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FOUR INTERPRETATIONS OF SEAN SCULLY'S PAINTINGS, (1973-1984).

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INTRODUCTION

As the title of this thesis suggests, the main focus of attention in the following pages is centred around four critical interpretations of Sean Scully's paintings, made between 1973 and 1984.

The investigations were made in the hope of suggesting how the art critic might be seen to function in the artworld, (rather than in order to measure the critical interpretation against the artworks themselves for example).

For this reason, Chapter 1 looks at some of the many ways in which the art critic could be considered. The emphasis in this instance is on the art critic as one who contributes to the dissemination of information in the artworld. This perspective is adopted as opposed to any other possible way of reconsidering the art critic, as it is most appropriate to the needs of this paper. Attention is drawn first of all to a theoretical classification of types of art information available in order to suggest the critic as one who makes a valuable addition to our knowledge about a given subject.

The critical responses of William Feaver, Sam Hunter, Joseph Masheck and Tiffany Bell to Sean Scully's paintings, made between 1973 and 1984 are discussed in detail in Chapters II, III, IV and V respectively. The guiding principle in each of these chapters is the idea that the critic, by responding to the artworks, broadens the scope of our knowledge of the paintings. The contributions made by each critic to our knowledge of Sean Scully's paintings are suggested in each chapter.

After thorough examination, the summary in Chapter VI, makes explicit what is implicit in the chapters given exclusively to criticisms of Sean Scully's work. By way of conclusion, the claims made for the art critic in chapter 1 are recalled, and in the light of discoveries made while reconsidering the critical responses to Sean Scully's work, the art critic's contribution to a fuller understanding of an artwork is reassessed. By the very nature of the subject, this conclusion is open-ended and suggestive rather than definitive or final. This is possibly a reflection on my sense of what the nature of art criticism can be.

CHAPTER I

If, for a moment, one were to consider the way in which information about the visual arts is accumulated, the multiple resources and methods of research used might seem varied and possibly infinite. The many factors which shape and help describe our perception of the visual arts at any given moment in time and the total range of contributing elements might seem so disparate as to defy description or any attempt to suggest classification or order. There seems to be both direct and indirect, immediate and implicit influences which, together, shape the scope of our knowledge about a given subject. Facts in retrospect can be pinpointed to their original reference but impressions, opinions, admirations and interpretations are not so easily traced to a specific source. It is often doubtful if attitudes can be attributed to a specific source at all, in the realisation that knowledge about the visual arts, or any sub-subject of, is the result of so many subtle, often apparently indirect influences that it is impossible to realise the full extent of the contributing factors, much less any attempt to organise these disparate elements into categories or under subheadings. In practice it may be impossible to untangle intertwining attitudes and ways of seeing; to separate the effects of education from the responses of intuition for example. But in theory these matters are apparently identified. For example, John A. Walker, (who's work will be discussed at a later point in this chapter), makes differentiation between types of information on the basis of the different sources of information; as opposed to differentiations made on the basis of information usage for example. Distinctions can be made between different types of information - which although may not translate so smoothly into a practical situation, are useful within their limitations and for the purposes of this paper.

One possible way of ordering the diverse experiences which collectively make up our perception of the visual arts, is to make a theoretical distinction between primary and secondary types of information. While these distinctions are in no way suggested as being definitive classifications, they do serve the purpose of indicating the context within which the four critics to be discussed at a later point are to be seen.

In describing information of the primary sort, the viewer or spectator confronts an artwork directly; as an original work of art on a one to one basis. The knowledge acquired by the spectator about any given work of art experienced under these conditions is reliant on the physical presence of the artwork - its impact in terms of colour, scale, material and context. The acquired knowledge or information is described as primary information.

It should be remembered however, that works of art reproduced or presented on slide, film, video or any form of photographic reproduction, (unless of course the work is expressly designed for such mediums), are not potential sources of primary information. While such presentation of artworks are capable of retaining details of colour, scale, texture and material accurately up to a point these images are re-presentations of the original work, and so cannot provide us with the essential prerequisite of primary information; i.e. direct, unmediated access to a given artwork.

By comparison, secondary information is a more diverse category; encompassing many formats, mediums and processes. Much of the information the spectator or viewer brings to the work of art and the subsequent intellectual demands put on the artwork are not governed by the primary experience, but by accumulated secondary information. The analyses, descriptions, reproductions, interpretations, opinions, reviews, criticisms and popular representations of an artwork might affect our perception as forcefully as unmediated access to the work.

Secondary information could be loosely described as knowledge about a given topic which has been mediated or re-presented in any form. It could be the case that the sum total of knowledge a person has at his or her disposal about a given topic is made up completely of secondary types of information. Considering the many artworks that have never been experienced directly, but are familiar to us courtesy of the secondary system of information, the multiple sources of secondary information become apparent. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel for example is familiar to most; the sequence of events surrounding its completion in the sixteenth century is information readily available. Yet the number of people who have had the opportunity to confront this work directly are comparatively few.

Sources of secondary information are so broad in scope that any attempt to describe their limits would be useless because of that very fact. It is possible however to suggest some of the effects of the secondary system. One could consider that at this point in time,

> "the fine arts of the past and present exist in an age of mass media, in an age of mechanical reproduction ....one obvious result (of this technical revolution) is the emergence of a secondary system of image dissemination which is in fact more extensive and powerful than the primary system upon which it is based". (1)

While this quote makes direct reference to image dissemination, the point which has been made could equally be applied to information dissemination. The suggestion that the secondary systems are at this point in history more 'extensive and powerful' than the primary systems is reflected both by the scope of information made available to us by the secondary system and by the nature of the information provided.

The medium of print and subsidiary technologies such as colour reproduction can claim a massive percentage of the total secondary system of information. The sheer amount of literature available to us and the quality of colour reproductions, allows us to focus our attentions sharply on a particular historical period or given artwork without ever having direct access to the original condition of our chosen subject. In Ireland this fact can be appreciated and for some, it is a cause of serious concern. For example, in a recent article on paintings from the National Gallery of Ireland the importance of encouraging temporary exhibitions was stressed, "as it may be impossible to obtain an example of the greatest names in the history of art, and they may for years be only known to the Irish public through the imperfect means of copying". (2)

Artworks which are unavailable to us, or which in some cases no longer exist are preserved and made available in some form through the secondary system of information. In even more practical terms, the art market which helps establish the cost of original works of art and its market value can make access to original artworks impractical and for many institutions, impossible (3). The demands of formal art education, for example, may require the student to become familiar with artworks that the country might never be able to afford, yet access to the work is offered by the secondary system of information.

Whatever the specific reasons for a publication or a reproduction might be, the very fact of their existence has altered our method of approach and sense of freedom in making investigations about the visual arts.

The potential power of the printing medium as a method of making information more freely available has been apparent for some time. A semi-fictional character in a recently published novel (4) reflects on the culture that enabled him to accumulate his extensive library and remarks that "this was a culture so flexible that whatever he needed was there in a book at his elbow. An ordinary sort of man, he could turn himself into a great military engineer, a bishop, an explorer or a general overnight if the fancy took him".(5) It is an appropriate analogy to the sense of freedom afforded to us by the secondary system of information in relation to the visual arts. Accessability in the artworld is no less dramatic; an ordinary sort of person could acquaint himself with a Watteau or a Warhol should the desire take him and should the library be open.

It seems appropriate at this point to introduce the art critic as he/she appears in the context of the secondary system of information as a participant in, and contributor to, this secondary system. The art critic is one whose limitations, and definitive classifications are as elusive as the limitations of the total scope of the secondary system of information. But we can say of the art critic that through the writings of the critic attention is drawn to works of art that might otherwise escape notice; the more subtle implications of an artwork that are unavailable to use are made available. The critic could be considered as one who mediates between an artwork and a larger audience through the secondary information system. Yet, the work of the art critic often appears as having a charisma, an appeal which extends beyond the advantages of accessability or the attractions of representation. While a colour reproduction of an artwork and critics response may for example, share certain facts; the formal composition or structure of the artwork, and even in a more general sense, both bring the work to the attention of the observer, the critic seems to have an advantage in the promise of a personal response to the artwork by the nature of the discipline.

When discussing an artwork, the critic usually has had direct access to the subject to hand. "He makes the first, and presumably freshest response to the work of art, grasps it when it is still new and strange, and gives us a preliminary hold on its meaning". (6)

Through the critic's work, the artwork is represented to us, having passed through the processes of interpretation and re-presentation.

Yet history has shown that paradoxically the temporary opinion of the critic can on occasion become the characteristic one. The reasons for the credibility afforded to the work of an art critic are difficult to define or locate. Traditionally the critic offered some form of specialised information, having a knowledge of preceeding traditions, on occasion a knowledge of previous works by the same artist or craftsman.

But perhaps one of the main reasons why the critic's interpretation of a work of art is consulted and so eagerly considered is to be found in the promise of a personal response. The critic, having confronted an artwork directly, can translate and retain some of the immediacy of his experience through this work. Sometimes, this sense of direct confrontation is retained and conveyed to the reader. When discussing a given artwork, the critic can often give a sense of the artwork's ability to provoke and affect the spectator. The reader in a sense can be brought to consider 'how it might have been', how they too might have responded given the same opportunity. The suggestion, or implicit promise of a potentially shared experience is not totally reliant on the narrative style used by the critic. Eighteenth century speculations on how the spectator is affected by an artwork suggests how an art critic could offer more to his audience through his writings than an isolated opinion.

The proposition that two people could respond to a given work of art in an identical manner was first expounded in 1790 by Immanuel Kant. In his treatise Critique of Judgement (7), Kant speculated as to how the viewer or spectator was affected by a work of art. Kant suggests that the spectator, by placing himself in proper relationship to the object of aesthetic interest, may be affected by it in a way which is shareable in principle by anyone else placing themselves in a similar relationship to the same work of art.

In this sense, critical judgements are not necessarily expressions of personal preference, but are assertations/confirmations of a potential objective value which an artwork may provoke. According to the Kantian logic, the critic could in theory make an objective evaluation of an artwork by placing himself in proper relationship to the artwork, and that affectation and possible evaluation is potentially similar to the experience of any spectator (8).

While Kant might never have considered that his speculations would ever have any relevant to the critic working within the framework of mass media, the legacy of his pioneering work is suggested as playing some part in the construction of the image of the contemporary critic. Recently, John Wyver made an investigation into the popular image of the art critic (9). He concentrates his attentions initially on the idea of the art critic as presented on television in order to draw attention to issues outside the immediate range of telecommunications.

As a case in point, Wyver discusses the B.B.C. production entitled Civilization (10) which was presented by Sir Kenneth Clarke. The way in which the documentary programme was presented brought Wyver to the conclusion that "as the press release boasted '11 countries and 117 locations visited'. If you had gone to all these places, such a claim implies, then you to would have come to precisely the same conclusions as Sir Clarke".(11) Wyver uses this example as a means of introducing the broader topic of how the critic is received by an audience, and elaborates on the subject of the critic as one who represents an experience which is potentially shareable with anyone else.

> "The words of the sympathetic critic are presented as an unmediated "truth", and only on the rarest of occasions are they challenged or contradicted.... an assumed 'objective' experience is implicit".(12)

The critic in this sense can act as a mediator between an artwork and the readership made possible through the secondary system of information, in the form of art journals, periodicals and popular magazines. The eagerness with which the critic's opinion is looked for when researching a given subject adds substance to John Wyver's speculations. Through the medium of the printed work, we are brought closer to the artworks. Yet whether we are brought to the immediacy of the original context or brought to a re-presentation, or an interpretation of the artwork, is unclear. There are no given rules, no basic prerequisites agreed upon. If such things exist at all, they can be uncovered only by considering specific examples.

* * * * *

Sean Scully is an Irish born painter, currently living and working in New York. His formal education in the visual arts was during the period from 1965 to 1967, when he attended Croydon School of Art, registering as a full-time student in the Fine Art faculty.

Immediately after leaving college, he taught and worked, both in England and America. In 1975, with the assistance of a Harkness fellowship, he settled permanently in New York, becoming an American citizen in 1984. The Rowan Gallery in London was the venue for his first solo exhibition in 1973, although since 1969 he had been exhibiting in group shows. His work has been shown extensively in England and America, and occasionally in Ireland, France and Canada (13).

While his working preoccupations have changed drastically over the fifteen year period of public exhibiting, Scully's work has always been characterised by and identified with a kind of dogged persistence - a singlemindedness which makes itself apparent both in his attitude to painting as his chosen discipline, and as regards to his chosen imagery. Two years ago, in conversation with William Zimmer, Scully was asked if painting was his passion. His response gives an indication of the extent to which he feels himself to be involved: "Some artists have to work to make a painting. I have to work at not making paintings. I could show you may diary, my correspondence. There are drawings all over them". (14) The imagery used in his paintings is equally obsessive. It has been joked that if Scully were in the retail business he would be known as the 'stripe king'; "Painting like Scullys is about colour and balance, but it is also about doggedness in laying down a million resolute stripes".(15)

During the fifteen year period which encompasses Scully's public career the critics, both in England and America, have been responsive to his work. In the following chapters a selection of those responses and their implicit preoccupations are considered. The literary quality of the criticism, support afforded by the particular publications or the reputation of the particular publication is not of importance. Priority is given in each case to an assessment of how the critic reads the work, and how the work of Sean Scully is re-presented in each case. The guiding principle in making these investigations is the idea that the critic, in each of the four instances, is making a contribution to our knowledge of the artist's work. Each critic places the work within a critical framework which he or she considers to be the most appropriate or most relevant. The work is suggested to the reader by the context determined by the author. Yet is is important to remember that,

"Everything we might say about an artwork that is not

> neutral description of esthetic properties is an attribution of content. (Even value judgement, insofar as they reflect what Althusserian critics call "visual ideology" are implicit attributions of content). If there is no such thing as neutral description, then all statements about artworks involve attributions of content, whether acknowledged or not. There are many possible ways to sort these things out, one is the model of geography - what types of content arise from this or that location of the artwork?" (16)

In each of the four critical evaluations to be discussed in the succeeding pages, the artworks brought to our attentions are placed in a context which the author may consider most appropriate at that time. The extent to which the public evaluation of the artwork might be effected by each evaluation remains to be seen.

CHAPTER 1

Footnotes

1. Walker J.A. Art in the age of mass media, London: Pluto 1983; P.67.

2. R. Mulchahy, "Spanish Masterpieces in Dublin", Irish Arts Review, Autumn 1984, (Vol. 1, No.3), pp.20-22.

3. R. Hughes, "On Art and Money", Art Monthly, December/January 1984/5, No. 82, pp. 6-12.

4. Farrell, J.G., "The Siege of Krishnapoor, Penguin, 1982.

5. Ibid p. 56.

6. Foster, S.C., The critics of abstract expressionism, UMI research press, 1980.
Quote from foreword by Donald Kuspit, p. ix.

7. Kant, I., The Critique of Judgement, trans. J.C. Meredith, Oxford: Claredon, 1952.

8. P. Richter, "Modernism and after (1)", Art Monthly, March 1982, No. 54, p.3.

"These basic ideas started two hundred years ago, provide the underlying framework for the modern aesthetic theory from which modern critical practice derives. I will list its main principles in a way which retains the main points of the 18th century beliefs I have been describing while relating them more specifically to current views and terminology:

(i) The quality of a work of art can only be known through a personal experience of that quality.

(ii) This can only be achieved through putting oneself into a right relationship to the work.

(iii) Critical judgements are not mere expressions of personal preference, but are assertions of objective value".

9. J. Wyver, "From the Parthenon", Art Monthly, May, 1984, NO.77, pp 22-25.

This essay was one of a series of six essays, collectively entitled "Broadcast T.V. and the Visual Arts", commissioned by T.S.W. (Television South West), to accompany the then forthcoming T.S.W.A National open art exhibition. In his essay, "From the Parthenon", Wyver discusses the limited range of representations of the arts on television including a history of the ways the dominant forms have evolved, with a consideration of alternatives to those forms.

10. Civilization is the title of a series of documentary programmes, researched and presented by Sir Kenneth Clarke, and broadcast by the B.B.C. in 1969.

11. J. Wyver "From the Parthenon", p. 22.

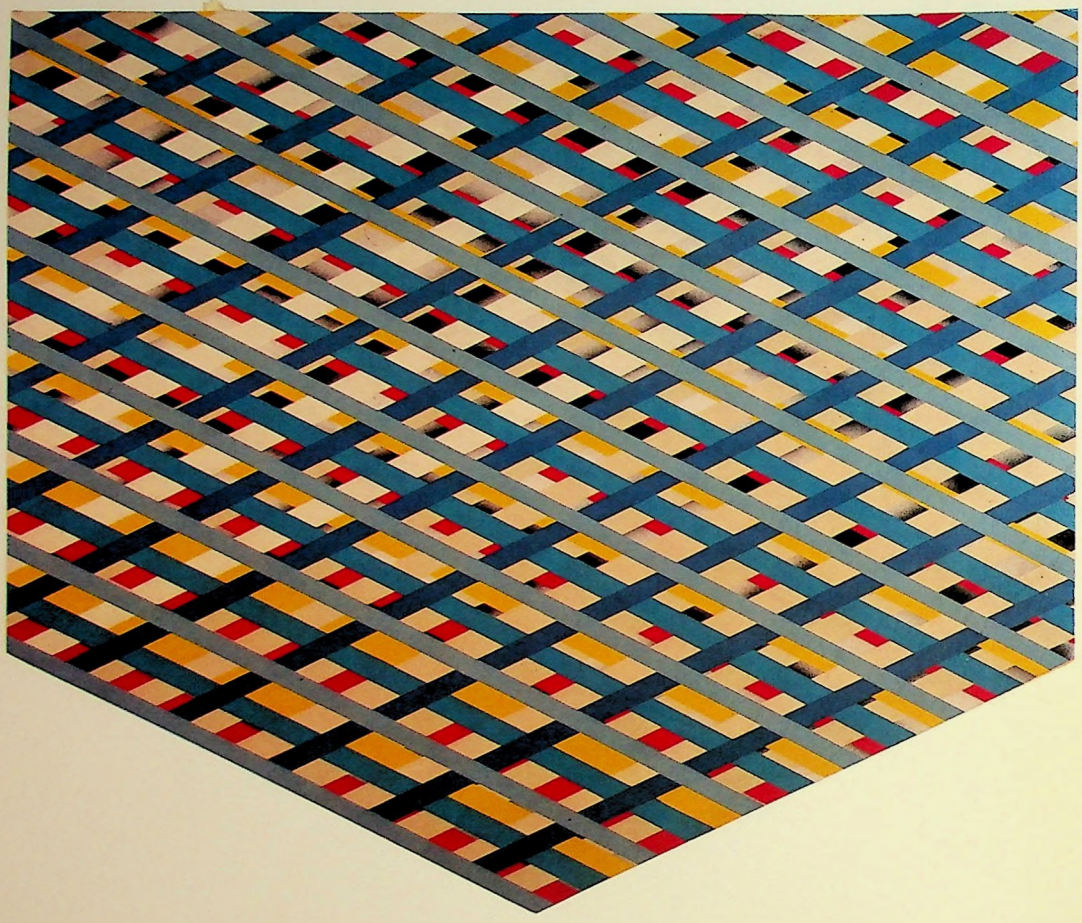
12. Ibid, P. 24.

13. All biographical details taken from the catalogue accompanying the "New Paintings and Drawings" exhibition, November 19845, at the Juda Rowan Gallery, London, and from my conversations with the artist in Dublin 1982 and 1983.

14. W. Zimmer, "Heart of darkness - New stripe paintings by, and an interview with Sean Scully", Arts Magazine, December 1982, Vol. 56. No. 4, P. 84.

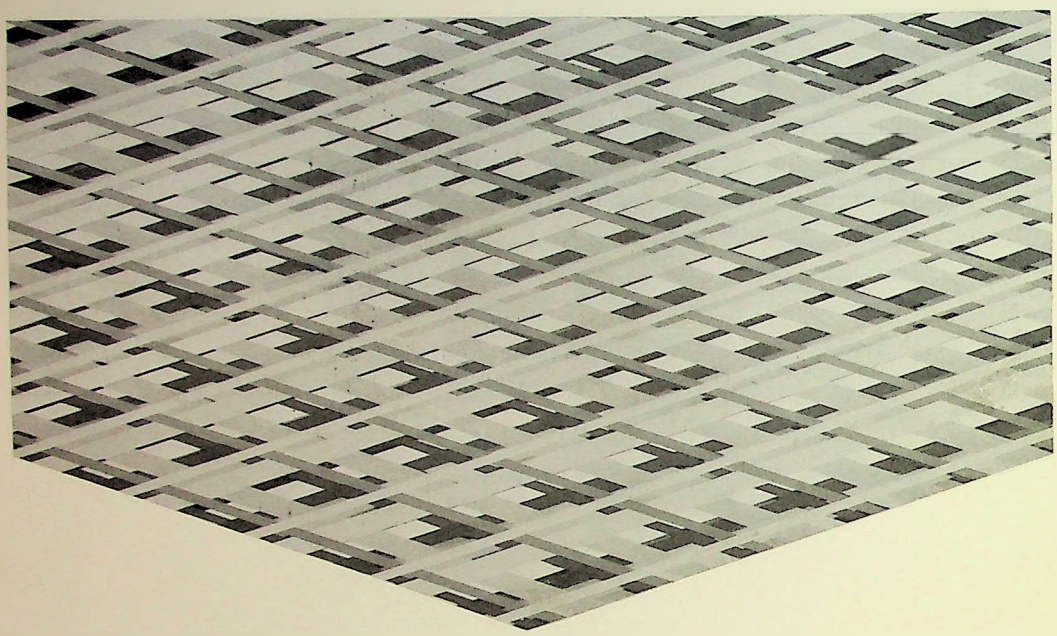
15. Ibid. p.82.

16. T.Mc Evilley, "In the manner of adressing clouds", Artforum, Summer 1984, Vol. 22, No. 9, P. 61.



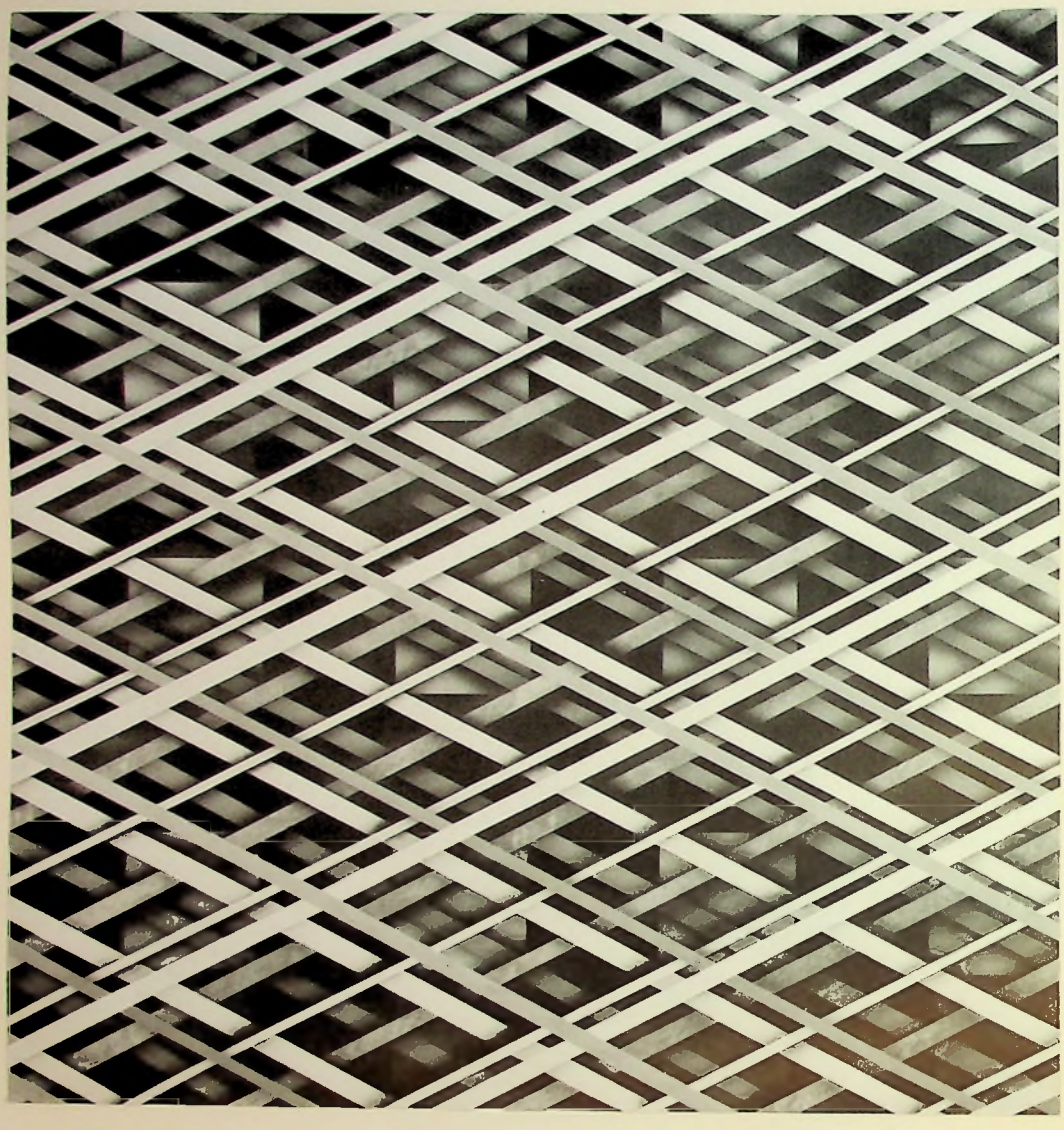
No. 1.

Overlay No. 2. by Sean Scully (1973).



No. 2.

Cream - Red - Cream by Sean Scully. (1975).



No. 3.

Amber by Sean Scully. (1973).

CHAPTER II

In 1973, Sean Scully had his first 'one man show' at the age of twenty eight. The venue for the exhibition was the Juda Rowan Gallery in London. In direct response to this first solo exhibition, the art critic William Feaver wrote an essay on Scully's work (1). Simply entitled "Sean Scully", the essay appeared in the November issue of the periodical Art International (2). At that time, Feaver had started writing on a regular basis for Vogue magazine. His reputation as an art critic was already established on the strength of his contributions to the London Magazine and to the Listener (3). His critical response to Scully's work in 1973 earned him the reputation of the "first critic to take serious notice of his (Scully's) work" (4).

The opening sentences of the essay serve the dual purpose of (i) introducing the artist to us through the author's recollections of previous occasions where he had encountered Scully's work, and (ii) introducing the work to us as it appears in chronological order. By making references to a "fair to middling student exhibition" in 1969 when Scully's work appeared as creating "quite a local disturbance", and by acknowledging Scully's participation in The John Moores Liverpool Exhibition of 1972, Feaver quickly brings us up to date with contemporary events by describing the then current show at the Rowan Gallery as being "by any standards a remarkable opening salvo" (5). This overview of the artist's career, (short as it then was), as a succession of events in strict chronological order prepares us for the perspective adopted by Feaver when he turns his attentions to the paintings that were to be considered (6).

After introducing the artist and his work to us by means of a condensed biography, Feaver is willing to tackle the work of the 1973 exhibition. But before disclosing a title, or making a direct reference to a specific painting, the paintings are considered in a general way, by the suggestion of a possible common denominator evident in all his paintings. In order to suggest a link between all of Scully's paintings, Feaver quotes the artist, (from an unidentified source) as saying, "for me, painting is about presenting an extreme state of one kind or another". Immediately following this quote is a reading of two paintings, by Feaver, which illustrate how he links the work to the artist's statement:

> "Red Light and Orange Slide, the paintings that first made his name were indeed determinedly

> extremist. Their brilliant razzle dazzle impact was the net result of a systematic accumulation of grids overlapping to form labyrinthine vistas" (7).

What Feaver has done here, is that by elaborating on Scully's statement in which he describes his paintings as being about presenting an "extreme state of one kind or another", he has interpreted it as signifying a desire for visual extremism. While this interpretation is perfectly credible, it is worth considering that it is not a natural, or inevitable one; but a conventional interpretation (8). Scully's expression, 'extreme state', was made in the context of describing his professional motivations or a working ambition, while Feaver sees this admission translating directly into a quality of the paintings themselves; "Red Light and Orange Slide, the paintings that first made his name were indeed determinedly extremist."

Thus, attention is immediately focused on the visual impact of the paintings, "their brilliant razzle dazzle impact" as Feaver describes it. A strong link has been established between the presentation of an extreme state and an extreme visual impact. In the paragraphs following immediately, Feaver's reading of the individual works support, and to a greater extent rely on this initial interpretation. Attention is focused on their visual impact by articulating the process of perception the viewer or spectator follows when confronted with the work in question:

> "These paintings were undoubtedly stake-claiming devices. They didn't invite searching examination. The eye was hustled along from one compartment in the grid to the next, observing occasional irregularities, enjoying the parallax illusions, but recognising that the effects were designed to be seen over-all, taken in at a glance, to be experienced, like the best of rock and roll, in repeated five minute bursts"(9)

It was mentioned before on page 18 how, in the introduction to Scully's work, Feaver gives us a summary of the events in the artist's career which lead up to the 1973 exhibition, and suggested then that this information was relevant to Feaver's reading of the work. While being the standard method of giving biographical details, Feaver uses the framework of historical succession as a method of describing Scully's careers as a professional painter. In his reading of the work,

Feaver's own idea of progression, a sense of past, present and future permeates his description of the work in question. The critique, taken with an overall view, reflects this preoccupation with the work being seen as a sequence of events following strict chronological order. The first paintings to be discussed, Red Light and Orange Slide were painted in 1971. Then Feaver goes on to discuss Blaze and Red Shadow, paintings which were part of the 1973 show at the Rowan Gallery, all of which was then contemporary work. Having dealt with 'past' and 'present' Feaver concludes his critique with implicit references to the future:

> "It is far too early to make any attempts to 'place' Scully. Comparison of his first show with the Nolands at the Waddington during the summer led me to suspect that a torch may have been laid down and taken up again ..... each subsequent modification is to say the least, well worth watching". (10)

When discussing a particular work, this sense of placement permeates the reading. Placement as employed by Feaver, describes the work's location within the artist's evolving career, its relationship to past work and its ability to suggest future preoccupations: "Arrival, painted on his return to England is..... like all Scully's best work, both a summary of his part preoccupations and a fresh departure". (11)

Thus, Feaver's reading of the paintings can be seen as revolving around and returning to the two main points outlined in the preceding pages, i.e. (1) a preoccupation with the work's own particular brand of extremism; its visual impact as experienced by the spectator and (2), a preoccupation with the placement of the work in a historical overview of the artist's career. The sum total of his observations and commentaries on the painting entitled Arrival is a good practical indication of how Feaver combines both these focal points which he considers to be important. (Relevance to either point no. 1 or no. 2 will be indicated)

> "Arrival, painted on his return to England, in the same drop shape is, like all Scully's best work, both a summary of his past preoccupations and a fresh departure (2). The predominant bands have

been laid down symmetrically so that a few slight deviations come as slowly dawning surprises revealing tiny chinks of darker, inner colour (1). In Arrival he spray freckled the lower bands, to spread their weight rather than to distance them. He made more of the pale neutral bands than ever before (2), by giving them a tousled texture (1), and by sponging the two topmost bands; one a flushed cream, the other a mottled blue, leaving them curdled and glossy like flecked stove enamelling (1). Arrival has all the strength of the first dogmatic grids (2), but in the intervening three years (2) Scully has learnt how to allow the eye to linger and take its time (1) - how to exploit unpredictable effects(1) without weakening the unity and energy of the whole (1)." (12)

Such an interpretation of the work is of value for two main reasons. One reason being the attempt on the author's part to communicate some of the energy and impact of the paintings as seen from the spectators' point of view. The detailed descriptions of the formal aspects of the work, (occasionally evolving into slightly timid interpretations which never extend further than visual metaphor), allow the reader to mentally reconstruct the painting's visual impact.

Another contribution Feaver's critique makes to our knowledge of Scully's work is the implicit demand that we consider each work as part of an ever-evolving process; each painting is discussed in terms of its relationship to previous paintings and suggestions as to what future preoccupations will be.

Yet such a reading relies exclusively on the works physicality i.e. the painting strictly as object, for reference material. If Feaver's emphasis is to be centered on the paintings visual impact, and its location within the artist's total oeuvre, there is little or no reference made to anything outside the work immediately to hand.

A possible indication of Feaver's self-sufficiency in his reading of the paintings is to be found in the essay's format; the essay is presented with a conspicuous absence of footnoting. This is not due to an inconsiderate attitude towards the reader, nor is it due to a relaxation of professional standards. By recalling Feaver's remarks about the painting entitled Arrival the reason for the absence of accredited source material becomes clear. The fact is that throughout the entire discourse Feaver makes no reference to anything outside the physicality of the works.

This outlook affects Feaver's interpretation of the work to the extent that the work is never placed outside the context of Scully's career as an autonomous whole. Cross-references are made, for example Feaver remarks that "Arrival has all the strength of the first dogmatic grids." (13) In this instance, Feaver may see the work as a projection, but a projection that always falls within the range of another painting. This drawing of parallels between different paintings, or the suggestion of cross-references, recur throughout his reading of the paintings. Feaver comments briefly on the fact that Scully had included in the 1973 exhibition at the Rowan Gallery some drawings which he sees as "rounding off a batch of work". (14) With particular reference to a series of six drawings entitled Diagonals, Feaver notes these works as being "the gouaches he painted alongside the open grid series a year ago .....which serve as footnotes to the East coast lights and Arrival. (15)

At this point, the reading of Scully's paintings as an autonomous body of work is taken to an extreme; to a point when a series of six drawings are read exclusively as some sort of elaborate postscript to the larger works.

On one occasion however, Feaver indicates how the paintings could possibly be considered problematic i.e. an occasion when the work appears to make reference to issues 'larger' than itself. His observation is brief. which is indicative of the overall focus of his critique. With reference to a particular painting entitled "East Coast Light II" he notes that "most significant, however, is Scully's success in overcoming the abiding problem in painting of this sort; how to reconcile the crisp, pure, uncompromising qualities of hard-edge, with willful, expressive, painterly qualities". (16)

This is the only point in the entire essay when William Feaver is distracted for a moment from the actual paintings and their description, and considers the broader implications of the works; "to reconcile .....the qualities of hard edge with.....painterly qualities". (17) Although for a moment we are made aware of the potential of Scully's work to refer to issues outside the immediate range of its own physical fact, this is achieved only by drawing attention once more to the visual qualities of the work; i.e. the juxtaposition of "hard edge" and "painterly".

CHAPTER II (FOOTNOTES)

1. From conversations with the artist in Dublin in February, 1982.

2. W. Feaver, "Sean Scully", Art International, November 1973, Vol. 17, No. 19, pp. 26-7, 32, 75, (See appendix) 1. page 68)

3. L Havelock Allan, "the press critics - William Feaver of the Observer", Art Monthly, June 1979, No. 27, pp 4-5.

4. S. Hunter, "Sean Scullys' absolute paintings", Artforum, November 1979, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 30

5. W. Feaver, "Sean Scully", p.26.

6. Illustrations nos. 1, 2 and 3 are part of the series on which Scully was working at the time, and which were exhibited in the Juda Rowan Gallery in 1973 which William Feaver refers to in his essay.

7. W Feaver, "Sean Scully", p. 26.

8. Sturrock, John (ed), "Structuralism and Since" O.U.P. 1979, p.7.
In his introduction, John Sturrock notes that "the nature of the message conveyed by signs such as wreaths of flowers is one determined by the culture in which the sender and recipient live. Flowers have no natural significance, only a cultural or convential one" This is an appropriate anology to Feavers interpretation; "extremist visual impact" as a significance of a desire for "extreme state", is a conventional, and not a natural interpretation.

9. W. Feaver, "Sean Scully", p. 26.

10. Ibid, p. 75,

11. Ibid, p. 26,

12. Ibid, p. 26-27

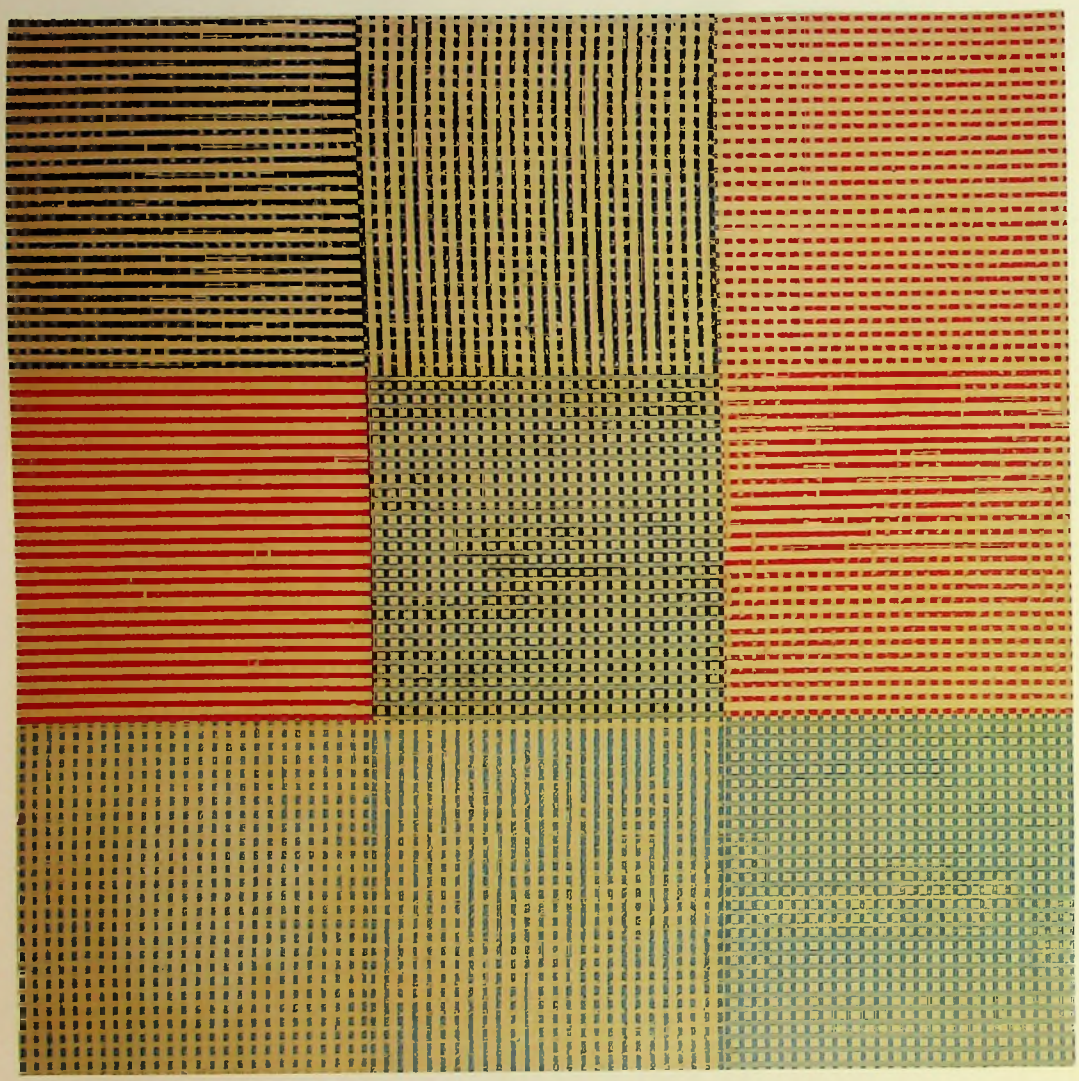
13. Ibid, p. 26

14. Ibid, p. 27

15. Ibid, p. 27

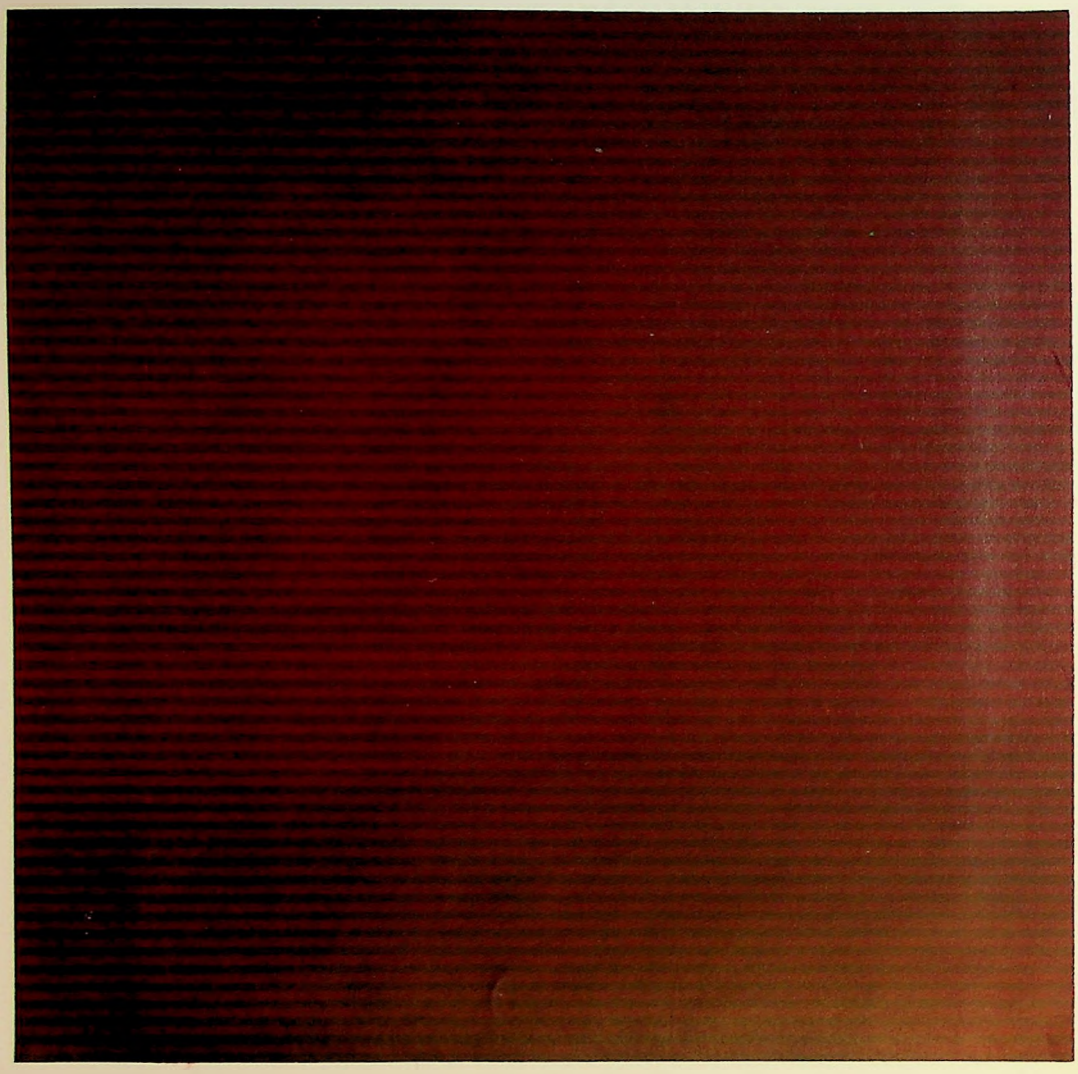
16. Ibid, p. 27

17 Ibid, p. 27.



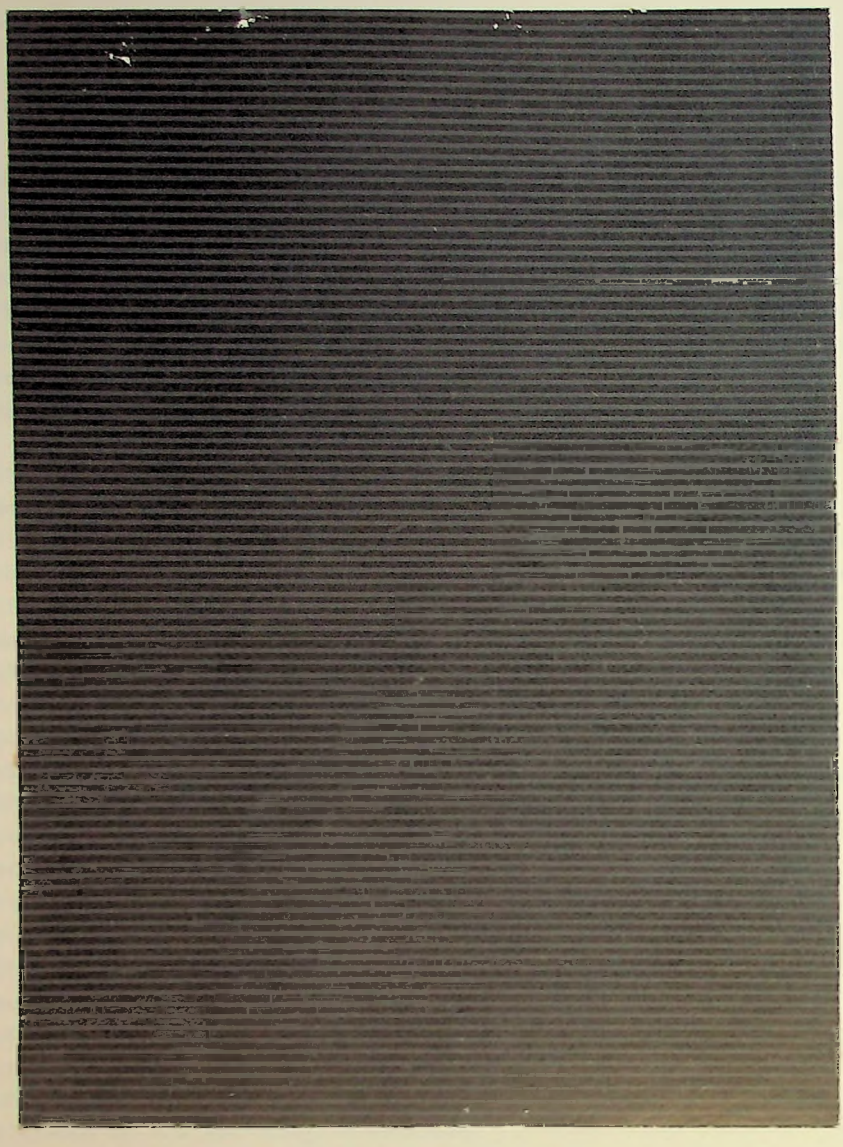
No. 4.

Hidden drawing No. 3, by Sean Scully. (1975).



No. 5.

Small Brown Painting by Sean Scully. (1979).



No. 6.

Grey/Black by Sean Scully. (1977).

CHAPTER III

Almost six years after the publication of William Feaver's critique, an essay entitled "Sean Scully's Absolute paintings" appeared in the art periodical Artforum. (1) The author, Sam Hunter, approaches the work with some of the same critical preoccupations expressed by William Feaver. But while it is useful to draw parallels between the two critics readings of the work of Sean Scully, their differences are equally important, and for the purposes of this paper, these differences between the readings will be stressed.

It is also worth noting and commenting on the six year period that separates the Feaver and Hunter essays. Since 1973, the year in which William Feaver wrote his essay, Scully's working preoccupations had changed dramatically, (if consideration is given to the strict limitations within which Scully's paintings are made; "about doggedness in laying down a million resolute stripes" (2)). When, in 1979, Sam Hunter turned his attentions to the work, Scully was working on a body of paintings which were less overtly dramatic than those paintings of the early 1970's.(3) These new paintings, with their low visual, near monochrome surfaces demanded a narrower range of chromatic elements and illusory devices, while in terms of surface variation, textural qualities and evidence of physical labour, the work had opened up to allow such qualities to come freely into play. Yet, despite such differences, Sam Hunter's reading is essentially different to that of William Feaver. While acknowledging the fact that in 1973 the body of work Feaver was presented with, and subsequently discussed in his critique, was very different to the work of 1979, Hunter's difference of critical method cannot be justified or explained by the paintings alone. The aspects of Scully's work which Hunter chooses to see as significant go over and above the dictates of the paintings themselves.

Interestingly enough, Hunter refers both directly and indirectly to Feaver's essay of six years earlier in the opening paragraphs of his essay: "In 1973, the Irish-born painter, Sean Scully told William Feaver, the first critic to take serious notice of his work, that his painting was about presenting an extreme state of one kind or another" (4). Indirectly, Hunter supports Feaver's interpretation of the desire for presenting an extreme state as being manifest in extreme visual impact. Hunter continues,

> "The basic components of his style have remained constant over the past four years, out of an

> extraordinary singlemindedness. And extremism still marks his current work, despite the radical transformation of dazzling illusionistic paintings into a sizeable and formally consistent body of near monochromes as controlled and reflective as the earlier work was unpredictable and dynamic." (5)

Hunter's support for the association of an "extreme state of one kind or another" and a strong visual impact is implicit in his ability to see both the "controlled and reflective works" and the unpredictable and dynamic" works as being significant of the extremism which is proposed as being characteristic of Scully's work. Obviously echos of William Feaver's critical preoccupations are to be found here. But whereas Feaver used this one aspect of the paintings as the central pivot for his discussion, Hunter moves on to other issues, leaving the reader with a sense of being informally introduced to the artist and his work rather than being made aware of the most significant aspects of Scully's paintings.

In 1973, it was considered to be "far too early to place Scully's work"(6). It would appear that 1979 seemed an appropriate time. After introducing the artist and his work to us, Hunter proceeds to discuss the paintings in a general way, but also in manner which establishes his personal critical perspective:

> "Their (the paintings) repetition of horizontal stripes from edge to edge, their impassive surfaces, their symmetry and overall unitary structure, evoke, minimalism." (7)

Immediately, we are presented with the elements of the paintings which contribute to form the overall visual impact. But Hunter does not bring these elements to our attention as an end in itself. His focus is in order to establish a possible link between Scully's works and mainstream artistic preoccupations, as they appeared to be when the paintings were first made (8). The aspects of Scully's works that Hunter draws our attention to are precisely those which are characteristic of minimalism, or of minimalist work (9).

It should be noted however, that the suggested association between the paintings and minimalism is established on the basis of the formal properties of Scully's paintings. Critical judgements made in this way are said to be physiognomical (10); in the sense that physiognomy describes that science of judging essential characteristics from the features of the face or body. Hence the word physiognomical, which

describes the critical method applied when judging a persons nature or character on the basis of physical attributes. As an approach to Scully's paintings, it allows some qualities of the work to be deduced from the formal elements. This method of interpretation becomes increasingly important as Hunters essay evolves. But for the moment, the association between Scullys paintings and minimalism itself is significant.

To take the paintings outside their own autonomous frame of reference, outside their own matter-of-fact physicality and attempt to locate the work in relation to broader artistic preoccupations, (in this case minimalism), is a method of inerpretation which recurs within Hunter's reading. But in this instance once the link between Scully's paintings and minimalist preoccupations has been suggested the author, in a sense, contradicts and challenges that initial assumption;

> "Yet the paintings reveal a considerable charge of emotion with their restrictive program.... such fugutive perceptual evidence of subjectivism, even hermeticism, identifies Scully's work as post-minimalist" (11).

Such re-assessment, and open debate would indicate that Hunter's approach to the work may be open-ended, suggestive, even on occasion ambiguous. The co-existence of formal austerity and willful, painterly qualities in Scully's work obviously has made an impression on Hunter. Six years earlier William Feaver was impressed by the same aspect of the paintings. For Feaver, it was "one of the abiding problems with painting of this sort" (12); a problem relating directly to the paintings themselves. But as Hunter reads this co-existence; i.e. the combination of formal austerity and emotive charge, it does not appear to be problematic in relation to the work itself, but only insofar as it relates to mainstream artistic preoccupation; an issue which he resolves by identifying Scully's work as post minimalist.

Continuous reassessment or articulated debate, (such as the appropriateness of minimilsm as a classification), is typical of Hunters approach to Scully's paintings. He establishes a possible interpretation; almost anchors the work by focussing attention on its significance according to a particular logic, and then upsets this equilibrium by turning quickly to another topic, or tracing another pattern of thought, which challenges the initial assumption. In the example of Hunters initial suggestion of the paintings compatability with the minimalist style, and the subsequent contradiction by

exposing overtly 'subjective' elements of the work, he resolves the issue by identifying the work as 'post-minimalist'. More often it is the case that Hunter leaves the issues he raises unresolved. In this way the work is not described by 'pin-point' location; but is mapped out as being an area lying somewhere between the given points. Take for example his reading of the Black Paintings made in 1977:

> "Like the monochrome grey series, the blacks were painted in sets identified by size and format, with an alternating use of acrylic and oil. The first black-on-black painting was a seven foot square canvas, employing 3/4 inch stripes, varying from one coat of paint on the ground to three for the relief bands, yet, Scully's operational methods are both simpler and more dramatically absorbing than his methodical surfaces would suggest. He intentionally lets the subtle imperfections of brushed surface stand, with traces of gesture in the combined ridges of paint -clearly visible at close viewing distance. The brush marks convey Scully's commitment to the painting act, and get rid of the machined, precisionist surface and the associations with a supra-human reality that makes puristic art of the past seem so anachronistic today." (13)

This is a good example of the author's unwillingness to allow the 'painting-as-strictly-object' perspective to predominate his reading of the works. While ample space is given to the discussion of the physicality of the Black Paintings, Hunter presents this information as a prologue to an account of the emotive potential of the work, which he sees as being at once complimentary and contradictory. The preposition, 'yet', used to combine the factual and emotive within the same sentence, suggests the hesitant, self-correcting tone of the essay. If Hunter could be said to have a critical method, his interpretation of the Black Paintings would indicate that it would have to be described as one which self-consciously balances, and looks for the same equilibrium within the paintings;

> "His paintings are in fact, unique today in their particular combination of painstaking method and emotional intensity, material presence and spiritual commitment, and in the harmonious graft of intuitive energies onto intellect". (14)

Hunter makes no attempt to reconcile the potential polarities of the "painstaking method" and 'emotional intensity'. Indeed for Hunter, this broad scope of the work; its ability to cover both severe fact and emotional intensity is its attraction. In his final sentences, Hunter suggests that the tensions provoked by this duality, and its recognition is both the works strength and significance:

> "We acknowledge the strict, almost dogmatic limitations of the pictorial structure which the artist has imposed on himself, and that awareness does not detract from their beadth and power and their precarious and exciting equilibrium" (15).

The significance of Scully's paintings is thus interpreted in their combination of severe formal limitations with expressive potential. In addition to this emphasis on a tension of opposites, Hunter exposes the paintings in a context briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, i.e. their position as they relate to the minimalist/post-minimalist issue. By placing the work in this context, the author suggests possible connections with mainstream artistic concerns. Hunters links between Scully's work and the contemporary artworld in which it appears. While on the basis of formal similiarities the connection between the paintings and is an obvious once, Hunter uses another pointed device as a means of placing Scully's work firmly within the scope of contemporary art practice.

It has been noted how William Feaver's essay was self-sufficient to a point where the opinions of the artist and others were not needed as a support, or confirmation of the opinions expressed by Feaver (16). By contrast, Hunter's entire text is punctuated with the names of artists, and selected quotations from, or remarks about, those artists; - Kenneth Noland, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella, Kasmir Malevich and Piet Mondrian.[17] The use which Hunter puts all these names to follows no strict rule; associations with Scully and other artists are established in response to whatever the particular demands at a given point in the essay are. For example, the painter Ad Reinhardt is used both as a predecessor in terms of formal similarities, and when the need seems appropriate - as an involuntary spokesman. For example, while emphasising similarities in terms of physical appearance, Hunter notes that in Hidden drawing No. 2., Scully adopted a square format subdivided into nine uniform areas, forming a perfectly trisected square "reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt's black monochrome paintings and their cruciform image" (18).

A paragraph later commenting on the grey monochromes of 1976-77, Hunter uses Ad Reinhardt again, this time as an ideological support for Scully and as a means of taking the work outside its own autonomous frame of reference. He remarks how "Scully's approach and attitude were actually more pragmatic and openended" (19) than those expressed by Reinhardt. Yet he quotes Reinhardt at will, with the justification that "nevertheless, some of Ad Reinhardt's pithy art dogmas and his various chastisements are wonderfully apropos" (20).

In retrospect, Hunters critique reads as one which recognises the formal and technical detail of the paintings, yet refuses to allow itself to be confined to an expression of the paintings as physical objects. By giving equal importance to the expressive, almost mystical potential of the paintings, Hunter establishes a tension of opposites; the co-existence of the strictly rational and overtly expressive, which is read as being the potential significance of the paintings. He proposes and suggests rather than demands a reading of Scully's paintings, their potential worth over and above a factual existence. The points of extreme between which Scully's paintings oscillate "challenge popular cliches about highly formal art as a sterile cul-de-sac" (21).

By juxtaposing detailed information about the process of painting, an almost mathematical proposition as in the interpretation of the Black Paintings, with clues as to the paintings ability to transcend these matters of fact, Hunter shows off the real strength of his critical abilities; - an unwillingness to allow the work to settle either as fact or as talisman.

CHAPTER III

FOOTNOTES

1. S Hunter, "Sean Scully's absolute paintings", Artforum, November 1979, Vol 18, No. 3, pp. 30-35. (See Appendices (2), page 72).

2. In chapter I, p. 12, the singlemindedness and persistent character of Scully's work has been suggested.

3. This point is best illustrated by comparing illustrations 1-3, typical of the 1973 exhibition, with illustrations 4-6, which represent the work of the intervening years.

4. S. Hunter , "Sean Scully's absolute paintings", p.30.

5. Ibid.

6. W Feaver, "Sean Scully", p. 75.

7. S. Hunter, "Sean Scully's absolute paintings", p.30.

8. B. Rose, "A.B.C. Art", Art in America, October/November, 1965. Reprinted in Minimal art - a critical anthology, G. Battock, (Ed.); E.P. Dutton; 1968.

   Rose's essay was regarded as one of the first major essays devoted to a definition of minimal style and its characteristics.
   "The work of the painters (minimalist) I am discussing is more blatent, less lyrical and more resistant - in terms of surface, at any rate, insofar as the canvas is not stained or is left with unpainted areas.... this work is critical of abstract Expressionist paint-handling and rejects the brushed record of gesture and drawing along with loose painterliness.

9. Ibid

10. Physiognomigy was originally a branch of the natural sciences, but in contemporary usage has broadened its scope to cover any deduction of quality or character from physical appearance.

11. S. Hunter, "Sean Scullys absolute paintings", p. 30.

12. W. Feaver, "Sean Scully", p. 27.

13. S. Hunter, "Sean Scullys absolute paintings" p. 32.

14. Ibid. p. 34.

15. Ibid. p.35.

16. Chapter II, page 22.

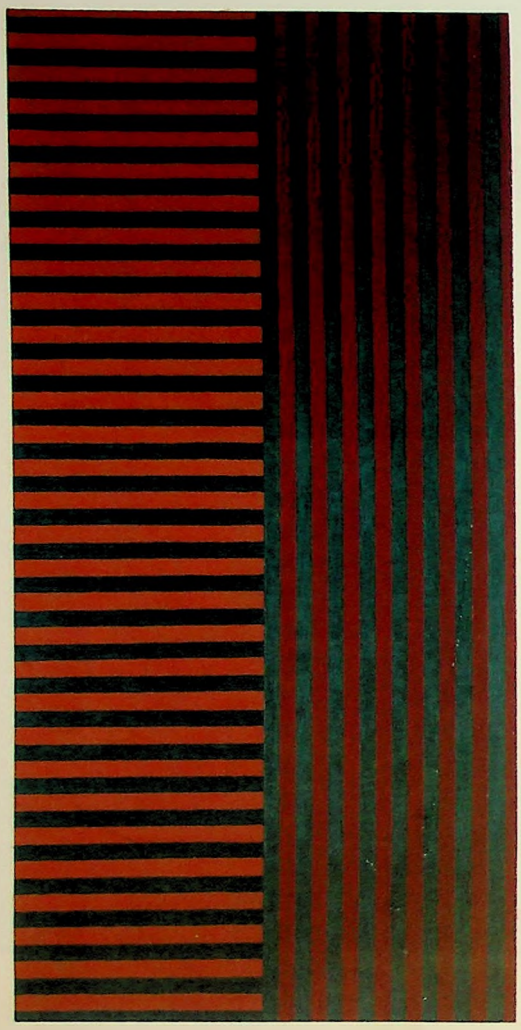
17. S Hunter, ibid, p. 30-35.

18. Ibid, p. 33.

19. Ibid, p. 33.

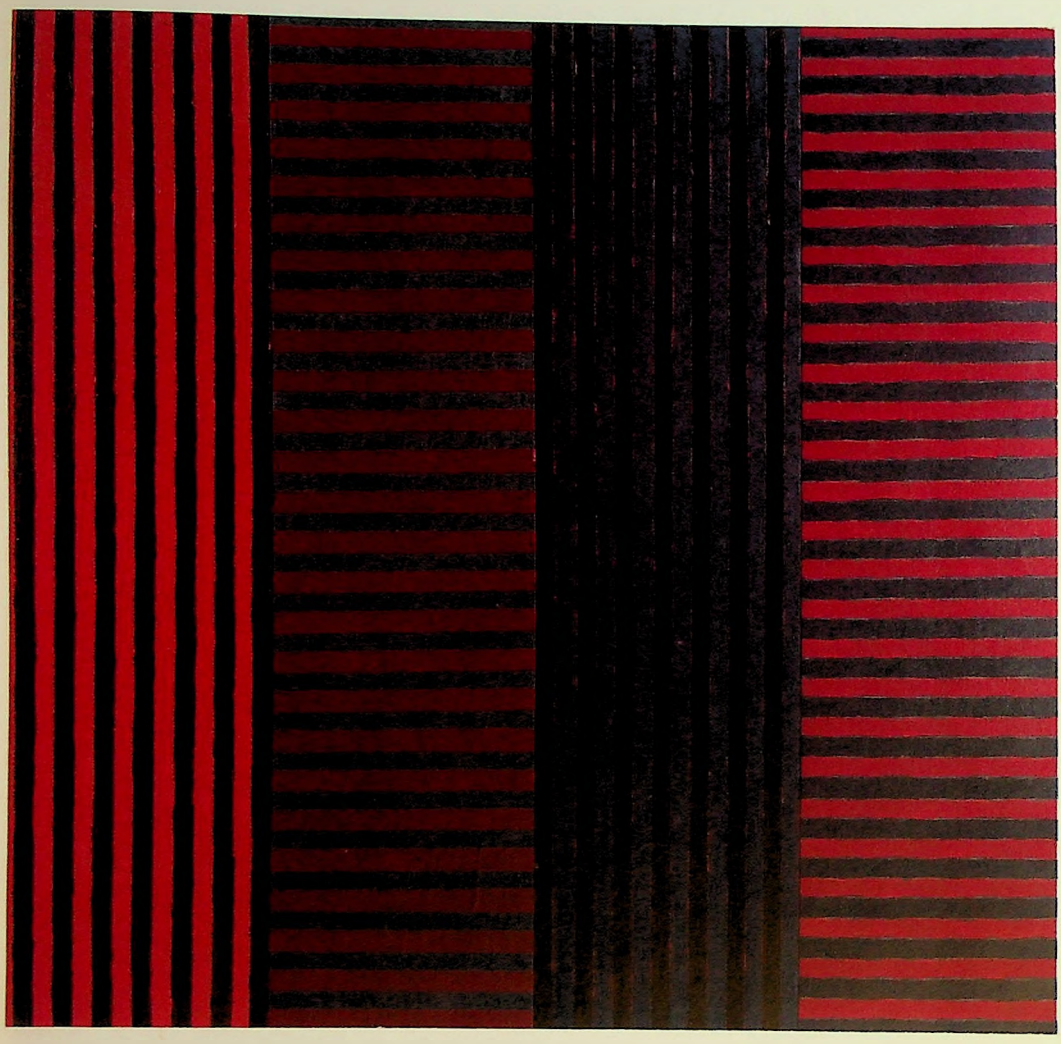
20. Ibid, p. 34.

21. Ibid, p. 35.



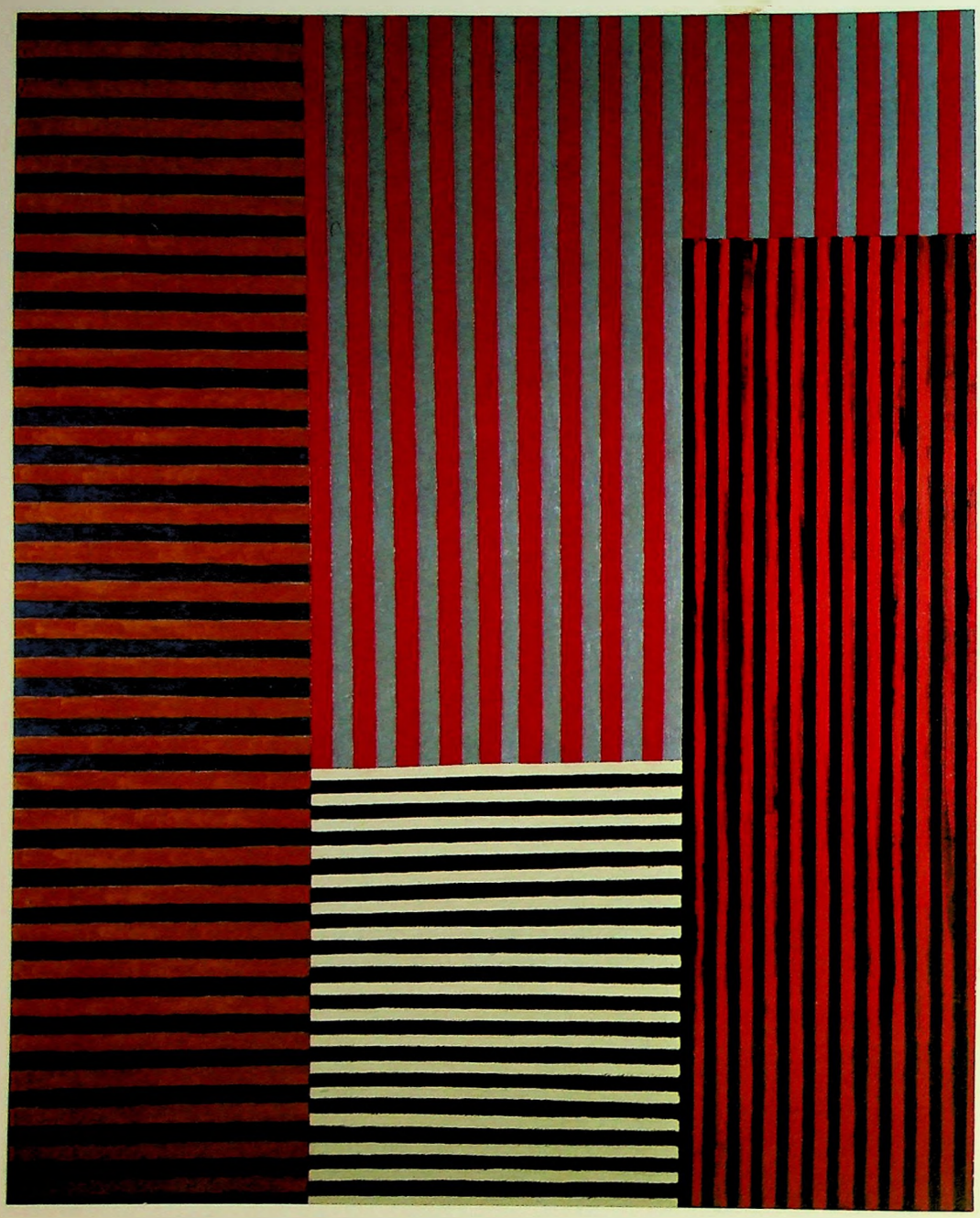
No. 7.

Firebird by Sean Scully. (1980).



No. 8.

How it is by Sean Scully. (1981).



No. 9.

Araby by Sean Scully. (1983).

CHAPTER IV

By 1981, Scully had nine solo exhibitions to his credit and no less than five exhibitions planned for that year. One of these exhibitions however, differed from the others to date, in that it was conceived as a 'mid-career retrospective' show, while the other exhibitions were primarily concerned with recent work. The show was designed to encompass the ten year span of Scully's public career. The Ikon gallery in Birmingham was the venue for the exhibition, a home base of sorts, and from there it travelled to the Sunderland Arts Centre, the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Gallery, Belfast and to the Warwick Arts Trust, London. The show was simply titled "Sean Scully - Paintings 1971-1981", and according to the acknowledgements printed in the catalogue, it was motivated and inspired by the fact that;

> "Sean Scully has produced outstanding body of work over the past ten years, and although there have been a number of occasions to see that work in London, Britain as a whole has had very little opportunity to do so. I (Antonia Payne) am pleased that the Ikon should be the gallery to remedy this situation by gathering together for the first time many of the best paintings produced during the last decade".(1)

The catalogue contained a reprint of Sam Hunter's essay; "Sean Scully's absolute paintings", which has been discussed in in Chapter 3 and an essay by Joseph Masheck entitled "Stripes and Strokes, On Sean Scully's paintings", commissioned specifically for the purpose of the catalogue. Masheck's reading of the work, and his opinion as to what its significances are, differ on many levels to the perspectives adopted by William Feaver and Sam Hunter. Conveniently, Masheck ends his essay with a consideration of the point of view he feels underlines the entire paper. For that reason, it seems appropriate to look at this closing paragraph in order to begin a reassessment:

> "I am aware that this essay has shifted its angle of approach several times along the way, but by this may enable us to begin to render up something that could only be pointed to before. All this has to do, I know, with my own thought, and work as well as with the artist's. There is no use in pretending that such

> relations can be simplified and completely rationalized. My historian's tendancy is to look back - Scully's, as an artist, is to do the one other thing he sees to do that still luckily deserves to be done". (2)

The admission on Masheck's part that his historian's tendency is to look back tells us something of how he sees his own reading of Scully's paintings. But a number of things remain unclear;"historian" is a vague classification. The only thing we can be certain of is that the historian is concerned with events of the past. William Feaver and Sam Hunter suggested a preoccupation with history in both their essays. It has been discussed how William Feaver gave his attention to the problems of locating the work within its own autonomous history, reading the paintings as a culmination of past preoccupations and as an indication of what future concerns will be. Sam Hunter, on the other hand draws attention to Scully's relationship to minimalism; the paintings ability to communicate a sense of time in so far as they relate to mainstream art of a given period.

Both Feaver's and Hunter's sense of history could be described as a selective view of the past as viewed from the present. In Masheck's reading of Scully's work, an entirely different concept of history emerges, and dominates his interpretation of Scully's work. Indeed to a certain extent it could be said that Masheck's concept of history is of the same stuff as his reading of the paintings.

Masheck's critique opens with a lengthy introduction, which takes the form of a description of the artistic climate predominant in the "later 1960's and earlier 1970's". i.e. the emergence of minimal art as the dominant avant-garde style in the United States. As discussed in the previous paragraph, Sam Hunter also considers minimal art as a point well worth referring to in relation to Scully's paintings. Hunter's association is made entirely on the basis of a physiognomical judgement - that is to say that on the strength of the fact that the formal properties of Scully's paintings are the same as some of the strong visual characteristics of the minimalist style; "Their repetition of horizontal stripes, their impassive surfaces, their symetry and overall unitary structure, evoke minimalism". (3).

Masheck's emphasis on minimalism is not concerned with formal similarities. Unlike Hunter, Masheck chooses to describe minimalism in terms of an attitude to painting as a discipline, the 'Zeitgeist' of that period, rather than as a classification of formal properties. His lengthy reminiscences read as both a humorous and evocative

description of the period;

> "Thanks partly to the conviction and importance of minimal art, which put sculpture in a position of dominance in the later 1960's and earlier 70's and partly, within the realm of painting, to the canonization of barely a handful of 1960's lyrical colourists, new painting in the 1970's seemed worse than actually threatened. As ever, intimations of doom became self-fulfilling prophecies: if painting was not yet actually dead, by a false teleology (or a hysterical apocalypse) it would have to be proscribed; even artists and critics who have once loved painting would do their duty and help to starve it out. At best, a guilty pleasure, at worst counter-revolutionary, painting came to be tainted in a pseudo-moralistic way....."(4)

Initially, this serves as a sharp contrast to Sam Hunter's preoccupation with the 'period as style'. Masheck's emphasis on 'period as atmosphere' underlines the sharp difference in perspectives. In relation to his discussion of Scully's work, it serves as an indication of what Masheck's 'historious' approach to the work will be. Referring to this long introduction, Masheck says;

> "There is a purpose in rehearsing all this, and it is not in order to keep extremely tedious discourse going.... We are concerned with the time when, as a young man, Sean Scully became a painter".(5)

This quote, in addition to the first paragraph describing the minimalist period, indicates how Masheck's concerns are not confined to 'period style', or classic hallmarks of the late 1960's and 1970's, but with the spirit of a time when Scully was making serious decisions about his career as a painter, and 'no one in England could then do intelligently and not care what was going on in New York". (6) Masheck establishes a connection between Scully's painting and the minimalist movement, not on the strength of a formal link-up between Scully's work and the dominant visual characteristics of minimal art, by suggesting what was considered significant in the visual art at that time, and what the popular preoccupations that were; " however are chose to react, he would at least be operating on a sophisticated level".(7) Masheck's sense of history makes itself apparent even in this small selection.

But before considering how Masheck's own particular sense of history affects directly his reading of Scully's paintings it is useful to consider the function the essay was to serve. Both William Feaver and Sam Hunter's essays appeared in well known art periodicals; their sole function to give a critical response to Scully's works.

But Masheck's essay was commissioned for the purpose of the catalogue accompanying the 'mid-career retrospective' show. Among the many demands of such a commission, one of the most obvious functions of the catalogue accompanying the "Paintings 1971-81" exhibition, is that it should complement the work selected.

Perhaps the most obvious way of achieving this is for the author of the catalogue's essay to work around the same theme or overall concept as was used as a basis for selecting the works to be included in the exhibition. In this case the works were selected on the basis of their ability to represent a specific period in the artists' career, i.e. the decade between 1971 and 1981.

Masheck adopts the same thematic basis to his essay, and structures it on the strict chronological sequence of the decade. He begins his account of Scully's career as a painter with a description of the period when Scully was a student and the artistic climate which prevailed, and follows his career through, year by year. Each paragraph deals with a specific period, the next one a chronological progression.

> "The earliest paintings shows a complex system of overlapping but all arthogonal grids in 1973..Scully's open 'plaid' paintings of 1974 pick up on the analytic consideration.... We turn to see how much, once more, can be piled in, . In 1974-75... Things get cool again in1977 and 1978".(8)

The passage quoted above is a collage of the opening sentences of five paragraphs, which illustrate how, in the most direct and simple way, Masheck complements the "Paintings 1971-1981" theme by following Scully's career through year by year. This structure echoes William Feaver's preoccupation with Scully's work as it appears to progress from year to year. But while on the basis of this working structure similarities appear, there are vast differences in the ways it is used.

William Feaver uses this chronological structure as the overriding concern of his critique, bringing him to a point when he says of the work itself that it is "like all Scully's best work both a summary of his past preoccupations and a fresh departure". (9) For Joseph Masheck, this overall view of Scully's career responds to the demand for an essay complementary to the exhibition, and serves the function of providing a structure, or a skeletal framework on which he builds his reading of the paintings.

The progression from year to year is used as a compositional device and not as a point of reference when the paintings are to be considered. Within this tight structural framework, Masheck superimposes his reading of the paintings, which in themselves, provide an alternative to the views expressed by William Feaver and Sam Hunter.

Masheck, throughout his interpretation of Scully's work, rarely, if ever, refers to specific paintings; rather he seems to prefer to consider the paintings in terms of their mood, or ambience e.g. "Things get cool again in 1977 and 1978" (10) is the way he chooses to describe the work of this period, rather than isolating formal characteristics. This interpretation of the works produced during this 'cool period' suggest again what both his critical and historical preoccupations are. Continuing his observations of Scully's 'cool period'; Masheck notes that;

> "We see canvases that are practically monochrome - consisting only of taut, narrow, taped adjacent stripes, all horizontal... The aim here is manifestly not to dazzle, as in 'optical art, but to convey our overall and perceptually shifting richness by spare and uniflectedly repetitive means, as, in the contemporary music of Phil Glass. So the effect, superficially 'light', is really a function of vigour, and carried with it as specific nuances of mood as do Whistler's "Nocturnes".(11)

Masheck's juxtaposition of Scully's 'cool' work with Optical Art, the contemporary music of Philip Glass and with Whistler's 'Nocturnes', (associations made almost in the same breath), indicates the vast differences between Masheck's reading of Scully's work and those made by Hunter and Feaver; the difference between an eclectic, 'discipline-hopping' reading and a self-referential, self-sufficient reading.

It seems almost as if Masheck recognises no boundaries of discipline, period or continuity when discussing what he considers significant about Scully's paintings. The section quoted also serves as an indication as to what Masheck's 'historians' sensibilities are and the sense of freedom he feels when history becomes a point of reference. In describing the sense of Scully's paintings as being comparable to the 'shifting richness' of Philip Glass's music, and to the 'nuances of mood' evident in Whistler's nocturnes, Masheck emerges as a critic who considers history not to be a strict account of the continuity of the past culminating in the present, but as a valuable source of everpresent sensibilities. References to Whistlers "Nocturnes" are made, not in order to establish a formal link with the late nineteenth century, nor to suggest a sympathetic predecessor, but in order to bring to our attention "the specific nuances of mood", common to both works, but restricted by neither one, nor to their original context.

This searching through the past in order to bring common sensibilities to light rather than to establish stylistic predecessors explains much of Masheck's reading of the paintings and his electic sources of reference. It has been mentioned before, how the author rarely makes references to specific works; preferring to focus attention on qualities common to a number of paintings. By virtue of this fact alone, Masheck sees the significance of the work in their ability to transcend their own physicality and not in the possible interpretation of the painting's self-referential 'matter of factness'.Specific thematic issues which are found in the paintings become the topic for discussion rather than the paintings as objects in themselves.

For example, Masheck devotes a generous percentage of his time to the possibility of repetition in itself as subject matter. In doing so, he broadens the scope of Scully's paintings to a point where they emerge as a direct address to an aspect of creativity itself and as if to emphasise this point, Masheck used a number of literary references (as opposed to references from the visual arts) in order to conjure up in the reader some sense of the significance of repetition itself as a source of creativity.

Initially, Masheck makes references to the formal composition of the ancient Irish poem "St Patricks Breastplate", (12) which is composed entirely of repetitive lines and refrains. The connection between the paintings and the ballad is suggested by associating the repetition of a phrase in the case of the ballad, and the repetition of a given module, i.e. the stripe, in Scully's paintings. This connection is made on the basis of the comparison of formal composition, equating a phrase in the ballad to a stripe in the painting.

Keeping with the issue of repetition, Masheck proceeds to make associations between the paintings and sympathetic works, but their point of contact is less well defined, yet with as powerful an impact. Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, Sove Kierkegaard and Wassily Kandinsky (13) are all mentioned by the author in order to suggest the potential scope of repetition as a creative resource. None of these people could make claims to share formal similarities with Scully's paintings, and perhaps for this reason Masheck uses them as reference points. His main reasons for establishing tangent points seems to be in order to conjure up the significance of the work outside its reading as visual metaphor.

Quoting from Kierkegaards book of 1843 entitled Repetition: An essay in Experimental Psychology, Masheck selects a passage which reads,

> "For though it had convinced myself that no such thing as repetition exists, yet it is a sure truth, that by firmness of purpose and by dulling one's talent for observation one can attain a uniformity which has a few more anaesthetizing effect than the most capricious diversions, and which with time, becomes stronger and stronger, like a formula of incantation".(14)

Then, without a pause for reflection or justification, Masheck jumps straight into the twentieth century, with a passage from Gertrude Stein's Writings and Lectures 1909-1945, which implicitly supports Kiertegaard's observations about the nature and effects of repetion -

> "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition.... No matter how often you tell the same story, if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different".(15)

It emerges in Masheck's reading of Scully's work, that the paintings as physical objects is an idea de-emphasised to a point when they practically disappear as such, and re-emerge as manifestations of a creative impulse, which becomes the central point of attention. In the lengthy discussion about the implicit aesthetic issues in repetition itself, from which sections have been quoted above, Masheck shows the extent to which his critical preoccupations differ to those expressed by William Feaver and Sam Hunter, who read the work exclusively as a physical object with given properties.

In reading Masheck's response to Scully's paintings, what are we given to believe are the significant aspects of the work? If Masheck's "historians tendency is to look back", we realise that it is not done in order to place the paintings firmly within a specific historical context, but paradoxically, in order to lift the paintings out of its own discipline, i.e. painting, and out of its original context of a particular place and time.

In doing so, Masheck distracts attention from the material properties of the work and re-represents the paintings as a produce of the intellect, which in Masheck's view is its strength and significance: its ability to point "to possibilities of generalized spiritual meaning in non-objective art".(16)

History, as perceived by this critic is not a solid matrix in which the artwork is suspended, but rather the knowledge that:

> "Joyce was right when he said "history was a nightmare". In its awakening, subjects glide around in homogeneous space as pure forms composed out of a mutation of history and style. Everyone occupies a zone in both the immediate and the beyond. Concepts of transcendence and meaning are erased. There is no conflict of direction, just its multiplication. All perspectives of views are absent".(17)

Both Joseph Masheck and Jonathan Miles, who is quoted above, appear to share the same 'historian's' sensibilities; in this case a perspective which allows the "subjects to glide around in homogeneous space", and which also suggests a healthy disrespect for chronology.

> "Masheck has a rich sense of art history. He sees it almost as a matrix from which individual works of art emerge, like creatures from a swamp, unable to shake the primordial historical ooze out of their natures".(18)

One only has to reconsider Masheck's interpretation of the paintings made during Scully's 'cool period between 1977 and 1978', which has been discussed on page , to realise the extent to which his 'historians sensibilities' have permeated his interpretations of Scully's work.

CHAPTER IV (FOOTNOTES)

1. Payne, Antonia, (Acknowledgements)
Sean Scully: Paintings 1971-1981, (catalogue), Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, September 1981-April 1982, P.2.

2. Masheck, Joseph, ("Stripes and Strokes, on Sean Scullys paintings"), Sean Scully: Paintings 1971-1981, (catalogue), Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1981, p.15. (See appendices (3) Page 78)

3. Ibid, p.4.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid, p.5.

8. Ibid, p.5-11.

9. Feaver, "Sean Scully", p.27
(See Chapter II, p.20)

10. Masheck, J. "Stripes and Strokes: On Sean Scullys Paintings", p.6.

11. Ibid.

12. There are a number of different versions of this poem, yet all agree on the basic structure, e.g.

"Christ be behind me
Christ be before me
Christ be below me", etc.

13. Masheck, Ibid, p. 11-13.

14. Ibid, p.12.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid, p.13.

17. Jonathan Miles, "History eyes - History dies", ZG Magazine, May 1982, No.8, (No page numbers).

18. J. Masheck, Historical Present, UMI research press, 1984, (Preface by Donald Kuspit,) p. xiii.

No. 10.

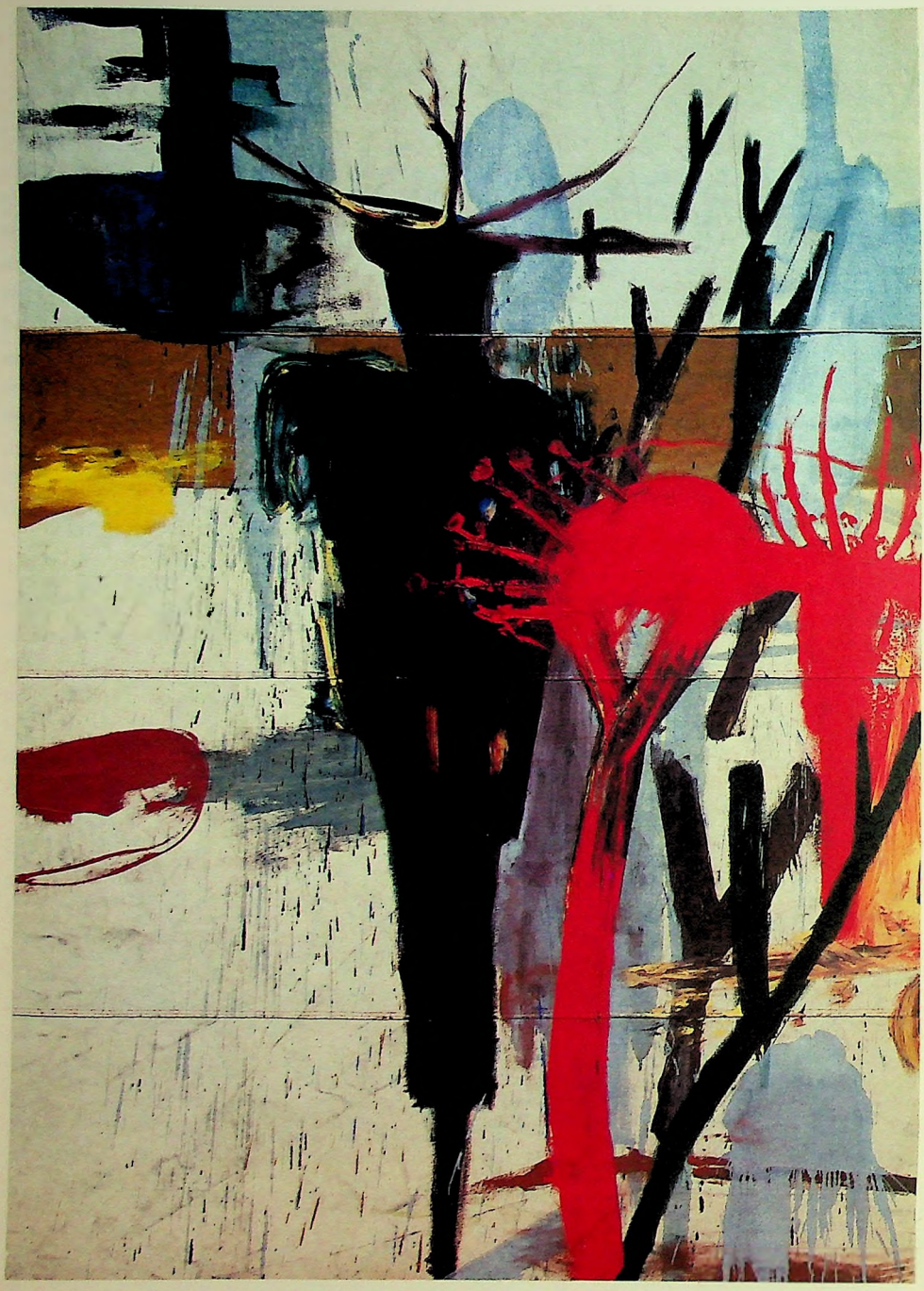
Shadowing by Sean Scully. (1983).

No. 11.

Heat by Sean Scully. (1983).

No. 12.

Unborn by Francesco Clemeute. (1983).



No. 13.

Matador on a Stick by Julian Schnabel. (1983).

CHAPTER V

In May 1983, an essay entitled "Responses to Neo-Expressionism" by a young critic, Tiffany Bell, was published by the art periodical Flash Art. Considering the points of view discussed in the preceding pages, this essay marks a radical departure from the critical preoccupations as expressed by Feaver, Hunter and Masheck. Initially, it is enough to say that Bell, unlike her predecessors, chooses to describe Sean Scully as being one of an informal group of painters, whose common interests Bell sets out to establish: "The following comments and opinions have been gathered from interviews and informal discussions held over the last few months with abstract painters about what they think of neo-expressionist painting".(1) The artists she chooses to discuss are Michael Goldberg, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Geremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Lynn Umlauf, James Mehlemann, Allen Furbeck, Linda Levit and Sean Scully.

This 'group' does not exist as such; as it has been selected by the author for the purposes of her essay. The decision to form this temporary group has been determined by Tiffany Bells needs, and not by agreement among the artists named. The boundary line of this group is, in her opinion, the fact that "they all make non-representational, non-figurative paintings". (2) This fact alone would suggest that Bells attentions will not be centred on Sean Scully's work as such, but will be focused on issues larger than the compactness of the paintings.

Considering the fact that Tiffany Bell has decided to interview and discuss the work and opinions of no less than eleven artists, one can imagine that the amount of printed space allocated to each is relatively small (3). While such severe limitations of space would obviously affect the representations made of each of the artists named, the overall concept of her essay affects directly the way in which the artists and their works are perceived. Her critical perspective, which is implicit in her treatment of the individuals, is emphasised when considered within the context of the essay as a whole.

It has been noted on page 40 how Joseph Masheck considered the inclusions of what he saw as his critical perspective to be a worthwhile gesture; "My historians tendency is to look back" (4). Tiffany Bell is no less articulate and aware of her working ambitions. Her opening paragraphs include a section which reads;

> "My intention in making this investigation was not to setup an opposition between two kinds of painting. Rather it was to test the "Zeitgest",

> to see if these artists were similarly, or even in a parallel way, feeling the need for change, so evident in the work of the neo-expressionist artists". (5)

This section serves the dual purpose of (i) suggesting the author's working aspiration and (ii) introducing the artists to us, not as individuals, but as a group with a potentially strong cohesion in spirit.

"Zeitgeist" is a term which recently has had something of an increased circulation in artworld vocabulary To a certain extent, this term is now identified with an exhibition of the same title which occurred two years ago in Berlin, and is remembered primarily as the platform from which the 'new painting' of the 1980's was officially launched. In many ways, the Berlin exhibition, by using the term to describe its particular selection of contemporary art, as redefined the significance of the word 'Zeitgeist' to cover its own particular needs. Yet, the many discussions of the exhibition prompted a review of the original significance of the word.

According to Christo Joachimides, one of the organizers of the Berlin Exhibition:

> "'Zeitgeist' is a term which first appeared in Hegel, but was later used in contemporary philosophy by Nietzche and Heidegger, for example. In this case (the Berlin exhibition) "Zeitgeist" indicates the beginning of the eighties as the moment in which a profound change took place in the visual arts. The title does not of course, refer to a new style, but to the spirit of our times, and to a new beginning in art".(6)

The ability of this term to signify 'the spirit of the times' is apparently its popular, contemporary usage - as in the opinion of Wolfgang max Faust who, in considering 'The appearance of the Zeitgeist,' remarks that the title of the exhibition is invested in its popular use with

> "the idea of hitting the nerve of the moment. It also recalls the Hegelian concept of the objective spirit that unfolds in history, and has an effect on the individual manifestation of an era".(7)

Thus when Tiffany Bells sets out to "test the Zeitgeist (8)", she uses the term as its popular contemporary usage demands;

> "to see if these artists were similarly, or even in a parallel way, feeling the need for change".(9)

Bell's method of establishing, or at least suggesting this communal spirit is straightforward and deceptively simple. First of all, she records each artist's response to the suggestion that 'neo-expressionism' is more deserving of artpublic attention than the non-representational, non-figurative idiom with which the eleven artists of the group have been identified. In the hope of establishing a communal spirit, Bell lists in turn each artist giving his/her opinion as to the significance of contemporary trends in painting. Then, in sharp contrast to each artists' assessment of the significance of the neoexpressionist school, is a brief summary of each artists' work and contemporary concerns; almost like an introduction to the artists' work, but misplaced and appearing at the end.

In the printed space given exclusively to the work of Sean Scully, this two-art representation follows through smoothly. The content of the first section, i.e. assessment of the neo-expressionist school, is a selection of opinions expressed by Scully during prior conversations (10). Scully is quoted as saying initially that neo-expressionism, in his opinion, "offers an alternative culture which asserts itself in times of crisis - when there is an absence of belief in the future".(11) He is represented as one who considers this 'new spirit in painting' to be secondary artform; in his own words, "at the moment, representational means are no longer appropriate for making major art".(12) Yet, so as not to be seen as totally dismissive, Bell includes an overtly optimistic and approving response from Scully, complementing the earlier remarks about the contemporary lack of 'major art', i.e., Scully's affirmation of and interest in the neoexpressionists use of traditional painting materials and exploitation of large scale format.

The second part of this two-part focus on Sean Scully's work is simply a change of focus. Without apparent continuity, from the sharp relief of neo-expressionism, attention is "zoomed" onto the artists own concerns as a painter. By way of introduction to Scully's private concerns Bell says that "Scully is glad that the focus has currently moved away form abstract painting - it removes the pressure to confirm".(13)

This observation on the authors' part is soon qualified by a quote from Scully which suggests what his ambitions as a painter might be; " the specificity of imagist painting does not allow the painting to express things far bigger".(14) Bell concludes that Sean Scully, "believes abstract art can express more significant spiritual aspirations than representational art".(15).

The effect of this representation is something similar to that of a documentary film, when the director sets up a basic structure and allows the subject or subjects of his attentions to build on the skeletal framework as they wish. Bell's essay retains this sense of an unobtrusive author who records, rather than demands responses from her subjects. Because of the apparently neutral way in which her interviews are presented, one feels that the author does not impose her personal opinions of the artist on us in this case.

Her focus on Sean Scully, taken in isolation, reflects an unobtrusive method of approach, and is apparently straight forward and simple. The outstanding feature of Tiffany Bell's approach is her emphasis on opinions of the artists and their personal responses as opposed to an in-depth examination of artworks. Scully's apparent condemnation of neo-expressionism on the basis of its inability to "make a major art" is echoed in the artist's admission that his personal ambition is to make paintings of more significant spiritual aspirations, than those expressed by representational painting. It is a familiar method of establishing an opinion; the assertion of one person's point of view at the expense of another's; in this case, the suggestion that non-representational, non-figurative painting is a more potent source of "spiritually significant" art than contemporary figurative work.

But the more significant reading of Bell's essay is only hinted at in her treatment of the artist as an individual. The reading of Scully's work which is impressed on us is not to be found so much in the section referring directly to him as in the overall structure and premises underlying the article itself.

In Bell's essay reference to artworks as physical structures with given visual properties is noticeable by virtue of its absence. With the exception of her initial remarks which established the prerequisite for selection in her informal group, (i.e. "they all make non-representational, non-figurative paintings"), the readers attention is diverted from the artworks made by the eleven painters selected.

Indeed, the possibility of the paintings of any member of the group being problematic, or significance in themselves is an issue which is never raised. Bell's non-comment on the validity of the paintings on which the artist's reputations rely is consistent throughout her critique. This fact alone might establish Bell as a critic whose preoccupations are set apart form the critics discussed in the preceding chapters.

If she chooses to omit description or analysis of the works themselves it is because, in her opinion, the real significance of this group of painters is not due primarily to, their work when seen in isolation, but the work becomes significant in Bell's opinion by virtue of the context in which it is considered. The position of non-representational, non-figurative painting within the arena of current preoccupations is the real significance of the artworks according to Tiffany Bell.

As suggested by the title of her essay, Tiffany Bell proposes that the significance of the paintings of each of the artists named is in their ability to assert themselves in the contemporary climate of art world preoccupations. In recent years, the attention of the art media and market has devoted to the re-emergence of imagist painting is seen by Bell as being in opposition to the aspirations of non-figurative, non-representational painters.

In this instance,the critic emerges as one who hears out the works defense at a court of history; the one how pleads it contemporary significnace. With the assistance of the opinions of eleven artists, (Scully included), the author suggests that while neo-expressionism has done a lot to resuscitate a dying interest in painting as a viable artform, it should not overshadow the claims of non-representational painting for a 'spiritually significant' form of painting. What Tiffany Bell is pointing to in this instance is not the significance of the works in isolation as art objects, but the context, or the cultural climate in which the works will be seen, and which ultimately decides the worth of the paintings.

The advantages to a reading of this sort to Scully's works are obvious. The relationship between Scully's paintings and mainstream artistic concerns has been a consideration for both Sam Hunter and Joseph Masheck. Hunter's suggested relationships were established on the basis of shared visual qualities, the physical semblances between Scully's paintings and minimalism. (16) Joseph Masheck's method of association is closer to that adopted by Tiffany Bell: the emphasis being placed on the attitudes to painting as a discipline at a given time, rather than shared formal properties. Yet Masheck leaves this point as an introduction and proceeded to discuss the painting's powers of transcedence. (17) Tiffany Bell sees no need to go any further; she focuses the readers attentions firmly on the contemporary context within which the work is seen.

This diversion of the reader's attention from the actual works to extension, has its advantages in the fact that it opens up the possibilities of the importance and the relevance of considering how the painting is affected by external factors, such as critical opinions, which lie outside the immediate range of the works themselves. Bell places the reader in the unusual position of considering context before considering content, and in so doing demands that the work be considered, not in a cultural/contextual vacuum, but as a contribution and complement to the external conditions in which the work was made.

Chapter V (FOOTNOTES)

1. T. Bell, "Responses to Neo Expressionism", Flash Art, May 1983, No 112, p. 40 (See Appendices 4, p.88).

   (Scullys paintings at this time are indicated by illustrations no 10 and no. 11, page 49 and 50. Paintings by two of the well know Neo-expressionist painters are illustrations no 12 and no 13, page 51 and 52).

2. T. Bell, Ibid, p. 40.

3. The essay in full consists of approx 4000 words, Of that total number, approx 500 words are given exclusively to a discussion of Sean Scully.

4. Chapter VI, page 40.

5. T. Bell, "Responses to Neo-Expressionism," p. 40.

6. "Zeitgeist, an interview with Christos Joachimides", Flash Art, November 1982, No 109, p 26.

7. W. Max Faust, "The appearance of the Zeitgeist", Artforum, January 1983, Vol.11, No. 5, p. 86.

8. T. Bell, "Responses to Neo-Expressionism" p. 41.

9. Ibid, p.40.

10. Ibid, p. 44.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. See Chapter III.

17. See Chapter IV.

CHAPTER VI

(SUMMARY)

In the first chapter it has been suggested how the critic could be considered as a mediator between an artwork and a reader within a system of secondary information. In an age when the secondary system of information dissemination is fast replacing the primary one on which it is based the critic is, for the reader, a sensitive, responsive link with the artwork. Through the critic, the reader might hope to achieve some real sense of the work, to be given an indication of the responses the work might provoke. In the four instances discussed in the previous chapters, the paintings of Sean Scully have been represented to the reader by way of the four reviews. What sense of the work has been communicated? In the specific examples discussed have the aspirations outlined in Chapter I been realised?

The first critic to take serious note of Scully's paintings was William Feaver, who considered the work as being significant on the basis of their visual impact; obviously impressed by the dramatic appearance of the paintings. Feaver verbally reconstructs the accumulation of motifs, colours and methods of application which add up in total to a brilliant spectacle. His evaluation of Scully's paintings reads as one saturated by the interpretation of the paintings as being first and foremost physical objects with particular visual properties. On reading Feaver's interpretation of the work, one could come away with a strong sense of how the paintings might appear in fact. In this critical response the author seems to have kept personal interference levels to a minimum as, for example, statements of personal preference or evaluations are not all that obvious. The overall tone is apparently neutral, and seems to make no attempt to convince the reader of anything other than the fact that these paintings are deserving of attention. It would appear that an objective response may be implicit as this critics response appears to be well founded in fact.

Sam Hunter's interpretation of Scully's paintings presents the reader with another set of values, and a completely different reading of the paintings.

For Hunter, the significance of Scully's work is to be found partly, and only partly, in its physical, factual existence. Like Feaver, he considers the works physical qualities, but not in order to conjure up

the 'razzle dazzle' impact of the work. Hunter sees the visual motifs of the work as being symbolic of a particular sensation or expressive potential. His commitment to such an interpretation allows him to recognise, in the bare physical facts of the paintings, suggestions of metaphor; "the brush marks convey Scully's commitment to the painting act" (1). Hunter's reading of the work communicates a sense of how the combination of fact and fancy could be the most significant aspect of Scully's work. By constantly repeating his point of view, Hunter asks that Scully's work be considered, not simply as physical objects, but as objects significant because of their expressive potential, as "a combination of painstaiking method and emotional intensity, material presence and spiritual commitment, and a graft of intuitive energies onto the intellect (2)".

This simultaneous recognition of matters of fact and powers of trancendence is the most memorable feature of Hunter's reading of Scully's work. The reader is asked to consider, not only Scully's ability to produce very finely crafted objects, but also ability of these paintings to call to mind sensibilities which lie outside the immediate range of the work. The differences between Feaver's reading and Hunter's reading of the work is apparent as in the first case, the work is read strictly within its physical limitation and in the second, attention is focused on the transcendental potential of the physical facts.

Joseph Masheck introduces us to yet another possible way of reading Scully's work. In his interpretation, the paintings as specific objects with titles, dimensions and specific visual properties, (the very points both Feaver and Hunter consider priorities) is obviously not a concern to Masheck. His reading of the paintings is concerned primarily with their ability to communicate a timeless quality

He goes to serious lengths to take the paintings out of their own matter-of-factness, and stressess the works potential as intellectual stimulus. This reading of Scully's work would appear to be seriously at odds with Feaver's interpretation; while Masheck points to the paintings as intellectual stimulus Feaver points to the paintings as visual, sensory stimulus.

For the first time, Masheck de-emphasises the work's physicality to a point where the paintings as solid objects practically disappear. He represents the work to the reader as a point of departure for a serious consideration of the creative impulses which prompted their making. By constantly referring to sources outside painting as a discipline, the paintings in themselves are not brought to the readers attention, but the works ability to provoke a reconsideration of creative issues is put very much into the limelight.

But while Feaver, Hunter and Masheck, show themselves to read the significance of the work in very different ways, it appears that all three read the work, as it were, from the object outwards. Feaver takes the work as a given object, and on it builds a self-sufficient, autonomous history from the formal properties of the work. Hunter sees the work not in terms of a logical, autobiographical progression, but rather as a tension of opposites, both formal and intellectual. Masheck reads the work as being significant only as a physical manifestation of a creative impulse, and in its ability to refer the spectator to issues outside the limited range of paintings as a discipline. Yet common to all three critics is their treatment of the paintings as isolated objects, hardly existing in the real world, as a point for critical departure.

Tiffany Bell offers an alternative to this approach, by working as it were from the general to the particular. She chooses to direct attention away from the paintings themselves in order to suggest that the works significance is to be found in the critical climate in which the work is placed. The interpretation of the paintings as physical objects with given properties is a method of approach that she chooses not to use. Her main focus of attention is on the contemporary preoccupations of the artworld; "a sense that these artists working outside a figurative or narrative tradition are being misrepresented as overtly intellectual".(3)

Bell recognises the amount of public attention held by what she describes as the 'neo-expressionist painters' in recent years. Her reflection on Scully's work takes the form of a plea for the recognition of the value of the non-figurative painters. She gathers an improvised group of painters together, including Sean Scully, on the basis of the shared formal properties of their work. Their solidarity is suggested by the artist's self-confessed ambitions to make paintings of major spiritual significance. Obviously Bells concern is not with the visual impact of the paintings, nor with the possible interpretation of the paintings as metaphor.

The paintings of Sean Scully are seen through Bell's essay as being, first of all, outside mainstream concerns at the time when they were first made and secondly, as an alternative to that mainstream. The value of the paintings in this way is determined not so much by the value intrinsic to the work itself, but by the value structures which surround, and inevitably define the works.

The interpretations of Scully's paintings suggested by these four critics are so disparate as to indicate no common ground; no working objective shared by all four. In each case discussed, the work is

brought to the immediate attentions of the reader, yet in each case the work is interpreted as being significant or deserving of attention for different reasons. But each critic is convincing in their : the claims made by each for Sean Scully's paintings seem perfectly credible. The fact that Joseph Masheck sees the work as being deserving of attention because of its ability to transcent its own physicality does not necessarily contradict William Feaver's assertion that the work is significant on the basis of its extreme visual impact.

One reason for this acceptance of the multiple perspectives offered by the critics might be the realisation that the critics no less than the artist or artworks which they represent, are responsive to a product of the times in which they work. Their interpretations of artworks are as open and sensitive to undercurrents of change as those artworks which claim their attentions. Tiffany Bell, in her review of Scully's work, draws attention to the possibility of a 'Zeitgeist', a spirit of time and place. The critics are not insensitive to this spirit; to the idea of hitting the nerve of the moment. The cultural climate in which the artwork is made affects and determines the way in which the work is seen. The critic can also be a reflection of that climate.

Thus it is hardly surprising that William Feaver's factual interpretation of Scullys work should appear at a time when formalist criticism claimed the artpublics attention. In the same way, Tiffany Bell could be seen as a reflection of contemporary concerns with the location of artworks within culture as a whole. The chronological order in which the four critics discussed appeared could be seen as a reflection of the changing concerns of the art critic, in accordance with the changing focus of artworld dialogue.

CHAPTER VI (Summary)

FOOTNOTES

1. S. Hunter, "Sean Scully's absolute paintings", Artforum, November 1979, Vol. 18, No. 3, p. 30.

2. Hunter, Ibid, p.34.

3. T. Bell, "Responses to Neo-Expressionism", Flash Art, May 1983, No. 112, p. 40.

CONCLUSION

The art critic has been discussed in a general sense in Chapter one. It is suitable at this point to return by way of elaboration to some of the ideas discussed there as some form of conclusion.

Attention in the first pages was centred on a popular image of an art critic as he or she might function within a secondary system of information dissemination. The art critic has been portrayed as one who assists in the distribution of information about the visual arts, as one who has been suggested as a vital and sensitive link between the artwork and the larger audience art criticism affords by virtue of the medium employed. In an age when a secondary system of information is fast replacing the primary system on which it is based, the art critic can be considered as one who may contribute to this replacement by the very nature of the craft, yet the promise of a personalised response remains. In the light of the points discussed in the previous chapters in relation to the paintings of Sean Scully and their critical appraisals, has the concept of the art critic been altered in any way, or indeed could any worthwhile addition to this particular concept be outlined.

One cannot dispute the fact that the art critic has emerged as a sensitive, responsive link between the artworks and the reader. The contributions made to our resources of information about Scully's paintings have been vast. By virtue of the fact that the contributions made by each critic have been so diverse and so complete in their perspective, it is appropriate at this point to make some sort of addition to the particular concept of the art critic suggested in Chapter I.

If anything can be said in retrospect, the critic must be acknowledged for bringing to the attention of his or her reader, a vital part of an artwork which has so far not been mentioned, but has been implicit throughout these chapters. Dr. W. Bongard, a German economist, whose area of specialization is the art market has used simple diagrams to illustrate what he considers to be a total work of art. (1) Using a pie chart, he cuts the complete circle in half. One of these halves he sees as representing the actual artwork, the object in itself. The remaining hemisphere is subdivided into four areas, representing the art market, the museum, the gallery and the art critics. Each area is equally important, as without even one of the subsections, the complete circle, or 'artwork' does not appear.

The interdependence of each contributing subsection is underlined by this fact, and suggests "what kind of enduring companionship between art and criticism has resulted from the gallons of ink spilled".(2)

The simple illustration used by Dr. Bongard is one well worth considering, as it suggests in the simplist way that both the art critic and the artwork in itself contribute to our total concept of the artwork. The artwork is dependant on critical response to the extent that it contributes to and extends the aura, the echo which surrounds and invariably becomes part of the artwork. The currency of opinion which surrounds the artwork is thus partly responsible for its existence and recognition as such. In this way, it seems that neither the artwork or the criticism can survive independently of each other.

This brings to mind the concept of "Rezeptionsgeschichte", which suggests that a work of art is a piece of dead matter until it is drawn into a dialectic, a dynamic relationship with an observer (3). That relationship which is essential to an artworks recognition and survival as such is determined by both the spectator and by the demands put on the artwork - the spectators horizon of expectation. The critic, by interpreting the artwork in a previously unacknowledged way broadens the readers sense of the artworks significance. If anything, this suggests a common objective on the critic's part, which is certainly implicit in the case of the critics of Sean Scully's work; i.e. to increase the ability to see and to recognise the multiple levels of interpretation and perception which an artwork may provoke.

An appropriate conclusion may be found in the writings of Donal Kuspit because of the sense of purpose implied when considering the role of the critic in the contemporary artworld;

> "Indeed, it is only in its media filtered form that the work has any facticity, it is only by having its singularity passed through the mass media that it acquires the aura of individuality, the tone of the ultra-unique, hyper individual inner life. Only publicised in the mass media does it seem to have a secret. Only when its finiteness is expanded by the infinity the mass media utopianly promises does it have a meaningful existence. Only when it has been infinitely extended by mass display is it truly powerful, a reservoir of energy that can resist the entropy of its own objectivity".(4)

Conclusion (FOOTNOTES)

(1) "Painting for Pleasure and Profit"; an 'Arena' production for BBC, broadcast in March 1985.

(2) Max Kozloff, "The Critical Reception of Abstract Expressionism", Arts Magazine, December 1965, Vol 40, No.2, p.27.

(3) Foster, S.C. The Critics of Abstract Expressionism, UMI Research Press, 1980 p.x.
(Foreword by Donald Kuspit)

(4) Kuspit, D.B., The critics is artist: the intentionality of art, UMI Research Press, 1984, p.387.
(Chapter 29, "Art in an age of Mass Mediation").

APPENDICES (1)

SEAN SCULLY

William Feaver

I saw Sean Scully's first truly formidable painting four years ago in an otherwise fair-to-middling student exhibition. A jarring mass of red, green, blue and yellow grids, it glared out, creating quite a local disturbance. A similar painting, Red Light, won him a John Moores prize in Liverpool last year.

Scully is now twenty-seven and has already more than fulfilled his student promise. By any standards, his first London show, at the Rowan in November, is a remarkable opening salvo.

"For me", he says, "painting is about presenting an extreme state of one kind or another." Red Light and Orange Slide (in the Power Art Institute Collection), the paintings that first made his name, were indeed determinedly extremist. Their brilliant razzle-dazzle impact was the net result of a systematic accumulation of grids, overlapped to form labyrinthine vistas echoing back to preliminary stain tracks on the canvas: the "go positions" as he describes them. Their edges obscured by the subsequent crowding effects, these first stained bands ended up as mere distant glimpses either of translucency or of inner darkness. Any tendency on the part of the bands to thrust outwards being checked by the cross hatching, the power and tension of these paintings was tied up in the colour sequences. For Scully's system was straightforward and, at times, brash. It followed a rigid, two-to-the-bar rock and roll beat, so overdubbled and multi-tracked that, rather like one of Phil Spector's multitudinous, pop sound-barrier breading record productions, the best of the completed paintings overcame colour barriers and, as Scully puts it, "became totally organic. So that the painting was not simply a demonstration of a process. So that the picture transcended this and, as it became most 'alive' it became most human."

These paintings were undoubtedly stake-claiming, attention-seeking devices. They didn't invite searching examination. The eye was hustled along from one compartment in the grid to the next, observing occasional irregularities, enjoying the parallax illusions, but recognising that the effects were designed to be seen over-all, taken in a glance, to be experienced, like the best of rock and roll, in repeated five minute bursts.

The "extreme state" of these paintings - each canvas topped up and brimming over with incident, each added grid overruling or at least modifying its predecessor - has become a uncompromising accumulative process unduly restrictive. So he tried, in various ways, to break out of the grid routine - to add movement, texture, dynamic reinforcement to his peak performance colour schemes.

In Blaze, the most successful of these forays, he organised a strutting diagonal march-past in Smarties candy colours: Pink, Yellow and burnt chocolate. But in this as in the earlier grid paintings, the pigment itself was applied in a neutral, even-coated way, stifling the canvas and, in effect, forcing the spectator to keep his distance, to look to the painting to satisfy his appetite for colour, line and rhythm rather than for modulated tone or texture.

Then, in the summer of 1972, he slipped into a flatter, looser idiom with four large paintings produced in quick succession. He first saturated the whole canvas with weathered blues or smart tan brown, then laid down two or three dark establishing bands and added narrower white, buff and red lines, subdividing the painting, raising further suggestions of space and depth with every move. But whereas, before, this skeletal state had served only as his "go-position", he now had sufficient confidence to make a line or two articulate enough to fulfill his needs. The grids opened out "like big blow-ups of details that had been taken out of a very hectic and overcrowded environment and placed against a white space". Excited by the variations in surface and density that emerged, he sprayed a red line under two red bands in Red Shadow, making the whole elegant painting smoulder with suppressed excitement.

These paintings had little of the bursting vitality of the previous series but, instead, a new, decisive, commanding quality. Instead of following his own pre-ordained rules he had found it possible to allow for accidents, to adjust his aims to suit the ground he found himself working on.

Scully spent the academic year 1982 -1983 at Harvard on a painting fellowship, and once again sook some months struggling to establish ways of enlarging the means and possibilities at his disposal. In particular he wanted to make the paintings "more various and softer from different distances", so that they could be read in detail as well as noticed overall. Red Shadow and Divided Blue, the best of the previous batch, had been little more than clarified enlargements of select passages from the first systematic paintings. The grids had been four-squarely placed, at calculated intervals. So, aiming to achieve a more expressionistic and unpredictable spacing, he took to shifting the bands, rollering them on freehand, leaving them scrambled and glutinous like slipshod rubber tiling. A few good strong paintings emerged, one in particular with diagonal blue bands running like ducts through thick fleshy paint. But Scully only found his form again fully in the spring of this year when, starting with Boom and Amber, he successfully amalgamated all he had learnt from his experimental sorties with the main body of his work.

Amber marked a return to the accumulative complications. It's a double exposure: a thick-ply grid obscured by several trellis layers, like the sliding gates on an elevator cage; the glowing colours springing from the canvas as though from a trampoline. For, by spraying under every band, Scully established ambiguous half-tones which could be read as shadow and as distance, making each layer of trellis float in a convincing illusory space.

This beguiling levitational trick of the trade (cf. Bernard Cohen's squirming coils paintings a few years ago) could quickly become a dead end in itself (again cf. Cohen). But in Amber and in other important paintings from his spell in America - Blue Shadow and East Coast Light I and II - Scully made a considerable advance. For the last three he sliced away the two lower corners of the rectangle so as to accommodate and encourage the downward dash of the diagonals.

Far from intimidating the subsequent development of the painting, the shaped canvas became in itself the "go-position" and gave Scully the confidence he needed to establish the preliminary bands freely and coherently in "dynamic combinations". And although each painting in the sequence considerably tightened and formalised as the bands accumulated, the impromptu energy survived. In East Coast Light I a jab of yellow sticks up as a lucky reminder of a previous stage in the picture's life. East Coast Light II emerged whitened into a dense mesh, undermined by zipping red bands. All these calculatedly risky paintings were opened up and aerated by the sprayed lines. Grid references were eliminated, the diagonals snapping into place like elastic bands, some straying under the tension and converging on their neighbours, leaving odd shadowy holes in the pattern where, by geometric rights, they should have been sited.

Arrival, painted on his return to England, in the same drop-sided shape is, like all Scully's best work, both a summary of his past preoccupations and a fresh departure. The illusory shadows have been diffused in wide spray scatterings. The predominant bands have been laid down symmetrically so that the few slight deviations come as slowly dawning surprises revealing tiny chinks of darker, inner colour, like slithers off Broadway Boogie Woogie. Most significant, however, is Scully's success in overcoming the abiding problem in painting of this qualities of hard-edge with wilful, expressive painterly qualities.

In Arrival he spray-freckled the lower bands, to spread their weight rather than to distance them. He made more of the pale, neutral bands than ever before by giving them a tousled texture and by sponging the two topmost bands: one a flushed cream, the other a mottled blue, leaving them curdled and glossy like flecked stove enamelling. Arrival has all the strength of the first, dogmatic grids; but in the intervening three years Scully has learnt how to allow the eye to linger and take its time, how to exploit unpredictable effects without weakening the unity and energy of the whole, how to make allowances for accidents and atmospherics.

Scully seems to advance by leaps and bounds, struggling to develop his skills in the intervening fallow periods. In "pushing the idea towards an extreme" he treats the process of painting as a count-down, aiming for the point where the more he adds to the painting "the simpler it gets", where the sum total comes alive. Despite the high-handed, single-minded impression created by such early paintings as Red Light, Scully can work successfully on any scale. He produces drawings not only as preliminary exercises but as small definitive suites to round off a batch of work.

Good examples of these are the gouaches he painted alongside the open grid series a year ago and a recent set of six remarkable drawings, Diagonals, in masking tape and stain which serve as footnotes to the East Coast Lights and Arrival.

It's far too early to make any attempt to "place Scully - though it's pretty obvious that he admires those leading lights of the past few generations: the great tradition established by Pollock, Rothko, Louis and Noland. Nolde's brand of extremism influenced him early on, odd as this may now seem. More recently he was impressed by the Olitski retrospective at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts: after-effects of this may be detected in the fine surface finish of Arrival and Soft Ending. This said, Scully already stands out as an unmistakeable, refreshing, independent voice. Comparison of his first show with the Nolands at the Waddington during the summer led me to suspect that a torch may have been lain down and taken up. For Scully's "struggle between the simplicity of evenness and the complexity of underlying space", a struggle that began with those tumultuous grid paintings shining unabashed, like multi-storey Costa Brava hotels basking in the noonday sun, and that has gained weight and power with each subsequent modification is, to say the least, well worth watching. In all his best work there's a sense of straightforward zest; a feeling that the painting is still evolving, still live, as you enjoy it.

SEAN SCULLY'S ABSOLUTE PAINTINGS

Sam Hunter

In 1973 the Irish-born painter Sean Scully told William Feaver, the first critic to take serious notice of his work, that his painting was "about presenting an extreme state of one kind or another." At the time Scully was 26, and had already held his first one-man show in London, of large-scale, optically active color grids that, in a sense, inflated Kenneth Noland's milder, overlapped planes of the period into more vivid and intricate space lattices, repeated and echoed in converging depth. After Scully emigrated to the United States in 1975, he abandoned baroque illusionism and spatial maze in a series of flat, monochrome paintings - first in grays, and then, two years later, in blacks - composed of alternating, uniformly spaced bands of paint slightly varying in texture and thickness. The basic components of his style have remained constant over the past four years, out of an extraordinary single-mindedness. And extremism still marks his current work, despite the radical transformation of dazzling illusionistic paintings into a sizeable and formally consistent body of near-monochromes as controlled and reflective as the early multicolor work was unpredictable and dynamic.

Scully's new paintings might seem narrowly dogmatic in their adherence to his particular formula. Their repetition of horizontal stripes from edge to edge, their impassive surfaces, their symmetry and overall unitary structure, evoke Minimalism. Yet the paintings reveal a considerable charge of emotion within their restrictive program. Ambiguities of surface can be read alternately as painting/object, spatial atmosphere or the flat wall. The physicality of the color matter, with its alternately reflective and matte effects, the subliminal after-image of chroma buried in darkened brown or black pigment, and deliberate inconsistencies in paint application all leave room for sensibility and support an intuitive reading of the decision-making process. Such fugitive perceptual evidence of subjectivism, even hermeticism, identifies Scully's work as post-Mininalist. A most engaging and articulate ideologue, Scully makes it clear that he still feels himself involved in highrisk painting of considerable emotional impact, despite its formal austerity. He is also convinced of the relevance of his fanatically single-minded methods both to issues of personal freedom and to the inherent meanings of art itself. The force and clarity of his elucidations, in paintings of masterful elegance and power, sharply challenge popular cliches about highly formal art as a sterile cul-de-sac.

Scully spent the academic year 1972-73 at Harvard on an exchange fellowship. In 1975 he returned to the United States for a longer period on a Harkness Fellowship, which enabled him to live and paint in New York for two years. His American experience made the London art situation seem provincial and limiting, so Scully decided to settle permanently in New York.

He has been living here for the past four years, stimulated by the art scene and by its formal traditions past and present - by the exemplary work of Rothko, Reinhardt, Ryman and Marden, among others. Scully's flat gray-and-black-striped paintings were first exhibited in New York two years ago. Last year he created a 10-by-20 foot, L-shaped wall painting 17 of his paintings, covering a five-year period, and Scully will also exhibit a group of black-on-black monochrome paintings later this winter.

Even before he left London, Scully was systematically eliminating the hectic activism and stereoscopic effects of his first colored space lattices, such as Overlay 2. By 1974 he had arrived at a new system of frontal, flattened multicolor panels that neutralized the dynamic interaction of his now-diminished color bars, within a more tightly woven gird. The barely differentiated intervals between narrow, criss-crossed vertical and horizontal color bars painted over tapes, coalesced into an image suggesting a variegated color fabric seen magnified. In Hidden Drawing No. 2, Scully adopted a square format subdivided into nine uniform areas, forming a perfectly trisected square reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt's black monochrome paintings and their cruciform image. Scully, however, not yet prepared to forsake chromaticism, continued to work in an understated palette restricted to grays and dulled down by subtly interactive primary colors.

There was a further transition in a series of "drawings", actually narrowly banded and closely meshed grids in close-valued dark tones, made in the early months of 1976. Here the trisected square was abandoned in favor of a generally horizontal format in tripartite vertical oblong divisions. Painted in acrylic on paper, and virtually devoid of color, these paintings are sufficiently refined in their contrasts to be equated with drawing. Scully's current banding or striping configuration in one direction carries a residual linear energy and seems to describe motion along a horizontal plane as well as a field phenomenon.

Late in 1976 Scully abandoned compositions of interlaced color bands entirely and moved toward a more quietistic and controlled visual experience with his gray monochrome series, again "pushing the new idea toward an extreme." His highly reductivist horizontal bands, distinguished from each other only by paint thickness and the uniformity of surface and slow tempo of these radically transformed paintings, suggest a number of possible sources, although none was direct. Inevitably they evoked the closed color planes and opaque surfaces of Marden, Olitski's equation of the painting as object and field in the grayed-down tones of his thickened impastos, and the banded symmetries of Stella's black paintings. Actually, there was a deeply felt and logically consistent flow of the new monochromes, whose gray pigment even bears elusive hints of the vivid chromaticism of the past. Scully said at the time that he felt compelled to break from the illusionism and complexity of his grids, in a statement reminiscent of Stella's famous rationalization for his black paintings at the 1960 Museum of Modern Art show.

"The solution I arrived at...forces illusionistic space out of the painting at a constant rate by using a regulated pattern."

Scully's new formal strategies de-emphasized composition and tonal gradation or modelling, and thus presented a rational distillation of his preceding work toward clarity, simplicity and a special kind of pictorial continuum. There was also a new moral tension evident in the uncompromising asceticism and exaltation of a formal ideal. While the gray monochromes evoked the absolutist forms of modern abstraction, from Malevich and Mondrian to Newman and Reinhardt, Scully's approach and attitude were actually more pragmatic and open-ended than that, in tune with the 1970s. Nevertheless, some of Ad Reinhardt's pithy art dogmas and his various chastisements are wonderfully apropos: "There is something wrong, irresponsible and mindless about color, something impossible to control. Control and rationality are part of any morality." And the stern postulate applied to painting that is "formless, no top, no bottom, dark, no contrasting colors, brushwork brushed out to remove brushwork, matte, flat."

Just as Reinhardt built up his black-on-black paintings by actually painting out successive coats of red, blue and green, so Scully's "monochrome" paintings are really similarly multicolor and dutonal, at least. The color mixes for his alternating bands - or for individual panels, when combined in diptych and triptych format - change subtly in actual hue, as well as in intensity, as the pictorial balance may dictate. In the gray painting which he calls Blue, in fact, Scully moved toward cool and distant tonalities, in this case combining both oil and acrylic mediums in alternating bands, creating a sense of forefround and background, and painting his bands in thickness of one to three layers. By alternating oil and acrylic stripes the artist managed to create even sharper distinctions of figure and field than successive coats of one medium alone would allow. Oil and acrylic also emphasize refined contrasts of shiny and matte surface. Scully has frequently combined abutting panels in diptych form, and in these ensembles the warm and cool tonal relationships of the banding device may operate between the two panels as well as within the single painting, depending on the visual impact both of color mix and of the coating of the surface with varnish.

All these extremely subtle nuances and differentiations make themselves known to the viewer only after a certain period of perceptual acclimation. The differences in types of luminosity, and the tonal shifts between paintings as the gray mix itself changed, give the work a kind of static energy, and a pearly, flickering light quality held close to the surface. With its subliminal dynamism, Scully's formal order did not aspire to a self-contained and unflawed perfection, but seemed rather to reflect a moment in a continuing mental evolution and process of consciousness. Even the narrow specialization of means embraced elements of risk and brinkmanship, for there was always the danger of having the painting vanish into its bland gray surface, or harden into a lifeless formula.

In a recent interview with the author, Scully explained his radical break with the past as an effort to rid himself of the last vestiges of traditional illusionism, and commented on the personal and philosophical implications

of his gray monochromes. He felt impelled to eliminate the Cubist grid, he said, in order to free his painting for interpretation, and to create a more viable space. In his open fields of horizontal bands he had found a strong device that also promoted an immediate and holistic perception of the painting. "My horizontal paintings force you to look at two things at exactly the same time," he observed. "The ground and top-most stripes present themselves simultaneously, and you can never break them down as you can the overlapped planes of Cubism. Because the surface is so complete, the emotions are freed." Scully nevertheless retains abundant options, within the system in format and expression: single panels, diptychs, triptychs; matte and shiny surfaces, diversity in paint texture, luminosity and medium.

After painting his voluptuous Red Diptych No. 1 at the end of 1976, Scully shifted his palette to a more uncompromising black-on-black monochrome in the following year, introducing a more problematic kind of visibility. Blackness compelled an even more complex and demanding involvement in perceptual issues, and in the temporal evolution of the painting.

Like the monochrome gray series, the blacks were painted in sets identified by size and format, and with an alternating use of acrylic and oil, although the most recent work almost invariably used oil on oil mediums. The first black-on-black painting was a seven-foot square canvas, employing ¾ inch stripes, varying from one coat of paint on the ground to three for the relief bands. Since then the method of paint application has varied from laying down transparent glazes to taking paint directly from the tube.

Scully characteristically paints in the color-ground with large swipes of a seven-inch housepainter's brush, using enriched blacks that "feel right" in their warm or cool tone, and shading them toward warm browns or russet. ("I play with color," he says of the mixing process; "It's an emotive thing.") He often works over a light gesso ground to enhance luminosity, and once the ground is established, he lays down masking tape from edge to edge by hand, following measured-off markings on the support. Then he applies the same color paint in two or three coats over the tapes, to achieve finally his foreground band in thickened, assertive relief working freely with the first applications and then more painstakingly on the later coats with a smaller, three-inch brush.

Scully's operational methods are both simpler and more dramatically absorbing than his methodical surfaces would suggest. He intentionally lets the subtle imperfections of brushed surface stands, with traces of gesture in the combed ridges of paint clearly visiable at close viewing distance. The brush marks convey Scully's commitment to the painting act, and get rid of the machined, precisionist surface and the associations with a supra-human reality that make puristic art of the past seem so anachronistic today. At any given moment he is working half-blind since either the ground or the foreground bands are obscured by tape.

Scully varies his methods for mixing the black monochromatic surfaces.

Sometimes he uses premixed colors; sometimes he works more programmatically, painting on progressive coats of red, yellow and blue with generous admixtures of black to achieve the desirable degree of intensity, light absorption or reflectivity that his enricled black surface requires. He has painted acrylic on his grounds, but now prefers to work with oil on oil, depending on the physical paint layers alone and the ridging left by the removed tapes to differentiate stripe from ground. The formats have varied from square to rectangle, and from intimate to heroic scale. Last summer the artist began working on vertical canvases in a one to three ratio - 28 by 84 inches - divided into three equal squares. In Italian No.2 for example, the middle square is unusual in being quite free of horizontal bands. Its surface shows marks of an expressive brush that had moved over it rhythmically in slow curving sweeps. The new series represents a surprising and abrupt break from the uniformities of four years of painting repeating bands over the entire surface from edge to edge.

In Scully's opinion, there is no optimum viewing distance for his monochromatic black paintings, or any preferred lighting conditions, so long as surface glare remains controlled and unobtrusive. This reluctance to offer the spectator a specific point of view, or to precondition his perception of the painting seems to represent an effort to test the audience's fundamental commitment to art, and to confront the spectator with the same ambiguities that the artist encountered in making the work. Scully discerns a contemporary relevance in the ambiguities of his art and a reflection of the human predicament. He expects the viewer to respond alertly to the internal dialectic of his paintings, and to read even his formal element existentially as well as esthetically. Since his bands fluctuate optically, while they share the same surface equally, they never clearly define themselves apart form the whole surface configuration. Their shifting identities give them a quality of "placelessness". Similarly, the close-valued tonalities create an impression of "no color".

Many artists have felt that black is as much all-color as "no-color", or the absence of chroma. Scully envisions his blacks as light, a "dead-light" that he finds harmonious and consoling. He describes himself as a nocturnal creature who works at night and likes "to go out at night", because he "finds it restful". Fond of Samuel Beckett, he perceives an ambiguity of place and location in his work, analogous to the contradictions and indeterminacy of his color. And he connects serial painting and contemporary creativity, suggesting that seriality has to do with "making something stand still."

These views get to the heart of Scully's structural obsession and the moral implications of formalist art for him generally. He finds expansive possibilities in limitation, linking the formalist position to the dilemmas of living itself, with its circuitous path to authentic personal freedom. Experiencing a positive exhilaration in working within strictly circumscribed limitations and preordained rules, he is convinced that his monotonal and systemic abstract painting connects him to a current of

spirituality in historic abstraction. "The power of abstract painting today," he declares, "lies in a constant exchange and perpetual transformation of a physical state into a visual, emotional and mental state, and back again. It is closely aligned to the human situation.

In his extraordinarily prolific outpouring of monochromatic black paintings over the past two years, Scully has demonstrated the seriousness, intelligence and strength of his painting, more than justifying his high-sounding declarations on art and life. His paintings are, in fact, unique today in their particular combination of painstaking method and emotional intensity, material presence and spiritual commitment, and in the harmonious graft of intuitive energies onto intellect. In the past year he has also become an assured monumental painter, capable of mastering a much grander theatre of operations, including large-scale mural painting, within his exacting formula. One notes his admiration for Seurat: "With Seurat you've got the most monumental painting made out of the most pedantic fussiness imaginable." In Scully's black, brown-black and red-black paintings today we acknowledge the strict, almost dogmatic, limitations of the pictorial structure which the artist has imposed on himself, and that awareness does not detract from their breadth and power, and their precarious and exciting equilibrium.

STRIPES AND STROKES: ON SEAN SCULLY'S PAINTING

Joseph Masheck

Thanks partly to the conviction and importance of Minimal Art, which put sculpture in a position of dominance in the later 1960s and earlier '70s, and partly, within the realm of painting, to the canonization of barely a handful of 1960s lyrical colourists, new painting in the 1970s seemed worse than threatened. As ever, intimations of doom became self-fulfilling prophecies: if painting was not yet actually dead, by a false teleology (or a hysterical apocalypse) it would have to be proscribed; even artists and critics who had once loved painting would do their duty and help to starve it out. At best, a guilty pleasure, at worst counter-revolutionary, painting came to be tainted in a pseudo-moralistic way, as if those who still insisted on taking it seriously as the flower of culture were either fiddling while Rome burned or collaborating in a restoration of the Bourbons.

Naturally, exceptions had to be made. The glory of Johns, our finest artist, had to be permitted to continue to unfold. Stella, and also Kelly, could pursue their own courses, the one toward relentless elaboration, the other toward an elemental lyricism of shapeliness (sweet Minimalism), since they had claims dating back before the troubles. Ryman's paintings were rich but rigorous enough in format to be excused, and Brice Marden just passed on Minimalist grounds, becoming, in fact, something like a minority junior member of the cabinet. Needless to say, while all this went on whole circuses cavorted outside the temple of art.

Meanwhile, British artists were probably more concerned than ever with what was going on in American art. Some kept up with the transatlantic formalist bulletins. When Minimalism and more international Conceptualist alternatives began to appear in Studio International and elseshere, beginning in the late 1960s, others went their way. I remember the case of Caro, in sculpture, as problematic - which it could only be because the work was good. Yet I was not surprised when, years later, an essay by me on "The Englishness of Caro" was almost audibly ignored. By then, in 1974, it was either reactionary by definition to take an active interest in regular abstract art at all, or else it was sacrilegious to show that Caro's "advanced" work was characteristically, even traditionally, English, instead of stressing its relation to the (American) sculpture of David Smith.

There is a purpose in rehearsing all this, and it is not in order to keep extremely tedious discourses going, even in their negation; nor is it to be nostalgic (hardly). We are concerned with the time when, as a young man Sean Scully became a painter, which no one in England then could do intelligently and not care what was going on in New York.

No doubt fortunately, Scully studied fine art at King's College, Newcastle, that is, in a department in which the presence of Richard Hamilton was still strongly felt. That was important because such a conceptual, or otherwise cerebral, consciousness as Hamilton's was in its own right transatlantic and cosmopolitan: however one chose to react he would at least be operating on a sophisticated level. Besides, one might as well start out where the action is. Scully remembers his painting as being at odds with prevailing attitudes. Knowingly or not, he was preparing himself for the situation in New York in the later '70s, even more by taking on the, at least knowledgeable, Newcastle esthetic than by 'pressing on' with abstract painting in a 'Grid City' mode. It must have been something like being in the Spanish Civil War, only to move on to World War II.

The earliest paintings show a complex system of overlapping but all orthogonal grids. These have affinities with then current British, as well as American, painting - and not only broadly, as regards the gird structure, but specifically, in the subjection of an orthogonal grid to some sort of enlivening yet still systematic complication. Of course, deliberate complication is critically questionable in a way that the will to condense can never be (a notion that goes back at least to XVII century rhetoric). Nevertheless, one might compare such works by Scully with, in English painting, orthogonal grids shifting in line with the formats of shaped, irregular geometric canvases by the late Jeremy Moon (whom Scully knew), or, in America, with Alan Shields' exotic pieces on unstretched canvas, cut so that the grid bands hang literally, like loose tapes - items like Shields' Devil, Devil, Love, of 1970. In any case, the use of masking tape in these and many later works by Scully must have been in the interest of some kind of (psychological) control. We see a tremendous build-up of preasure (I first typed 'expressure') barely held down by Scully's densely packed lattices - in the sense of those enormously heavy blankets of steel used for bomb disposal. The paintings offer something like a view into some dense, crystalline microstructure (a la D'Arcy Thompson or Lancelot Law White on the 'amazing' geometries of natural form in the age of Herbert Read?). More practically, the build-up of bands is one way of overcoming the active/passive dichotomy of figure and ground, and a clever one too; yet, ironically, it produces a surprisingly clear, however shallow, illusionistic space.

A shift from the orthogonal, in 1973, let some of the steam out of Scully's piled-up grids, which always overlap but never actually weave (one might think of felt, in the sense of something textilelike but packed tightly flat, rather than an actual 'web'). True, the problem of the 'merely' decorative raises its pretty head, but there is also a zany iconoclasm toward the quasi-cybernetic profundity of the grid in this shift of axes: right angles relax into oblique ones - Descartes in a deck chair. Also, this shows an interesting impatience with the grid as given, a desire to see how much it can take, what else it can be made to do, which amounts to a practically Vorticist fitfulness. Think of the tight orthogonal grids appearing as fenestration-like motifs, suggesting skyscrapers, in paintings by Wyndham Lewis (which are otherwise also like decorative openwork in Mackintosh's furniture, or, again, like the fenestration patterns of sky-scrapers in early modern

New York painting), in relation to Scully's earlier work; think even more, of the oblique diagonal crisscrossing of David Bomberg, as in In the Hold, 1913-14 (Tate Gallery).

When Scully trimmed off the lower corners of the diagonally gridded paintings, forming a point, the Vorticist evocation became, if anything, more urgent, maybe because the passive decorativeness of something that might just as well roll on and on, equally unimpeded in all directions, was overridden by something more assertively structural. (It is always interesting to see what Scully will do next when he finds himself in a rut.) In Overlay 2, one of these paintings from 1973, there is a ruthlessly logical opposition between the solid stripe along the left-hand diagonal edge, at the bottom, versus a row almost all of stripe 'ends' along the right-hand edge. By 'almost all' I aim to call attention to the fact that while segments of an underlying stripe along the left-hand edge do appear - a stripe that would visibly run along that edge if it were not interrupted periodically by stripe 'ends' - these regular units already announce that segmental bit of a band, generated where one obliterated band still shows itself as interrupting another at the point of crossover, which comes into prominence in Scully's paintings of the following year, where it evokes the segmentally interrupted bands of the 'boogie-woogie' motif in Mondran's last paintings.

Scully would later return, in paintings all of adjacent horizontal stripes, to a complete smothering of the ground by painted bands. But first the separate band was pulled free, in evenly syncopated grids and less regular 'plaid' works of 1974, which also return the grid to the orthogonal. In the series '26.7.74' the grids and their overlap are altogether regular, though the resultant structure is much sparer than the tightly packed grids of Newcastle. In the other group, however, that known as '20.7.74', we already see this paring-down pushed further, towards a complete dismantling of the whole grid idea. This will result in Scully's classic horizontal stripe paintings at the end of the decade, in which the 'deconstructed' grid elements are neatly (and rather Minimally) laid down in absolutely horizontal stripes. Here, however, in 1974, the '26.7.74' paintings really come just before those of the group '20.7.74', by a matter of mere days: Scully often takes a step backward so as to take two steps forward.

Separated in this way from its load-bearing function in the grid structure, the band is freed. At the cost of Scully's having to reconsider the nature of the adjacent ground, the band becomes an enfleshed line, an element entitled to occupy such and such a position with so much mass. This is the 'planar line' of geometric abstraction from Malevich and Mondrian down to the present. Here, the band, while very linear, is nevertheless 'painterly': the blotting of paint along the tapemasked edges is allowed to remain, as are the 'boogie-woogie' segments where otherwise obliterated grids can still be seen. For the time being, the upshot is that the stripe gets to be a band of paint.

It will not be out of place in this connection to point out the modern interest which Scully and, before him, Ben Nicholson and other British painters, have shown for painted, perhaps especially striped, pottery.

Nicholson began his career with the conservative but promising still life called Striped Jug, 1911, where an obviously painterly concern is shown for the striping applied as a pot is spun on the wheel. Pottery stripes grow in Nicholson's work from being such an 'external' motif, through one already obviously painted on some level, as freely painted ornamentation on a jug - witness the 1933 Still Life (Mediterranean), with a jug having horizontal stripes at the neck and similar lines flaring upward from the base, a painting which belonged to Adrian Stokes - to a completely independent grille of lines as an accompaniment for an overlapping cluster of vessels (goblets) in Cubistic linear profile, this in Still Life (Chinese), of 1945.

Concerns like this are sometimes made into folkloristic pap by chauvinistic or provincial observers ('Born as he was in Devon, his creamy whites...'); instead, I mean to indicate a modern British tradition of taking serious interest in painted pottery as art. J.P. Hodin and the painter Patrick Heron have both written sympathetically about the pottery of Bernard Leach and his associates a generation ago, an involvement that parallels the relation of Peter Voulkos as a ceramicist with Abstract Expressionist painting in America. Leach had studied pottery in a 'master-class' arrangement in Japan from 1909 to 1920. His approach, back home, to the common pottery of England, was nothing less than a natural extension of an already sophisticated orientalism. The issue of painted pottery would probably have some pertinence here even if one did not know that Scully loves Leach's and (Shoji) Hamada's English wares - or that he has a superb recent work by the great Japanese potter Tatsuzo Shimaoka, one beautifully painted with negatively striped cloudy white spots, suggestive of Ryman in contemporary painting as well as, earlier, Rothko. Bernard Leach was important for bringing to England from the East, besides Mr. Hamada, a sense of pottery as an object of serious esthetic attention. Leach disliked Picasso's painted ceramics because 'Potters start from clay - up; he starts from painting - down', but Patrick Heron, quite rightly, suggested the painting of Braque as 'exact counterpart, in ceramic terms', to Leach's pots. Leach, it happens, speculated on the function of the painted line on pottery in a way that may suggest Scully's always unbroken, stripes and linear bands: 'The ends of lines are important, the middles take care of themselves'.

Scully's open 'plaid' paintings of 1974 pick up again on the analytic consideration of line and stripe, band and field. In fact, this is already an issue in Red, painted two years earlier in 1972 - a pivotal year in that Scully spent half of it teaching at Newcastle and half as a visiting artist at Harvard. By the way, this whole tendency to come to a halt, back up, reconsider, then press farther on, suggests to me an affinity with the pessimism of Johns in painting, as well as Beckett, in literature. Neither does it seem irrelevant, speaking of Johns, to observe that the densely overlapping bands of Scully's earlier paintings are like the overlapping crosses of the Union Jack, whereas, once Scully's bands come to alternate as parallels, they are like the composition of the 'Stars and Stripes', as revealed by Jasper Johns.

The works of 1974 are calm, not only because their colours are less hectic (which, too, would recur), but also because they are concerned with refinements. Especially in the '20.7.74' paintings, the visible tinkering with the constitution of the grid structure suggests Matisse's many revisions of the decorative grid in his Pink Nude, 1935, in the Cone Collection (Baltimore Museum of Art). We know from photographs of the Pink Nude in its various states, as Matisse kept altering it, that as the disposition of the figure came to be settled, the prominent grid pattern of the spread on which the model reclines also went through a series of adjustments, back and forth between regularity and irregularity. Earlier on, this coverlet was painted as as a grille consisting exclusively of parallel, nearly but not exactly vertical, lines amounting to stripes (state ix); then, crossing, broken horizontal strokes were added in some areas (state xi); only afterward did the pattern become a regular orthogonal grid of squares (state xiii); even then, the grid got de-regularised, rendered sketchier and less rigid in structure (state xviii); and so on, to the completion of the painting, which is somewhat tighter again. Matisse might as well have been adjusting the fine-tuning knob on some apparatus, going back a little less 'too far' with each reversal - a procedure not unlike the shifts in Scully's development.

Grid painting has its own pre-history, even if contemporary interest in such affairs, as on the part of the French, with their 'deconstructive' abstraction in the 1970s, tends to fixate on the tiresomely possessive perspectival grids used to project three dimensions onto two (from the landlord's point of view) in Renaissance and post-Renaissance representation. A quite different interest can be found in certain 'non-objective' features of pre-Renaissance art, as in the less urgently representational elements in Byzantine painting, including the great mosaics. A nice situation obtains at Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, in Ravenna, in the mosaics of the north side of the nave. In a passage dating from around A.D. 500, a view of the port of Classe is seen framed between sections of the city wall. Virtually the same pattern of irregular squares with every other row on the halfbeat - in the one case, dark bands against a light ground, in the other, the opposite - appears in a ship at anchor in the harbour and the dressed stone blocks of the walls, regardless of whether the gridded pattern 'depicts' cloth or stone. Here the Byzantine artists evidently thought of what was structurally similar in both motifs; what is more, in light of Scully not to mention Matisse, they enlivened both grids equally in the rendering.

From the calm analytic of 1974 we turn to see how much, once more, can be piled in, in 1974-75. Square canvases are heavily overlaid with orthogonal bands, now tightly and neathly packed: then such squares themselves get bolted together - a row of four, or a cluster of nine adding up to one super-square. Also as vehement as it is 'structural' is the desire to leave alternate masking tapes in situ, painting right over them; as both Mondrian and Newman had left tapes on before - Mondrian in his late New York paintings; Newman in Onement 1, 1948, and Concord, 1949 (Metropolitan Museum).

Things get cool again in 1977 and 1978. (Is there not a kind of breathing rhythm in all this, an alternation between tight and loose?) We see canvases that are practically monochrome - a grey vertical oblong, a blue square - consisting only of taut, narrow, taped adjacent stripes, all horizontal. If the issue of decorativeness hovers here once more, that is probably because of the extremely simple, repetitive and self-evident structure, which one necessarily 'skims' instead of following line by line. The aim is manifestly not to dazzle, as in 'Optical' Art, but to convey an overall and perceptually shifting richness by spare and uninflectedly repetitive means, as, in the contemporary music of Phil Glass (which Scully has long admired), inflections come only in the piling up of many repetitions. So the effect, superficially 'light', is really a function of rigour, and carries with it as specific nuances of mood as do Whistler's 'Nocturnes'. A perfect occasion, too, for the artist to feel the limitations of acrylic paint and to engage the subtleties of oil.

From a viewpoint such as this, the tight systems of narrow bands in these paintings show Scully taking risks of withholding rather than risks of offering too much. Were these paintings less ennervatedly rhythmic, and less understatedly but insistently chromatic, they might fall into just that type of decorativeness which William Morris characterised for applied art: "...Ribs or stripes or honeycombs or herring-bones...are the poor refuges from barrenness of invention which a less artistic age is driven to, and still uses in a most profuse and wearisome way." In these paintings of Scully's it is, if anything, the pressure of sensuous overload against the rigour of self-imposed structure, that obviates wearisomeness. Perhaps pertinent in this regard, from the earlier history of European modernism, are the often enough striped, monochromes of Wladyslaw Strzeminski, which were pretty much unknown in the West until the publication of the (polyglot) catalogue of the 1973 exhibition at the Folkwang Museum, in Essen, Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936: BLOK, Praesens, a. r; this likeness, however, is only a matter of form. In different way, Scu-ly's near-monochrome striped paintings raise the question of 'Hard-Edge' Painting as an Anglo-American concern. It is worth mentioning the term 'Hard Edge' was coined by Jules Langsner in his catalogue, Four Abstract Classicists, for the exhibition of that title of the Los Angeles County Museum in 1959. This show travelled to London, and the phrase caught on: by the late 1960s in England it was possible, speaking of William Morris, to apply it to an incisive graphic line evident in British art from the Pre-Raphaelites to, ironically, Morris' own designs and, beyond, in painting - this in Quentin Bell's Victorian Artists (1967).

No such evocations would arise without the crisp, consistent repetitiveness of Scully's stripes, and it is time that we considered repetition itself as a theme. Here the literature of repetition would be worth considering, even if it were not for Gertrude Stein, thanks to Scully's interest in Samuel Beckett's writing, an interest that shows in several titles of his paintings. For Beckett as well as for Scully, one might well want to consider the incantatory repetition of lines and refrains in ancient Irish poetry, well before there was such a thing as the ballad form, and

which still survives in the powerful hymn known as 'St. Patrick's Breastplate'. But there is also, in the Romantic period, the dominance of repetition as a proto-Existential theme in Kierkegaard: 'For though I had convinced myself that no such thing as repetition exists, yet it is a sure truth that by firmness of purpose and by dulling one's talent for observation one can attain a uniformity which has a far more anaesthetizing effect than the most capricious diversions, and which with time becomes stronger and stronger, like a formula of incantation'. This is from the strange book entitled Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology (1843), and by this point in the text Kierkegaard has already maintained - 'Who would wish to be a tablet upon which time writes every instant a new inscription?...Repetition is a reality, and it is the seriousness of life.' Kierkegaard's book even circumstantially resembles Scully's diptychs in format, divided as it is between two (terribly repetitious) parts (and signed 'Constantine Constantius'). Perhaps even more relevant is Kierkegaard's exposition, in Either/Or, of the same year, of his 'rotation method' of overcoming ennui by shifting one's attitude toward an otherwise all too familiar situation: think of Scully's later paintings on multiple canvases in which the direction of the stripes is rotated from one panel to the next. Kierkegaard speaks of the 'vulgar and inartistic' way of overcoming boredom, which is to move away to escape it, which, he says, 'needs to be supported by illusion'; thus, 'One tires of living in the country and moves to the city; one tires of one's native land, and travels abroad; one is europamude, and goes to America, and so on; finally one indulges in a sentimental hope of endless journeyings from star to star'. Scully, who is I hasten to add as settled in New York as Beckett is in Paris, exemplifies the 'rotation method' of Kierkegaard not only in rotating the axes of stripes or panels within a given painting, but also in the way he 'shakes up', from time to time, what is to be considered as given in his works. 'My method,' Kierkegaard writes, 'does not consist in change of field, but resembles the true rotation method in changing the crop and the mode of cultivation. Here we have at once the principle of limitation, the only saving principle in the world. The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become.'

Kierkegaard thought that what he was doing was 'psychology'. Be that as it may, the American psychologist William James came to reflect, later in the XIX century, on the possibility of thinking the same thought in exactly the same way twice. In the chapter on 'The Stream of Thought' in his Principles of Psychology (1890), James constructs a three-dimensional grid or graph, in perspective, with, written along one edge, the legand 'I am the same I, that I was yesterday'. Accompanying the diagram is the following veritably Surreal description of how, in an obvious but inert sense the words still mean the same thing and are true, experientially they change in significance: 'If we make a solid wooden frame with the sentence written on its front, and the significance: 'If we make a solid wooden frame with the sentence written on its front, and the time-scale on one of its sides, if we spread flatly a sheet of India rubber over its top, on which rectangular co-ordinates are painted, and slide a smooth ball under the rubber in the direction

from 0 to "yesterday", the bulging of the membrane along this diagonal at successive moments will symbolize the changing of the thought's content...' I have suggested elsewhere that this very siagram may have influenced a monogrammatic design by Max Ernst; I would like to wheel it out again, momentarily, in connection with Gertrude Stein, William James' student at Harvard.

Allow me first to read into the record a passage from Kandinsky's Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1912), which was published in England translation at London and Boston in 1914, and which Gertrude Stein herself may well have known:

'The apt use of a word (in its poetical sense), its repetition, twice, three times, or even more frequently, according to the need of the poem, will not only tend to intensify the internal structure but also bring out unsuspected spiritual properties in the word itself. Further, frequent repitition of a word (a favourite game of children, forgotten in later life) deprives the word of its external reference. Similarly, the symbolic reference of a designated object tends to be forgotten and only the sound is retained. We hear this pure sound, unconsciously perhaps, in relation to the concrete or immaterial object. But in the latter case pure sound exercises a direct impression on the soul. The soul attains to an objectless vibration, even more complicated, I might say more transcendent, than the reverberations released by the sound of a bell, a stringed instrument, or a fallen board. In this direction lie great possibilities for the literature of the future.'

Aware as Kandinsky obviously is here of its potential in the search for a pure painting of spiritual significance, he observes, further along, that 'repetition of the same tones thickens the spiritual milieu that is necessary for the maturity of the finest feelings', likening it to the effect of a greenhouse on plants.

Like Kierkegaard and James before her, Gertrude Stein came to say, in 'Portraits and Repetition' (Lectures in America, 1934), "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition." Why?

'...Every time one of the hundreds of times a newspaper man makes fun of my writing and of my repetition he always has the same theme, always having the same theme, that is, if you like, repetition, that is if you like the repeating that is the same thing, but once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis...No matter how often you tell the same story if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different.'

A little later:'No matter how often what happened had happened any time any one told anything there was no repetition. This is what William James calls the Will to Live'. She remembered.

Having thus paved the way, I offer, finally, a passage in Beckett's novel How It Is (1961). What is being considered, as usual (!), is the peculiar modern inertia in which there is nothing left to do, nothing left to write or paint - except, perhaps, just one more line, just another few strokes. In this dilemma, system, far from generating the clinical tidiness of Constructivist art, works just to get something much more emotive moving: 'for each one of us than if only four of us before the initial situation can be restored two abandons two journeys four couplings of which two on the left or north tormenting always the same in my case number 2 and two on the right or south tormented always by the same in my case number 4'. And, like the diptychs of Scully, the very typography of Beckett's novel consists of patches of unpunctuated lines, in or out of jibe across the facing pages.

Scully's 'repetitious' canvases all of stripes grew in size, and the stripe broadened accordingly, into a band that left behind finally the character of a line. It seems that he was making room for the stroke, the touch, the intervention of the body through the hand, to take over the stripe entirely. The most recent paintings, made by eye without tape, and in which there are no sharp edges at all, were made possible by an intermediate step in which great wide swipes from a large brush got freely smeared over neatly masked tapes. When Scully made pairs of these into diptychs, I was sceptical. This seemed to be a punningly physical and caricatural allusion to the altar-piece format. Soon enough, I saw that what this procedure actually did to the physicality of the painted, taped, and painted over again, striping was a revealing (revelation). For with two such canvases conjoined, each unveiled, so to speak, what was obscured in the other: each half of a diptych having by definition half its underpainted layer obscured by overlaid stripes, both panels taken together exposed exactly enough (otherwise half obscured) covered over area of one and, likewise just enough striping to eompletely obscure a second ground of the same dimensions.

Scully and I share an interest in the Orthodox icon as a clue, of sorts, to possibilities of generalized spiritual meaning in non-objective art. Scully, for his part, borrowed as a title for one of his recent striped diptychs the name of one of the great icons, a XIV century image of Ss. Boris and Gleb (martyred for their non-violence in royal family squabble). Only knowing Scully's Boris and Gleb, 1980, in turn, made it likely that I would attend to Roger Fry's modern enthusiasm for this very icon: 'take St. Boris and St. Gleb...,and see how much expression is put into the mutual interpellation of their eyes. This is, by the way, one of the best examples of what such a decorative narrative style was capable of.' (By his strange term 'decorative narrative' Fry attempts to clamp together two esthetic extremes, as though to trap an elusive intrinsic significance in between.) Fry continues:

> 'We are at once fascinated and intrigued by the rhyming effect of the double silhouettes. There is an exquisite balance and proportion in in all parts; in the relation of the figures to the picture rectangle and in the spaces of background which the silhouettes leave...Those rather generalised and schematic notions of modelling by light and shade which the Russians had inherited

from Byzantine originals tended generally to get less and less definite - more and more the drapery, for instance, was apt to become either flat or to be merely decorated by linear patterns which are the vestiges of folds.'

I am aware that this essay has shifted its angle of approach several times along the way, but by this may enable us to begin to render up something that could only be pointed to before. All this has to do, I also know, with my own thought and work as well as with the artist's. There is no use in pretending that such relations can be simplified and completely rationalized. My historian's tendency is to look back; Scully's, as an artist, is to do the one other thing he sees to do that still luckily deserves to be done.

Nietzsche: The good men are in all ages those who dig the old thoughts, digging deep and getting them to bear fruit - the farmers of the spirit. But eventually all land is exploited, and the ploughshare of evil must come again and again.

Beckett: That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one's classics, to one through the day.

RESPONSES TO NEO-EXPRESSIONISM

Tiffany Bell

The following comments and opinions have been gathered from interviews and informal discussions held over the last few months with abstract painters about what they think of neo-expressionist painting. The artists I spoke to range in age and position in the art world and included: Michael Goldberg, Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Robert Mangold, Sean Scully, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Lynn Umlauf, James Muehlemann, Allen Furbeck and Linda Levit. Although there are more and less painterly artists among this group, the differences in their paintings no longer look as great as they did a few years ago. They all make non-representational, non-figurative paintings.

My intention in making this investigation, though stemming somewhat from a sense that these artists working outside of a figurative or narrative tradition are being misrepresented as overly intellectual, uninvolved with human concerns and less expressive, was not to set up an opposition between two kinds of painting. Rather, it was to test the zeitgeist; to see if these artists were similarly, or even in a parallel way, feeling the need for change so evident in the work of the neo-expressionist artist. In so doing, I hoped to come closer to a description of the intentions, if not the subject matter in abstract painting. I also wanted to find out what these artists think about the overwhelming interest in painting, which is often described in terms of its difference from non-representational, minimal art.

As pointed out by almost all the artists, neo-expressionism inadequately defines a wide range of painting. Generally, however, the discussions did not center on any one artist's work but on neo-expressionism understood as figuration and an emphasis on self-expression presented through images and/or a gestural manner of painting.

Michael Goldberg feels that this new trend "does not impinge on his life dramatically." Like all the artists who have been painting many years, his work has developed to a point where it synthesizes many things in a way that determines its own course. When looking at art, Goldberg does not look to the work of young artists for examples, but to that of Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Brunelleschi, Courbert, Manet and Pollock. He recognizes a need for, and is concerned with introducing more explicit content in his paintings. He says that the "minimal mode feels very exhausted today," and his work over the last few years has included obvious allusions to architecture and landscape, but not as representational images. References exist but are complicated by and contrasted to the formal aspects of the painting. If he was a younger artist, Goldberg says he would be painting in the neo-expressionist mode. He sees the possibility for more latitude there than in a geometric or minimal mode, and believes in "extending visual and emotional horizons through the act of painting."

Goldberg himself, however, is not interested in expressionism. Of German expressionist painting, both older and newer, he says that with the exception of Kirchner he does not think of it as a major art form. It is too "loaded with nostalgia and literary sentiment." And as for the American expressionism of the present, he characterizes it as infantile leftism which is itself reactionary. He finds it does not sustain prolonged consideration; it is instantaneous and anecdotal. The introduction of content has been made in a simplistic and contrived way which responds to the demands of "an intelligently self-motivated participatory audience." Goldberg does not believe the art deals with quality, the essential element which sustains a work of art. It is not so much a question of style but of incorporating a sense of necessity or urgency. He suggests that his interests - landscape, architecture and human scale - are universal, not a la mode.

Robert Ryman's painting even more than Goldberg's seems to direct its own course of development. It is in fact somewhat surprising to find that Ryman visits the galleries to see neo-expressionist work. He is familiar with the painting and finds good painters among these artists. Such aspects as David Salle's division of canvases and juxtapositions of opposites interest him, but he finds neo-expressionist work, in a more general sense, hindered by the "ball and chain" of symbolism and narrative. Furthermore, he believes there is much that is familiar in this work, which is not retrogressive, but has little "discovery" in it. He implied that this aspect of painting, a kind of enlightenment in the aesthetic means, was of greater interest in art then explicit subject matter. Although Ryman finds some of the work interesting, he feels that the most exciting painting to emerge will not be narrative, representational painting, but a kind of "object painting." As to his own work, he does not feel limited in what he can convey by his choice of means.

Brice Marden describes his interest in the neo-expressionist painting as curiosity about what people are looking at. He believes the work to be an outgrowth of pop art and does not think the overwhelming presence of this kind of painting has as much to do with a major change in the direction of art as with a marketing phenomenon. There is always high quality figure painting being done - and artists will continue to do it - but the focus will not always be on them. It is the market for art that demands the appearance of radical change.

Marden does not find the art itself interesting; nonetheless, his consideration of it has had some effect on his own painting. On the subject of imagistic paintings on panels he commented: "...you can put anything on a panel because a panel has a physical reality. You put everything together and it all works because they are all real things. So this calls into doubt the whole idea of painting on panels. You think you create new colors and things, but maybe it's too easy. How much of it is happening because of the physicality of the panels?"

Partially in response, Marden has recently been doing paintings on rectangular canvases in which the division of color is painted instead of being defined by separate panels.

When Marden says he is not interested in this art, he refers primarily to the subject matter conveyed through configuration. He feels that the introduction of images creates a more directed way of reading a painting. It is easier to look at, but usually the direction comes across as a limitation. Marden admits that to talk of subject matter in abstract painting is difficult because it is not always so evident. He did, however, begin to think of his subject matter differently around 1973 with the Grove Group paintings. He implied that he was responding to a sensation that second and third generation minimal art lacked expression. "The grid was getting to be as much of a cliche as the dead tree trunk in American thirties' surrealist stuff. I'm still working with it, but with ramifications of it. I'm trying to get more information into that space whereas before there was probably just as much but expressed in a different way."

Marden says that illusion is "one of the primary things you get working on this abstract plane." It seems that it is his intention to complicate the sense of spatial illusion in the paintings.

Often Marden applies subject matter to his work through the tiles. But he points out that "it's not just a matter of using subject matter as something referential to make a picture. There is always the problem of whether you can really get the idea of subject matter and the actual thing to be together."

Robert Mangold is the artist least familiar with the neo-expressionist painting because he lives outside New York City. One reason he left New York was to get away from the art world, and now, besides following the work of a small number of artists, his involvement and reactions are those of a spectator who derives "a certain amount of amusement or interest" from what goes on. In fact, in one sense he is glad that the focus of attention is off what he is interested in. It gives him greater privacy and "you don't have all these people who don't know what else to do, doing minimal paintings."

More seriously, he enjoys aspects of the expressionist trend because "they challenge a certain situation." He says it is radical-looking art, although he questions what is being introduced that is really new, rather than new because we haven't been dealing with it for a while. "The majority of people at any given time are just doing what's in vogue...I don't know if anything really changes, or opens things up. I think it's true that certain kinds of painting become possible... What a few people do affects a lot of other people. Otherwise they would be doing other kinds of derivative painting because that's the way people develop as artists."

He is less concerned about the stylistic aspects of the art then with a sense of the speed with which things can be promoted. "I think there's a danger when art becomes a quick commodity for consumption, sale and increased value... because it becomes an incredibly speculative situation where people profit from short skyrocketing careers.

There's a certain kind of economic threat to the art world... Most careers that are worth anything are long careers usually, and people don't want to support an artist for even ten or fifteen years."

Mangold stresses that he does not relate to art in terms of whether it is abstract or not. He finds as much boring abstraction around as other kinds of painting, and has tried to force change in his own work at certain points. In the early seventies, he shifted from serial works to individual paintings in which color played a great role. More recently, in his x-and y-shaped paintings, he has been attempting to make more complicated paintings by expanding the structural elements in a way which allows for the inclusion of more than one color. He is not, however, considering doing spatial paintings and wants to keep his paintings flat with the image held to the surface. Mangold does not think his paintings are more intellectual or less emotional than other kinds of art. He looks for a certain combination of tension and simplicity in structure, which can be enhanced by color. "I'm somehow involved in the monumentality of art, and if I'm expressing something, that's what it is."

Umlauf, Scully and Gilbert-Rolfe are younger and less well-known than the four previously discussed artists. As a result, their positions are more directly affected by the neo-expressionist trend. As one might expect, they do not have ambivalent attitudes toward it.

Lynn Umlauf is not a geometric painter and her work has always been closer to a more expressionist than minimal mode. But this kind of expressionism, which incorporates an insistence on maintaining the integrity of the paintings' objectness. She takes a positive interest in the neo-expressionist trend "because [it] is leading away from geometry and into more spontaneous and associational form-color-space relationships." Her comments do not suggest any objection to the use of images as such, but she is more interested in the techniques or methods, usually the "abstracting" aspects that some of the artists use. Of Julian Schnabel's paintings she says: "The images I see aren't interesting per se, but in the way they are melded together as objects, with the artist using every possible subject at his disposal." She does not like the illustrative, "borrowed" subject matter in other neo-expressionist painting and sees it as irrelevant rhetoric. She questions whether much of the painting will survive. "Will the young Italian, American and German art transcend this initial scrawl and rediscovery of the self that will come with maturity? I know each of the individual artists is already mature, but this urge to celebrate primitive instincts is reactionary and the real world is more complex."

Umlauf, like the other abstract painters, emphasizes the importance of a "search for more original form and color." She does sense more freedom in the situation today but also feels challenged by it. Painting cannot be held back now and she thinks abstract painting is becoming bolder and more thoughtful. Her own has changed over the last few years; she uses different materials and more intense color, and her painting has become more gestural.

Sean Scully sees neo-expressionism as offering "an alternative culture which asserts itself in times of crisis- when there is an absence of belief in the future." He views it as a popular, secondary art. "At the moment, representational means are no longer appropriate for making major art" such as Newman's Stations of the Cross. "It seems to me the only thing you can do formally [in representational painting] is wallow around in history...It's not like T.S. Eliot's idea of taking the responsibility for history and dragging it forward an inch." More positively, Scully is interested in the use of materials and large scale in much of the neo-expressionist painting. He also believes that these artists have injected energy back into painting. Abstract art had become hermetic and representational painting is "capable of restoring subject matter and guts to painting, and relating it to life...which is what it needs."

Like Mangold, Scully is glad that the focus has currently moved away from abstract painting. It removes a pressure to conform, and allows for exciting things to happen. His own painting has changed noticeably over last few years. Scully continues to paint stripes but is now more concerned with subject matter than with the formal aspects of his paintings. He is trying to incorporate more meaning and greater complication, though he does admit to feeling limited in what he can convey at times. Abstract art is less specific in certain ways, but Scully seems to agree with Marden that the specificity of imagistic painting "does not allow the painting to express things far bigger." Scully believes abstract art can express more significant spiritual aspirations than representational art. It is still a young tradition, however, and "what it is able to represent is reflected by its youth." As abstraction progresses it will get broader and be able to incorporate more evocative and suggestive connotations. "Nobody challenges its religious power, but they challenge its narrowness. I don't think it will always be that way; it should become broader and broader...And that is what I intend to try and do."

Like Scully, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe considers the neo-expressionist painting as a "lower level of cultural phenomenon." He associates it with popular music, and on the subject of emotional content he comments: I don't think neo-expressionist painting has any particular claim on emotionalism. I think the trouble with expressionism, both neo and original, is that it's limited to one sort of hysterical pitch. Music has all the possibilities from a shout to a whisper at its disposal, which is why expressionism is always boring and rather uninteresting."

In his opinion, the notion of the personal has become "totally devalued by being used as a prop for all sorts of banal interests in peoples' private autobiographies - a gibberish preoccupation with the personal in the recent past of American art." Like Marden, he sees much of the painting being done as derived from pop art; as representing yet another variation of the notion of the ready-made. The ready-made in this case is the stretched or the pictorial rectangle, and the "presumption is that you can put anything into it...These people are not trying to play the violin but are just using the violin in such a way that its potential as an instrument is merely being applied for something else."

He suggests that it is "hypothetically interesting to have a very selfconscious, dispassionate interest in expressionism, exploring neo-expressionism from a different point of view... But my point is that the artists aren't like this, and the art doesn't work."

As far as the development of his own work is concerned, Gilbert-Rolfe says he has learned from minimalism and direct antecedents such as Newman. His painting, however, has become "a work of greater explicit complexity" which is in a sense opposed to the kind of "imminent complexity" of minimal art. Asked about the subject matter of his painting, he explained that in abstract painting one did not think of subject matter "as being part of the operation," as in representational paintings. Again using a musical analogy he explained: "The difference between abstract painting and representational painting is the difference between writing music and writing songs. In songs, the musical dimension of the work as a whole becomes in some way subordinate to a literary thematic. This does not happen, in amy sort of direct way, in music."

Thus, Gilbert-Rolfe thinks more in terms of generalized thematics than subject matter. "The sense or feeling that I would want to place at the center of my work would be of conflict...conflict as a necessary pre-condition of more or less any kind of coherence...Conflict in the sense that in any argument or any description one has to identify contradictions. One can't characterize any event in historical life except in terms of contradictions, which even when resolved don't cease to be contradictions. And I think that sense of meaning or wholeness...through mutually exclusive forces which are not simply opposites, is the kind of conflict which interests me and which I think could be said to characterize my work."

Linda Levit, James Muehlemann and Allen Furbeck are approximately of the same generation as the neo-expressionists. In one sense, because they are young and their work is not well-known, these painters are in a more flexible position than the others mentioned here. They might conceivably be more open to and encouraged by the change. On the other hand, as abstract painters among contemporaries who seem to be overwhelmingly neo-expressionist, they may find themselves in a more vulnerable position and face greater doubts about their work. Their responses vary.

Furbeck, the youngest of the three, was working primarily within a geometric tradition until about three years ago. He then began courses at the Arts Students League to learn to paint in a traditional, academic mode. He continues to make abstract paintings, but does admit to re-evaluating some "comfortable assumptions" he was working with. Levit, also a geometric painter, has reconsidered some aspects of reductivist approach. She believes neo-expressionism has stimulated new possibilities for painting and her own work has "loosened up in terms of paint application and forms." Neither Levit nor Furbeck, however, have been directly influenced by neo-expressionism. Both object to the kind of images used and the way they are dealt with. They feel that the juxtaposition of images quoted from various sources is made without subtlety or resonance in means.

Muehlemann, who has been painting longer than Levit or Furbeck, makes all-over, textured paintings. His work too has changed over the last few years to incorporate more color and space. Muehlemann appreciates the renewed interest in painting triggered by neo-expressionism, but does not believe it has "opened things up." He suggests that most artists were aware that painting was in difficult straits and that the neo-expressionist just departed in the most obvious and accessible direction. But he feels that an ambition to make paintings that will hold their own next to Cezanne's is not easily fulfilled.

The sense of dissatisfation with a reductivist approach to painting recurs throughout these discussions. For the older artists, it seems to have arisen earlier in the seventies and for the younger generation, it is a more recent feeling which clearly parallels that of their neo-expressionist contemporaries. It is a feeling that is evidenced in changes, or rather, in a course towards greater complexity, manifest in all of their works. Of course, the move to painting aggressive, disjointed images on velvet, and Marden's switch to painting on rectangular surfaces in which he draws the edges, are hardly the same. Nonetheless, Marden's decision is significant in that it suggests both a parallel - though much subtler - move away from minimalism, as well as pointing to major difference in the approaches to painting or, more specifically, to subject matter. For Marden, the emphasis is on revelation through means; subject is expressed through relationships of color, line and space. Thus, he can paint an historical theme full of emotional content such as the Annunciation, the incorporate the traditional iconography in a way that makes a convincing, powerful and relevant painting. The subject is not illustrated or directly referred to through images, but suggested by feelings described through color and movement.

The points of view presented here are not shocking or even unexpected. Ryman's attitude toward the "ball and chain" of symbolism and narrative is familiar. For the most part, these artists are stating again their belief in a formalist approach. It is this formalism, so ingrained in our understanding of modernism, that the writers on neo-expressionism and postmodernism call into question. What was once considered a radical approach is labelled as conservative. When asked about the political significance of neo-expressionism, only Goldberg and Scully answered directly. They maintained the belief that representational painting reflects conservatism. But they too would agree with the general opinion that political significance is hard to measure in neo-expressionist or abstract painting. Rather, what these discussions do point out is a difference in attitudes toward history. A simple comment such as wanting to paint as well as Cezanne suggests the acceptance of modern tradition which demands that meaning and feeling be expressed in a way which incorporates that tradition in a new or different way. We have here a reaffirmation of painting, but not one that comments on art and life in a negative or cynical way. These artists maintain a positive belief in the possibilities of revelation and profound feeling expressed through painting.

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