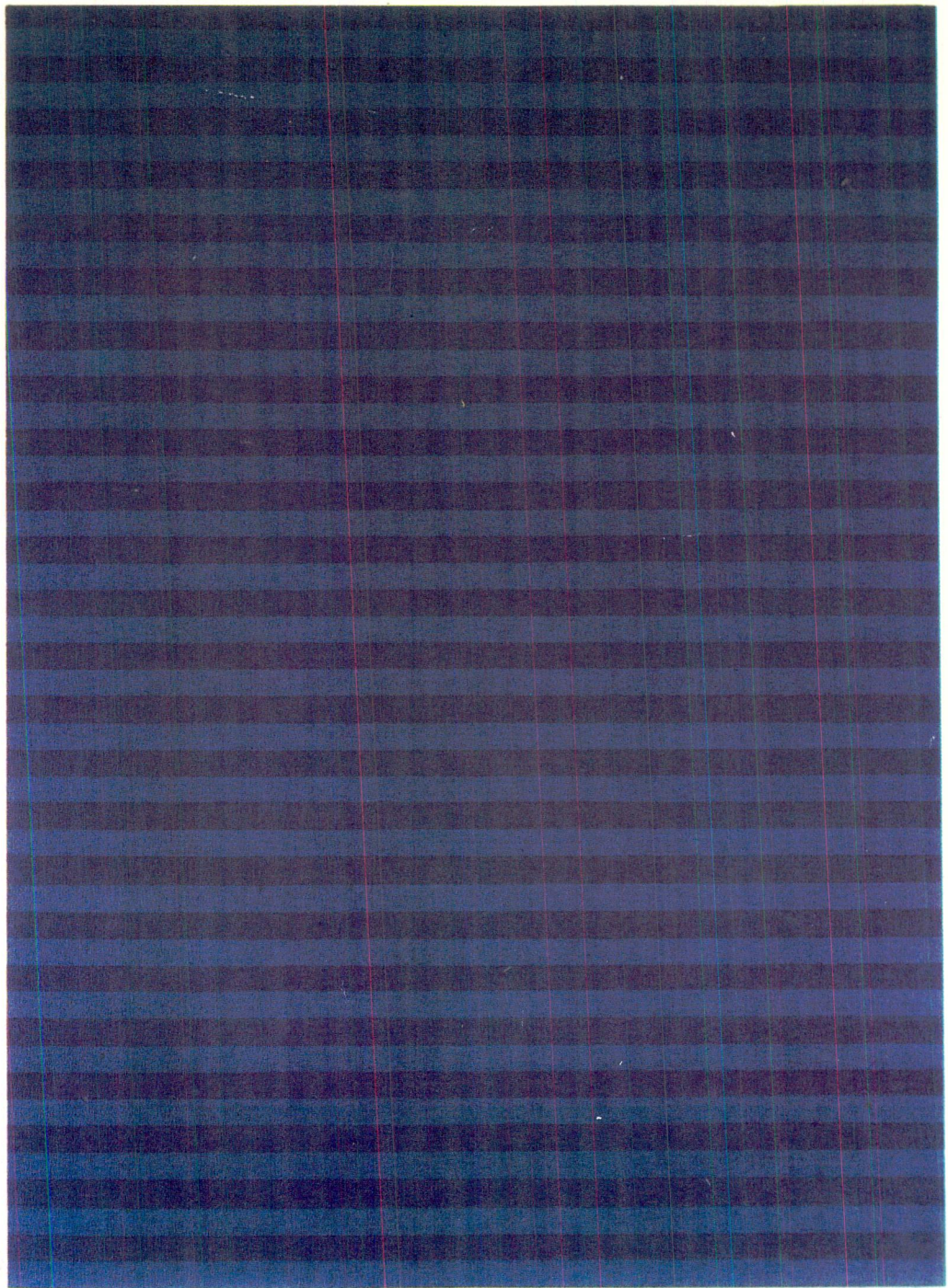
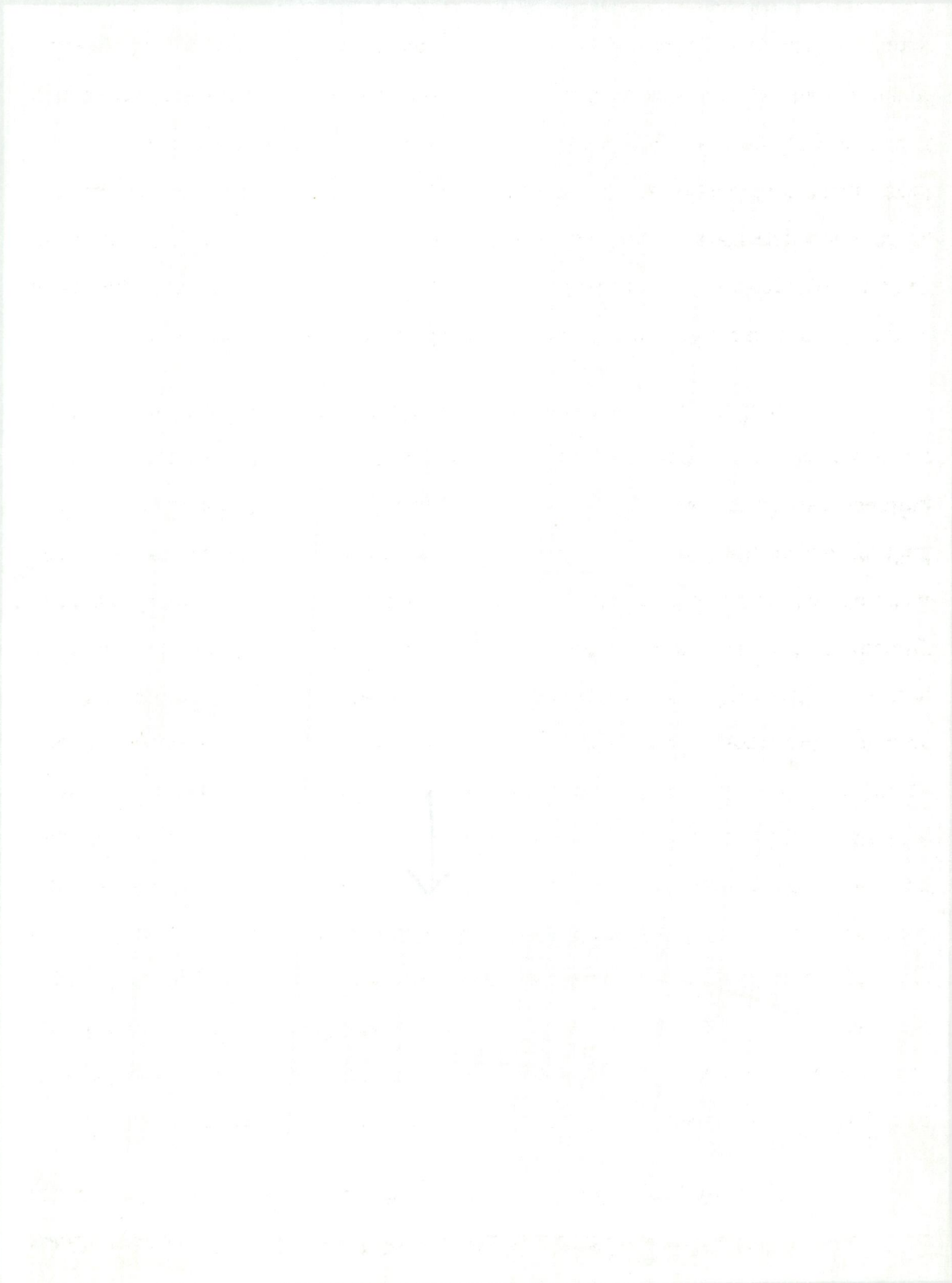


Plate 21.

Sean Scully: *Blue*. 1977.

Oil and acrylic on canvas. 48" x 36".



ignorance, rather with knowledge and complete awareness of his artistic context. Scully readily acknowledges his regard for his influences. In his own words he 'adores' his influences 'passionately' (Scully, Hugh Lane Memorial Lecture, Nov. 1994).

While tracing the influence of other art and artists on Scully, there is a danger of misleading the reader into believing that Scully has an academic approach to his painting. On the contrary, Sean Scully's paintings have strong links with real lived experience, and the paintings themselves need to be viewed in order to understand the nature of the balance he has achieved between the pull of his artistic inheritance and the input of his own individuality. The actual physical act of painting appears to be an important one to Scully. Once he left behind his cool clean hard-edged stripes of the seventies there has been no attempt to cover the inescapable fact that these are paintings that have been painted! Layers of colour show through, allowing sometimes complex colour relations to unfold and the brushmark is always visible. Differentiation between different sections is sometimes reinforced by the fact that some sections are literally distinctly different structures, inset or even standing out from the main surface level. The back of his paintings are purported to be monuments of structural ingenuity. Paul Bonaventura claims that Scully is alarmed at what has happened to abstract painting over the past twenty five years in the sense that he believes it to have become disembodied from real life and therefore academic (Bonaventura, 1992, p.1).

The kind of work which Scully produces, and indeed the comments that he makes regarding his method of working, suggest that he has a very disciplined approach to the making of art. The forms that he uses (the stripes) are used again and again, regardless of whether he is working with pastels, water-colour, oil paint on canvas, print or indeed, pieces of metal. His attraction to the stripe came about initially in that it challenged him. He saw it, at the end of the Seventies as a 'wreck of other forms of painting that had become untenable' and claims that it was the sense of failure associated with it as a form at that point, which attracted him (Hugh Lane Memorial Lecture, Nov. 1994). He had of course already been working with this form for a number of years, but with a somewhat different attitude. He saw now the possibility for re-use, for re-discovery. So while Scully's forms remain constant, his inventiveness is evident in his complex colour combinations and is seriously applied to the endless re-



cycling and re-interpretation offered by the simple patterns of those same stripes. Just as with people in which one's dark mood can either lighten or deepen, so too with a panel when placed side by side with another panel. When Scully has engaged in the actual ritual of the painting itself, he further engages in it, in its position in relation to other 'parts'. There is always a dialogue between the various panels that make up the whole. Each panel of a work has a different 'history' to the others, converting an overall, relatively simple scheme into a highly interesting and engaging one.

At the Hugh Lane Memorial Lecture in November 1994, Scully referred to his work in the Summer of 1981 when his studio was, in fact, a wooden construction, a barn, which structurally bore a resemblance to the compositional features of his own paintings. He described his work of that time as having been 'slapped together' similar to the environment in which he was working. The pieces, many irregularly shaped, were arranged to form relationships and then frequently re-arranged to form new relationships. Bits of the same construction were not always painted on the same day, and that along with the constant reviewing and re-arrangement introduced what he describes as a 'time narrative', which is not unlike that which is automatically a feature of music. Each piece of each painting existed independently, yet there was always the possibility of something new happening. The physical nature of such pieces, and of all Scully's canvases is such that their construction is not left to chance. They need to exist in such a way that they can in fact be employed side by side, with or even inserted into other parts. The ability of each piece to exist independently of other pieces, but with the possibility of a totally new interpretation when placed in context with other parts, places them on a parallel with the forms of music, in particular those larger forms which are constructed of a number of parts, each of which make sense individually, but which have an additional meaning as part of a unified whole.

The scale of Scully's water-colours is small and they tend not to have titles, but their dates show that generally they are done in blocks. They are less monumental and have a lighter touch and sometimes they serve as outline plans for larger works [Plate 22]. His pastels tend to have a somewhat mysterious quality and reflect a more sombre mood with their darker tones. Some of his recent prints have a freshness and



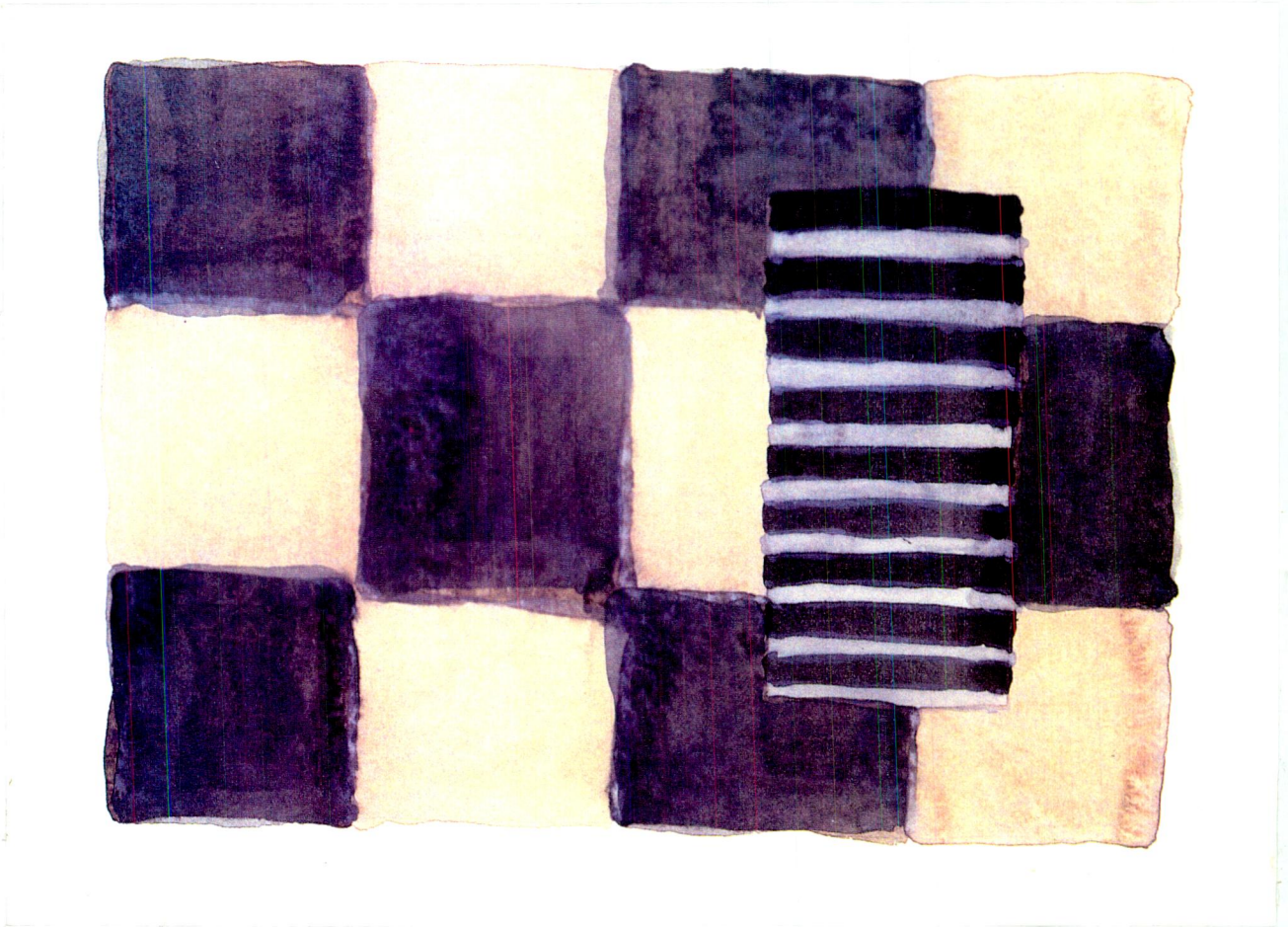


Plate 22. Sean Scully: *Untitled*. 1992.  
Watercolour on paper.





spontaneity almost at variance with the whole process of the printing procedure. All in all however, it is evident that Sean Scully is an artist whose finished works are 'arrived at', in the words of Paul Bonaventura, 'as a consequence of ritual' (Bonaventura, 1992, p.4). Bonaventura adds that much of what Scully does in the making of a new work is marked by repetition and the observance of certain ceremonies, which he claims to be in itself, a form of the cultivation of perfection. This form of 'cultivation' is not done however in a mechanical way. There is clear evidence in his finished works that the emotional content is of major significance. In Scully's own words :

*The forms which I use in my paintings, the stripes, may appear to be banal, but they are given another life when the body, and the intellect and the emotions are harnessed together.*

(Bonaventura, 1992, p.4)

These words emphasise the co-existence of the physical and the intellectual. That Scully is emotionally involved when actually painting is confirmed by his admission that:

*When I have finished a painting, that's when I feel normal.*

(Poirier, 1990, p.13)

The dimensions of many of Scully's canvases are large and these monumental works convey a message of strength. Alistair Hicks quotes him as saying, "I spent five years making my paintings fortress-like" (Hicks, 1989, p.102). Their strength, however, is not just a question of size. It is a strength born of the fact that they are formally strong. Indeed he speaks of the relationship between his work and architecture, although he does not have to make his works function in a practical way, which is a substantial difference. In fact they do serve a practical function, in the sense that they channel his emotional energies. Poirier refers to Scully the fighter (Poirier, 1990, p.30), (Hugh Lane Memorial Lecture, Nov. 1994). Within and between the formal divisions of his works the artist's humanity is observable. No longer hard-edged, except where the neighbouring area is a separate structure, works like *Spirit* (1992), make serious attempts to go beyond the physical, and beyond the representation of physical things, into the realms of thought, feeling and the unconscious. Their contemplative



qualities are present side by side with their strength and vigour, placing them on a par with music. Hicks attributes his (Scully's) risk-taking to his emigration to America where he says, he has 'injected a surprising lyricism into these rock faces of paintings' (Hicks, 1989, p.102). In an age when the fleeting image is the norm, works like Scully's fulfil an important role in challenging the mind, but also touching the soul.

Other apparent contradictory features are visible in the Scully paintings. Most works have a limited palette, yet the combination of colours are complex. In this he reflects the influence of painters like Derain and Rothko. According to Poirier it is in the area of colour that Scully has proven to be particularly persuasive and far-reaching (Poirier, 1990, p.11). Poirier adds that Scully devises colour combinations of such power and in such compelling harmony that he has been able to generate a range of feelings and emotions unmatched by any other artist working with similar structural parameters. Contrast between light and dark is important in the colour combinations which Scully engages in. An area of light is placed almost always beside a darker area, but the whole idea of unity is addressed when the light area appears again, as it invariably does. An interesting colour-play is present in the painting *Union* a more recent work where the 'checkerboard' format is used. The left half of the painting is similar to the right half, but in lighter tones than its opposite, so that two types of personality exist side by side, different to each other (difference depicted by colour intensity), yet embracing one another as the checkerboard form eases one side more gently into the other. Stripes are more differentiated. The right side of *Union* overpowers the other in that its colours are stronger. The delicacy of the left side, however, gives it a different kind of strength.

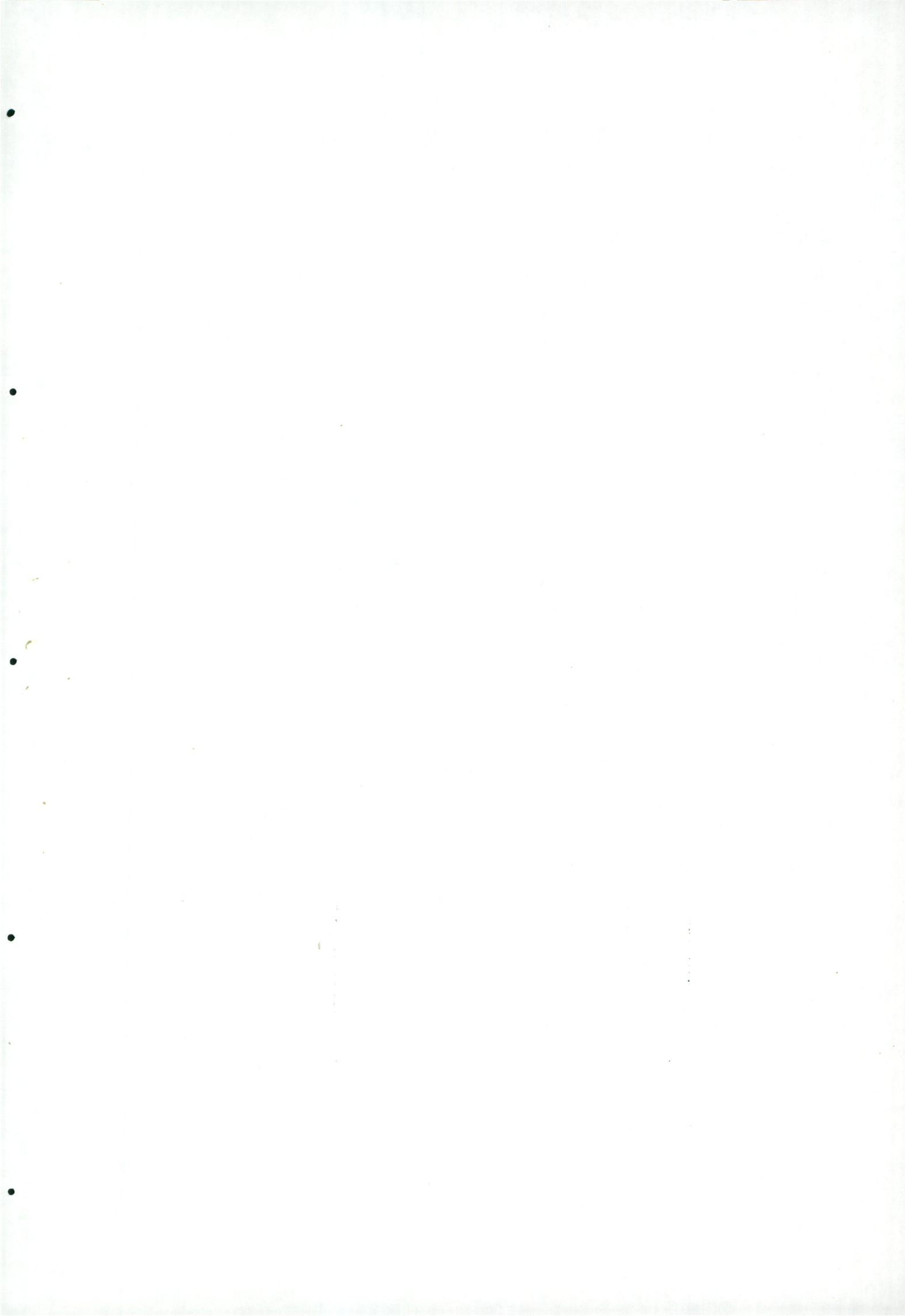
*Union* and all of Scully's checkerboard paintings seem intent on addressing the idea of unity within a work where contrasts are part and parcel of its language. There are huge differences in the kind of colour combinations Scully uses from painting to painting. The colours used in *The Bather* (1983), are those of sea, sky, sand and flesh to convey a 'realism' on a par with that of a figurative depiction. The mood of people and place is ever present in this work. A totally different combination of colours is used in his *Catherine* painting of 1993, where black and white are the dominant colours. In this sense Scully reduces his manner of depiction to essentials. Four panels make up



the work. Delineation between the areas of work is hazy, except where a separate panel exists. One area of white exists as a total entity, a complete panel in itself. This white panel is whiter and brighter and less contaminated by other colours than other 'white' areas in the same work, and the eye is drawn to it. The relative purity of the panel makes one think of a place untouched by the world, but such a 'white' is also a colour which reflects the influences of other colours more strongly. In the black areas of this work there is a strong presence of blue as there is in the painting *Coll*, a smaller work of three panels, one of which is metal and painted in a matt finish, a definite contrast to the other 'black' areas of this work [Plate 23]. It seems that Scully is always searching for ways of 'speaking' with colour and surface. A dialogue takes place in each work and this is inextricably linked with his use of colour.

I see the 'humanity' of the artist present in the 'stripe' form, where an area of darkness does not persist indefinitely but always eventually gives way to brightness. Scully's childhood fear of the dark, referred to in Poirier may be, at least in part, responsible for this (Poirier, 1990, p. 13). Repetition of colour bands is as strong a feature of Scully's paintings and as significant in the overall unity of effect, as is repetition of themes in music, in the traditional ternary, sonata, ritornello, rondo and theme and variation forms and advanced even further in Schoenberg's twelve-tone method. Recurrent also in Scully's paintings is the construction of something small held by something massive, and invariably there is some contrast of colour or colour arrangement between the two.

Colour has, for some time, been used by Scully to represent his own emotional state of involvement with the subject. The black and white of *Empty Heart* (1987), is quite different to that of the 1993 *Catherine* painting, where here the white is tinged with a fleshy pink and the undertones of the outer panel red, like 'eyes swollen from crying' (Poirier, 1990, p.157) [Plate 24]. This painting symbolises the struggle of the artist with himself as he comes to terms with the death of his son Paul, killed in 1983. Prior to painting *Empty Heart* Scully had, in his grief, stopped painting for a short time. Black and white are both colours linked with death in certain cultures. In Western culture, black is predominantly so, but white, with its suggestiveness of death's pallor, is in the Orient the colour of mourning. To the Hindus black represents time, and to the



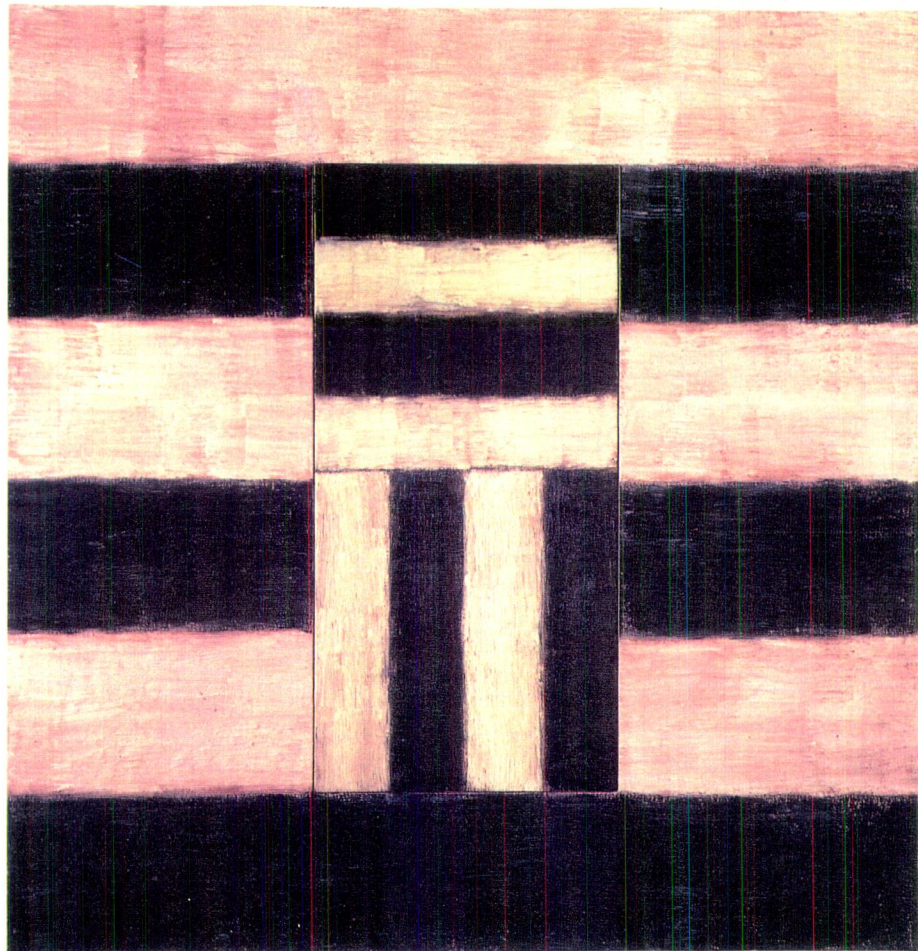
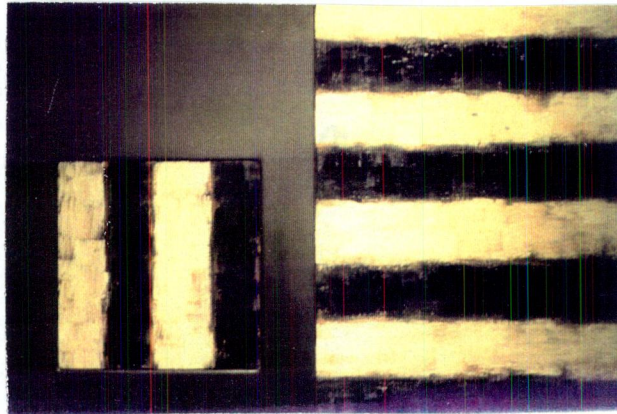
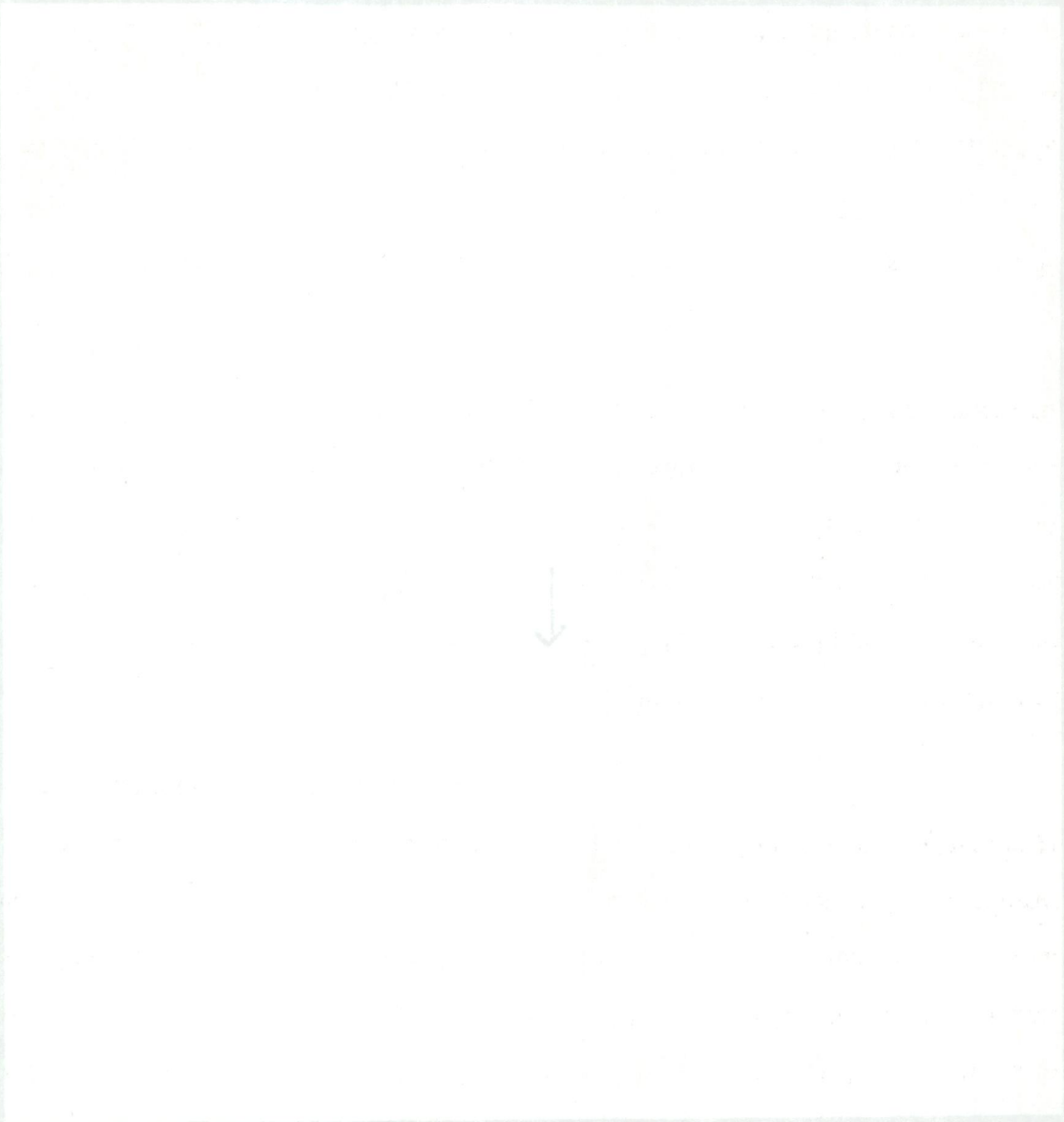


Plate 23. Sean Scully: *Coll.* Oil on canvas and steel. 60cm x 90.2cm.  
Plate 24. Sean Scully: *Empty Heart*. 1987. Oil on linen. 72" x 72".





ancient Egyptians it is the colour of rebirth and resurrection. In light of these diverse symbolic possibilities and the impact of the actual painting itself, it would seem that the gloom of his 1986 painting is giving way to a more positive outlook, despite its title, *Empty Heart*. Whatever particular effect they have, Scully's colour decisions are consciously symbolic, and are responsible, I believe, for points of view such as those of Alistair Smith who says that Scully's paintings contain the extroversion of his American forerunners and an oriental predilection for contemplation (Smith, 1993, p.85).

The subjective element that is a significant part of the content of Sean Scully's more recent works is in line with the ritualistic approach he has towards his work. More than one writer has given attention to the disciplined process of working which Scully engages in, but it is not by formula that Scully paints. His admission to using personal tragedy in his work (i.e. *Empty Heart*) (Huge Lane Memorial Lecture, Nov. 1994), and his subsequent statement concerning the transformation of grief into a kind of beauty (sometimes brutal) concerns a fact that is readily accessible to the viewer in his titles. Indeed through his titles he retains the advantage of association which is of enormous importance in figurative work.

Despite the presence of brushmark in all his later works, it is not gesture in the expressionistic way (as is the case in Schoenberg's musical vocabulary), but gesture more in line with Cezanne's lack of certainty or the moving, classical, deliberate but structured gesture of Masaccio. The squares of the checkerboard illustrate this point well. In the Huge Lane Memorial Lecture, Scully refers to the constant invention regarding brush strokes and their directions when used in a four sided figure where all sides are equal.

The greatest indicator of all to the spiritual side of Scully's character is found in his dedication to the cycle of *Catherine* paintings. If the definition of a cycle is, 'a recurring series of changes' (New Imperial Reference Dictionary, p.261), then cycle is probably the best way to describe these works. Arthur C. Danto claims that the *Catherine* painting of a given year resembles more closely other Scully paintings of the same year than the *Catherine* paintings of other years (Danto, 1993, p.14). In a way, says Danto, the whole series of *Catherine* paintings show the development from year to



year of the artist's vision. Catherine Lee (Scully's wife) and Scully retain the *Catherine* paintings in their own private collection, the finest work of each year, kept as an act of renewal of their relationship, which must surely be a spiritual act. Danto refers to the sacrificial aspect of this, which is akin to the sacrifice of the fatted calf or lamb in numerous other cultures from ancient Greece to the biblical lands (Danto, 1993, p.44). The *Catherine* paintings have no particular formal similarities to one another other than those formal similarities common to all his paintings. These are, however, constant, although there is variety as well.

The unity that marks the *Catherine* paintings is consistent with the unity that runs through the entire body of Scully's later works. That unity is closely linked with the formal consideration of his works. By investing his intellectual, emotional and artistic concerns and his physical process of painting into one particular form, he has enabled a simple formal means to produce a wealth of artistic variation. The resulting paintings challenge the viewer to 'discover' their meanings. The viewer, in the absence of recognisable external objects will, through his/her imagination, project meaning onto these works, making them very real and interesting. Consequently, the paintings satisfy both painter's and viewers' personal needs in a way that closely resembles music.

*Man turns his gaze away from the external towards himself.*  
Kandinsky (Madoff, 1993, p. 51)

In the five year period from 1975 to 1980, Sean Scully searched in solitude for a method of combining formal considerations with the physical and emotional aspects. The result of this working period, during which he did not exhibit, was the evolutionary nature of his paintings in the 1980s. When he reinvested abstract painting with those elements such as colour, contrast, brush stroke, emotion as well as composition, he came upon what Hans Hofmann describes as the 'spirit' in art:

*The spirit in art never dies, because its nature is predominantly spiritual.*  
(Hofmann, 1967, p.48)

Scully's painting *Spirit* (1992) is worthy of discussion in light of this [Plate 25].



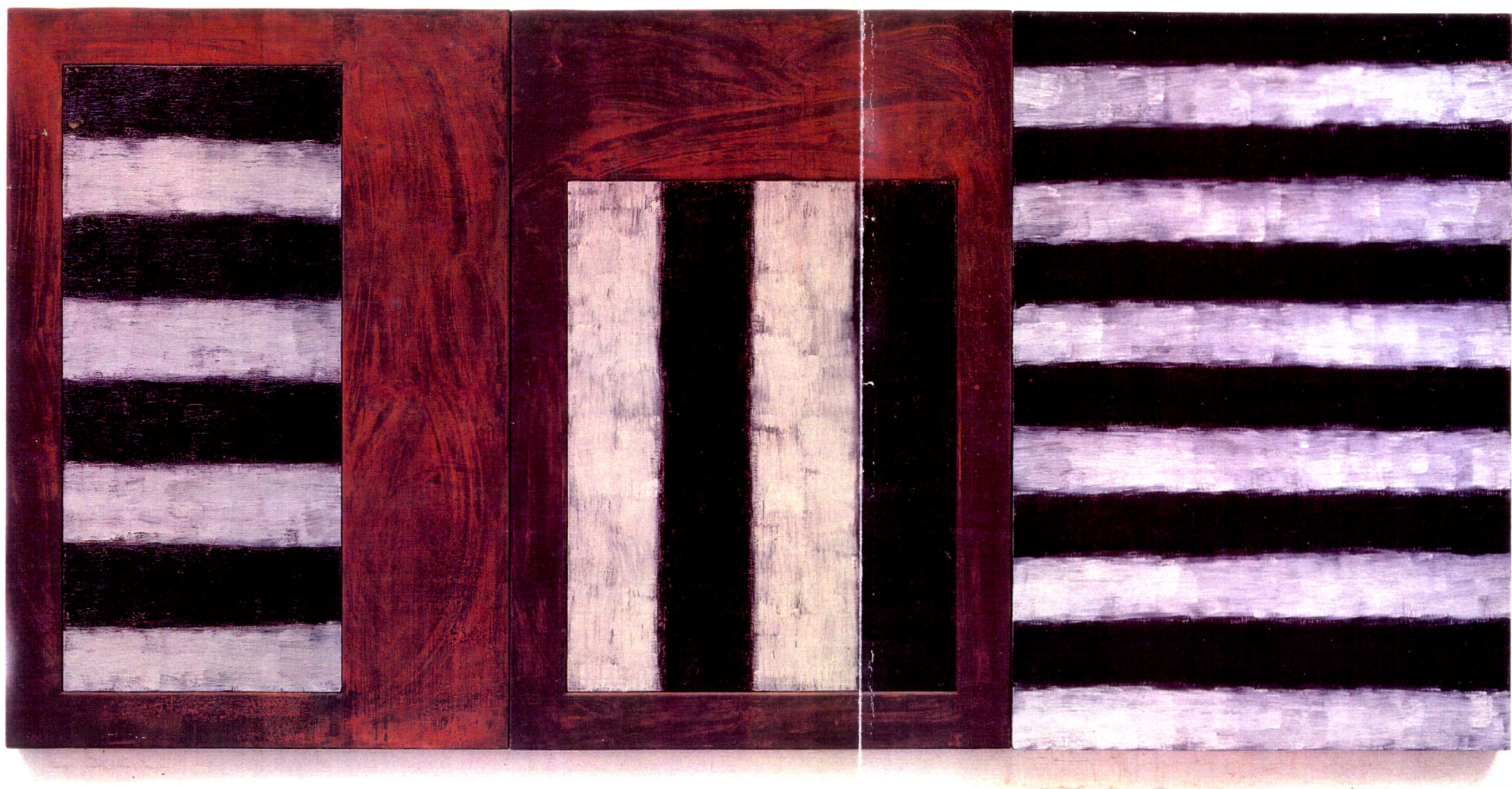
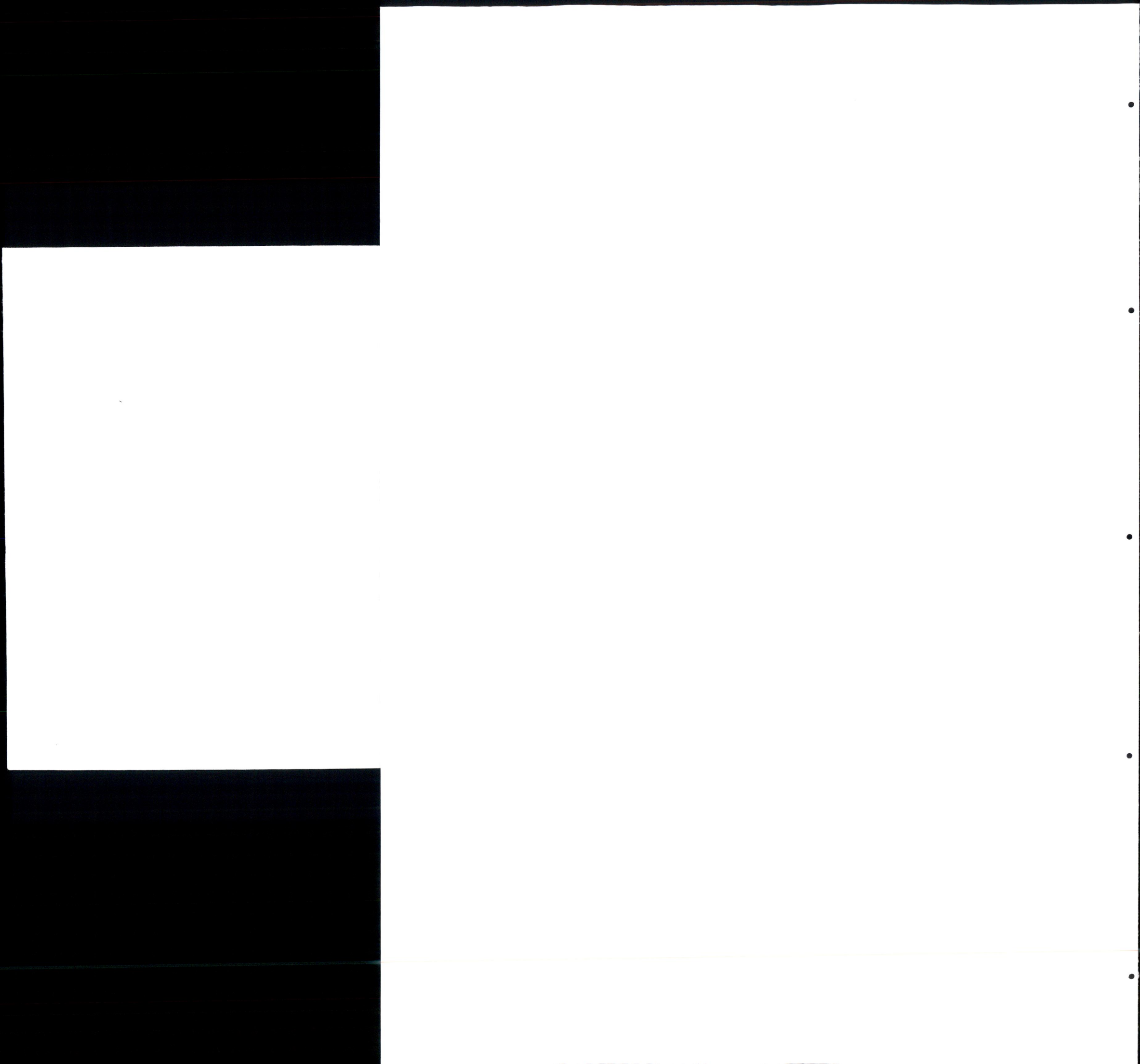


Plate 25.

Sean Scully: *Spirit*. 1992.  
Oil on canvas and cor-ten steel. 78" x162".



A large piece, 78 x 162 inches, it consists of three parts, into two of which are inserted central panels, bringing its total number of panels to five. For someone who spent some time doing construction work in New York, the physical side of this posed little problem. Carter Ratcliff refers to Scully's claim that in construction work he indulged himself privately, composing the elements of brick, window and door space 'in a satisfying way' (Ratcliff, 1993, p.20). Earlier in his essay Ratcliff refers to the theories of Leon Battista Alberti, the Renaissance Italian 'universal man' who said that composition is 'the rule in painting by which the parts fit together in the painted work' (Ratcliff, 1993, p.14). As one with an interest in music, I look on this work seeing its resemblance to a sonata or tripartite musical form of some kind, where all the movements are different to each other, while still retaining something in common with each other. In formal terms, it has numerous characteristics of Scully's other works: separate panels which work together; 'island' panels, panels surrounded on all sides by other panels; and vertical and horizontal bands of colour, painted with a limited palette. Like *Coll*, metal is used in this work (increasing for some the sculptural associations Scully's work evokes). The two outside panels to the left are made of Cor-Ten steel which has been rusted with swirls of colour differentiation, which contrasts considerably with the relatively static nature of his painted bands of colour. The swirling motion of the rusted plates is suggestive of those present but unseen forces of our world, such as wind.

Spirit in the Catholic sense is frequently depicted with lines of similar movement. Cartoonists use curvilinear lines to suggest movement and change from one space to the next. The conversion of a steel panel through the physical action of applying rust inducing agents to initiate a chemical reaction is, as with painting itself, alchemic in its transmutation of metal. The use of rusting, which once initiated, has an apparent 'life' of its own, continuously mutating, conveys a sense of spiritual life, which continues, if one believes in the concept of after-life, long after physical life has expired. If 'spirit' is seen in terms only of those intangible qualities of a person, even this undergoes change depending on the nature of the person's experiences. The two enclosed painted canvases are completely surrounded by the rusted panels which must surely be metaphors for the 'spirit'.





The white of the panels is, like *Empty Heart*, underpainted with a fleshy pink suggestive of skin, representing in their simplicity the body, black or white; big or small; fat or thin; strong or weak; active or inactive—and comparing its simplicity to the complexity of the other facet of humanity, the spirit. There is a feeling of ease when looking at the painted panel to the right, but when seeing it as part of the whole, it has a kind of emptiness. The tension that exists between the rusted panels and their inserts makes them interesting. Although they are each placed directly beside one another there is a sense of isolation in that the painted black and white panels are all removed from each other.

The painting may be about the human condition, in particular about the spiritual domination of that condition, but it is also about difference. Unlike his hazy divides, which are hazy and tentative, the divisions here are definite and visible. Other works have tripartite divisions, namely *Heart of Darkness*, although in that work the history of previous attempts at painting lies between the divisions conveying uncertainty [Plate 26]. In some way too, I am reminded that Scully has been in three cultures in his life, Irish born, English bred (but no doubt subject to those Irish influences which would have been inescapable living with Irish parents) and American adopted, when I look at this work. Two of these cultures are defined as islands. *Spirit* is an abstract painting and as such, may or may not reveal its meaning, even to the artist himself. It is a window to knowledge: the search for this can only result in provoking the viewer to thought. It is also a window to emotion.

The abstract nature of Scully's work is in contrast to the referential nature of late twentieth century painting, and there is little evidence to suggest that he has any interest in the inclusion of figurative elements. But Scully is finely attuned to the happenings around him, and has been from his early dealings with abstraction through his 'deferential bows in the direction of both op art and serial painting' to his *No Neo* painting of 1984 (Smith, 1993, p.85) [Plate 27]. The whimsical nature of fashion is not something he seems interested in, rather he is committed to the pursuit of the evolution of his own personal idiom of expression which will ultimately serve painting, as a medium in good stead. His challenge to us to investigate the world of personal expression and how that might be done, may well be lost to those who doggedly



reiterate arguments against painting as a legitimate medium to this end in this age, (i.e. Thomas Lawson who refers to painters as, 'exploiting the last manneristic twitches of modernism...' (Lawson, 1984, p.153)), but there is little doubt in my mind that history will see Scully as an important artist in the move to redefine abstract art and its role at the end of the century. After all, the development of abstraction in painting was the most significant development at the beginning of this century, banishing forever the exclusive position which music had previously held in reaching areas of consciousness beyond the realms of the tangible.



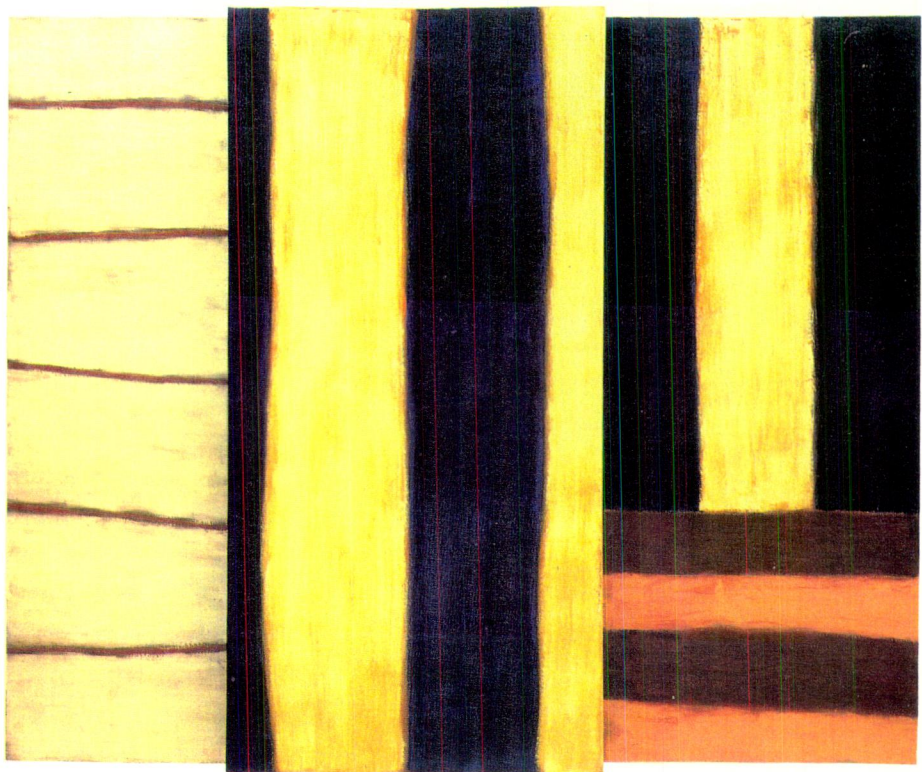
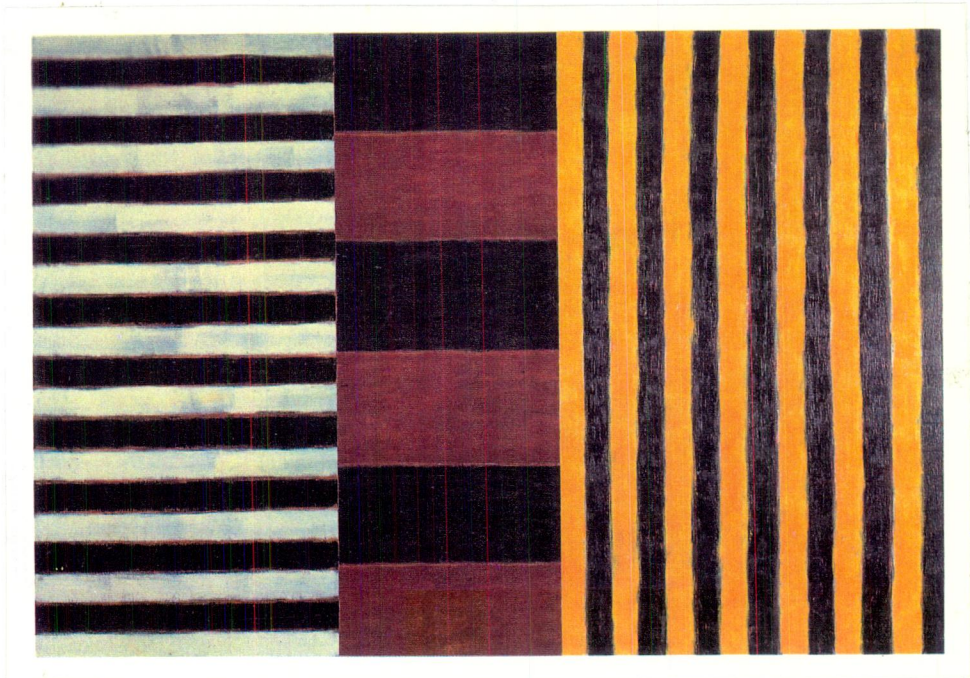


Plate 26. Sean Scully: *Heart of Darkness*. 1982. Oil on canvas. 96" x 144".  
Plate 27. Sean Scully: *No Neo*. 1984. Oil on canvas. 96" x 121".

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Heart of Darkness  
↓  
II

## CONCLUSION

*...Created form moves us (so) profoundly because it expresses the emotion of its creator.*

Clive Bell (Art, 1928)

The words of Robert Delauney which claim abstraction to be, not a style, but 'a change of understanding' have more than a ring of truth about them (Vego, 1980, p.12). However, this 'change of understanding' has enabled painters to answer, with a great deal of conviction, those challenges to painting's value which philosophers have long placed at its door. Early abstract painters gave much consideration to the relationship between abstract painting and music, but also to abstract painting's capacity to reach beyond the tangible. Denis Thomas' claim that in our own age the painter's function is probably nearer the poet's than in times past is reinforced by the words of Franz Marc:

*Art is the bridge to the spirit world...the necromancy of the human race.*

(Thomas, 1976, p.5)

Qualities which were once exclusive to music are now shared by abstract painting. In the absence of depiction and in line with music's traditional concern with form, abstract painting focuses on formal qualities and on the ability of colour and shape to affect the senses and the emotions.

All the writings of Arnold Schoenberg confirm the belief that his main intention (and indeed his initial starting point) was to be expressive. Given the nature of his musical inheritance, it is not really surprising that he used formal means to follow this through. The abstract nature of music has ensured that, throughout its Western development, its formal qualities have been the focus of composers' attention. Absolute music does not require a narrative to reach to the 'heart and soul' of the listener. Where Schoenberg used narrative it was largely for formal purposes. His twelve tone method was born of a desire to provide a structural framework for composing in the absence of the traditional one of moving toward a tonic. Schoenberg began his expressionistic drive



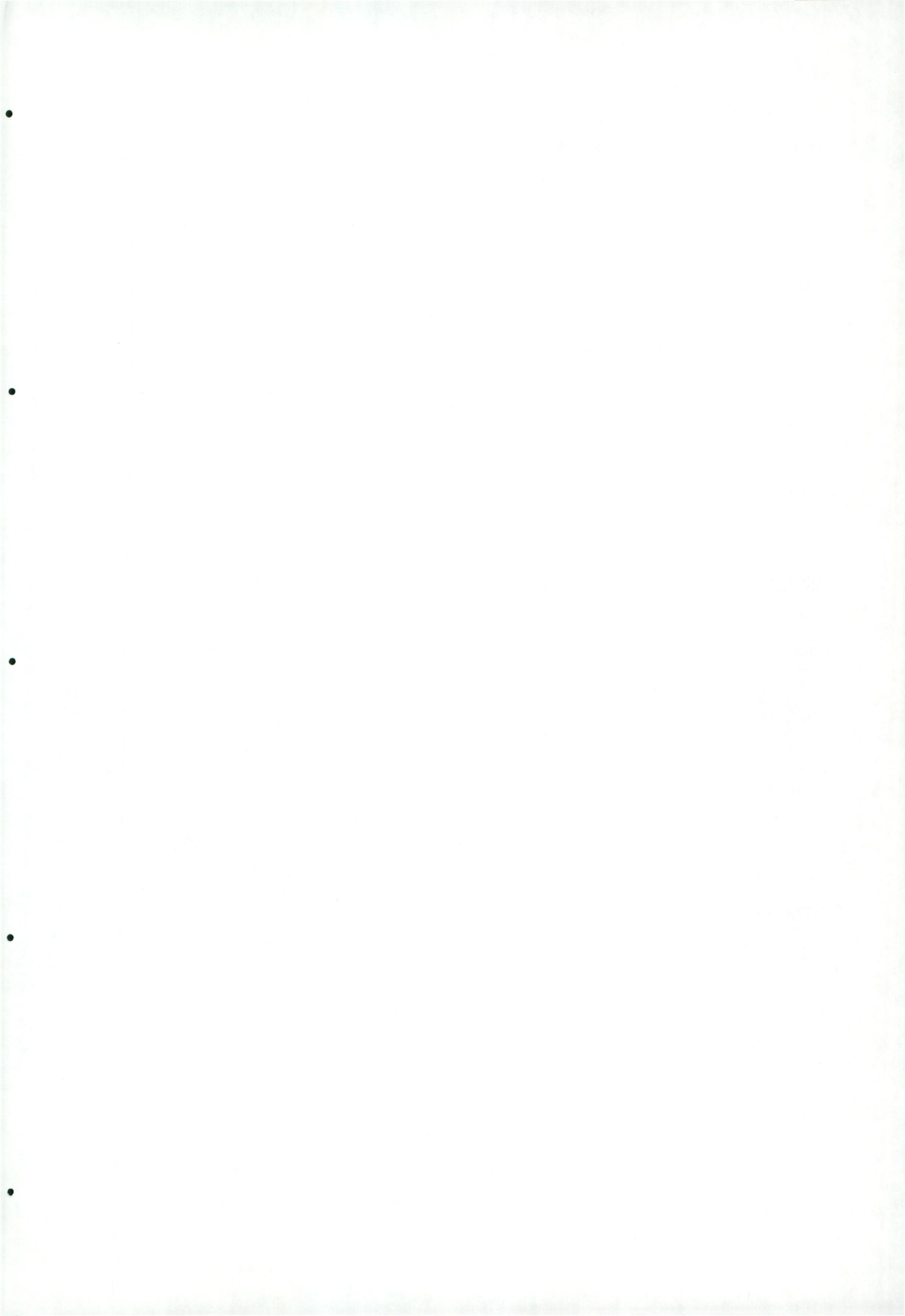


with short, almost informal, pieces. The most significant development of his music was, however, that of serialism, to which this earlier work led.

Sean Scully, on the other hand, began with a formal system (the grid system which had replaced the older system of perspective) and, after a period of experimentation with its formal properties, he injected these structures with a subjective lyricism which, he felt, had gradually been drained from painting in the late 1960s and 1970s. Through his constant interaction with the formal concerns of the grid system, the focus of his attention had shifted and the conclusion he reached incorporated a subjective approach to balance the cold formality of his earlier work. In short, Schoenberg and Scully have much in common although their approaches appear to have been different.

The music of Schoenberg and the paintings of Scully incorporate their personal experiences. In Schoenberg's case the musical IDEA was born of feeling and the idea then translated into whatever form seemed appropriate. His use of the varying colours of the instrumental timbres available to him was extremely expressive, and comparable to Scully's frequently symbolic use of colour. That Schoenberg used forms from literature as well as those used traditionally in music dispels any argument which might suggest that in looking to the future, he rejected the past. He honoured it as Scully does.

If Schoenberg experienced rejection by a public interested only in traditional concepts of beauty and value in music, and the subsequent sense of isolation this undoubtedly brought with it (even well known composers of the day failed to understand his means of expression), Scully shares some of this feeling of being an outsider. Indeed in the Hugh Lane Memorial Lecture Scully claimed that the role of the outsider is fundamental to who he is. He does not wish to be smoothly absorbed into the current art scene and is rather taken by the idea of always 'being in exile'. In Scully's case, it seems that this role is one of choice. Schoenberg, on the other hand moved from his native Vienna to live (temporarily as it happens) in Berlin in the hope of meeting more positive reaction there. Yet it seems likely that Schoenberg would be destined to feel apart. Born a Jew, it was necessary for him to emigrate to the United States to avoid



anti-semitism in Germany. Scully, at the age of four, became an exile with his Irish family, who had emigrated to England. Now he lives in the United States. His life of living in exile contributes to a personality never prepared to embrace simplicity or certainty, and his tenacity is as significant a part of his creative responses as it was part of Schoenberg's search for structures, which would not depend on resolution to a tonic.

A sense of obligation, in the case of both Schoenberg and Scully, revolves around the part played by composition and formal concerns and its intermingling with subjective tendencies. Lebrecht refers to Schoenberg's belief in the composer's duty to art which transcended his right to self expression (Lebrecht, 1992, p.307). Kandinsky, on the other hand, was of the belief that art must always be expressive, the result of some profound emotion or spiritual experience (Read, 1974, p.191). Nevertheless, it is patently obvious that self-expression was the main concern of compositions of Schoenberg's middle period, yet always finding an appropriate form. Self-expression is a foundation for any work of art, whether conscious or unconscious. Responses to the vicissitudes of life, to external stimuli and to conscious, subconscious and unconscious feelings tend to become fundamental to the working through of an idea, despite working through a format.

Music, because of its temporal nature, has always, in the Western tradition, seen form and structure as necessary vehicles for movement. The fact that the musical work cannot expose itself fully at any one time, but unfolds over a period of time, means that it has adopted certain techniques to unite its parts. Orderliness, repetition, regularity and system have long been perceived to be conditions of music (as indeed of Man). Unity has been the aim at the very centre of attempts to make music cohesive. It is hardly surprising then that Scully (who has an interest in music) has employed orderliness in his works, engages in the repetitive form of the stripe and applies himself to the painting process in a systematic way. The underlying grid structure, although not always as precisely defined in his recent works compared with his early usage, serves to bring a very strong sense of unity to his idiom, so that parts of a whole 'fit' together in a very 'natural' way. The fitting together of diverse sections never looks contrived. Yet a critical interaction invariably exists between them, so that they both unite and contrast, one with the other. Indeed in a Scully exhibition in 1994, it was discovered on the



opening night that the panels of one work had been incorrectly placed. That this could happen is testament to the fact that the sense of unity between parts is very strong, existing regardless of specific placement. With every choice of placement made by Scully, many other possibilities exist.

As to Schoenberg, the single greatest achievement of his twelve tone method is that of unity. For the first time in the history of Western music, foreground and background become inextricably linked with cells from the series used to 'harmonise' other notes of the series. While polyphony focused on horizontal movement, and the figured bass of the Baroque era on the vertical line of the music, with subsequent composers attempting to be aware of both, no one achieved such unity before Schoenberg. Indeed just as his aim was to rid music of the dominance of one tone over the others, his practice ensured that he also removed the dominance of the horizontal line of music over the vertical. The total saturation of the series into the entire fabric of the work makes twelve-tone compositions cohesive beyond question.

The use of the grid as a formal means of construction was no less a structuring device than perspective had been. It was merely different. In the same way, while tonality had with it an accompanying 'baggage' of use and meaning, serialism was just as strong a guiding force, while still depending on traditional means of expression such as dynamics, tonal colour and tempo change to induce mood, and create a sense of anticipation and of climax, both of which previously relied on tonality to achieve. The grid, as visible in the works of Scully, is merely the framework on which the meaning of the work is hung and the traditional painting means, those of colour tone, brushmark and contrast, induce the mood of the viewer, because it is through them that the painter offers himself and his feelings.

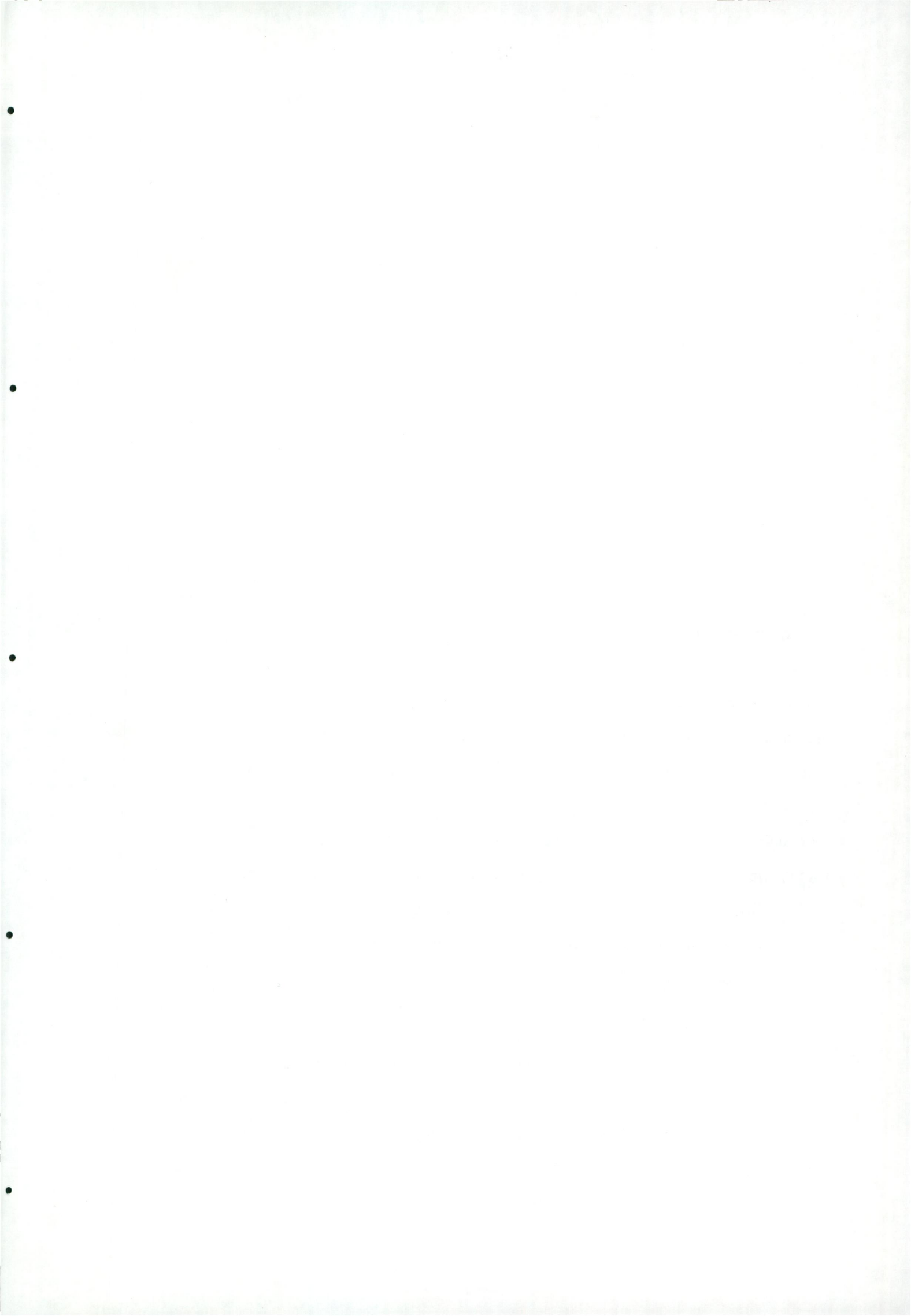
Because of the temporal nature of music, its reliance on formal devices for cohesive purposes, where contrast is also a long-established and recognised aesthetic quality, is all the more essential. Schoenberg did not discard Sonata form, principally because it was a wonderfully binding operating principle, which worked! Sonata form, traditionally founded on principles of tonality, was seen by Schoenberg as valid because of its thematic connotations. Its method of dealing with theme – introduction,



development and reiteration – was still valid even when the tonal system was abandoned. These thematic concerns accentuate the abstract nature of Schoenberg's musical idiom. However decisions about form inevitably become decisions about thematic treatment, consequently rendering them inextricably enmeshed. In a similar way, in the paintings of Scully, the stripes can be seen as both the theme of his work and their form.

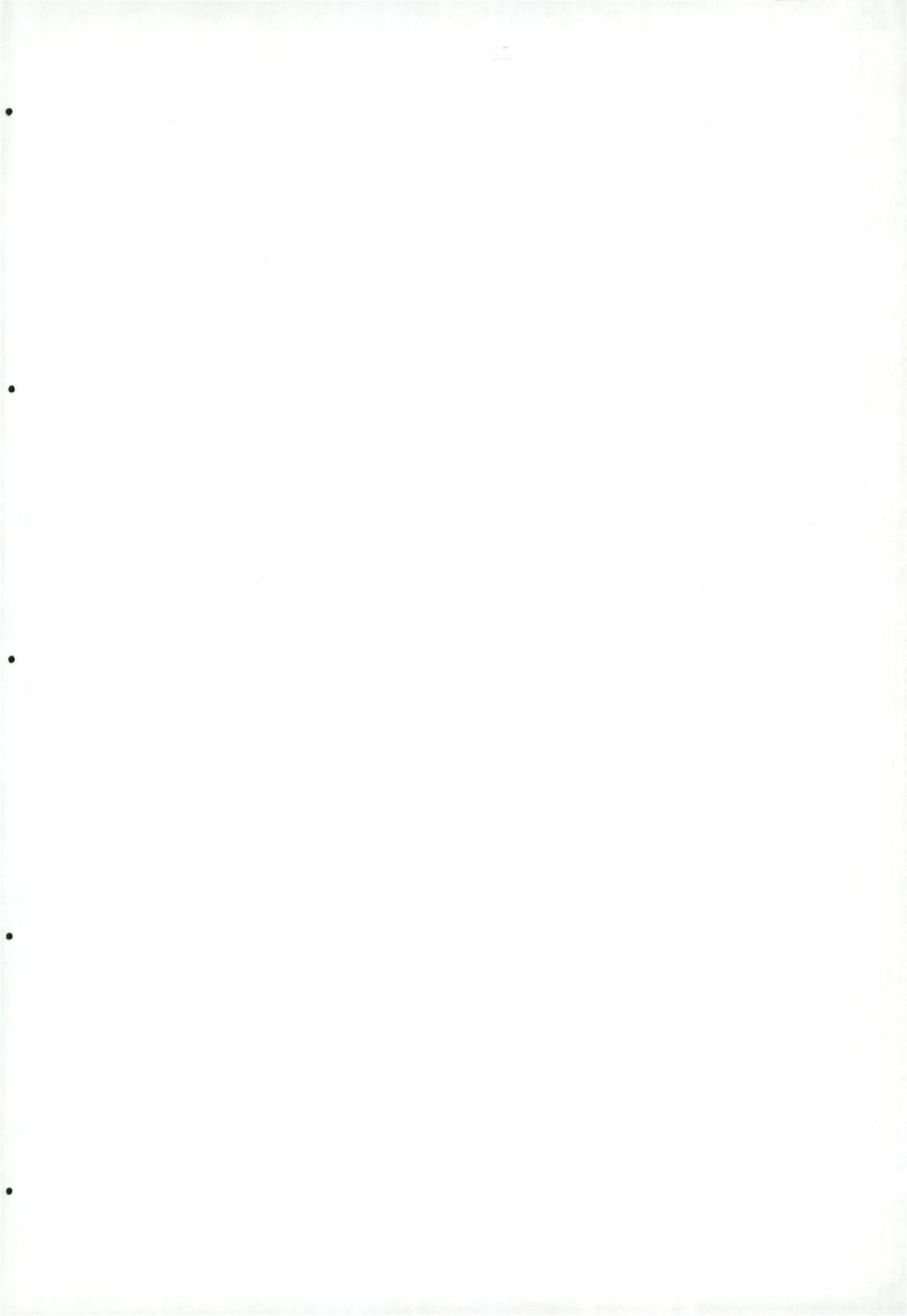
To conclude, there are more similarities between the concerns of Arnold Schoenberg and Sean Scully than there are differences. The two artists began with quite different emphases, but through their chosen media, working with commitment and dedication, they arrived at a common conclusion. To use the works of these artists as a 'yardstick' to assess the value of all similar types of creativity, it would seem that balance between emotional and objective concerns should be the most important aim. Mastery of the form in use, regardless of whether it is visual or aural abstraction, is a necessity in achieving this end. Without a formal framework, it is probably impossible to create meaningful works of art and certainly impossible to sustain such creativity. On the other hand, over-concern with construction, without emotional/subjective input leaves a gap that cannot be filled by any devices. Balance between subjectivity and objectivity makes for unity and harmony, contrast and resolution.





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