

Dr Mark Merrony, Director of the Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins, interviews the internationally renowned abstract artist Sean Scully in his Barcelona studio

How old were you when you first started to paint or draw?

I was about six. While I was at a convent school I was very involved with things like Nativity plays and I used to make the scenery. I was always the school artist.

When you were at art school did you only paint abstract pictures?

No. I started making very realistic drawings and I drew obsessively for the first couple of years. I produced a lot of beautiful drawings of friends, plants, animals, landscapes. I am showing them in Ireland and in Germany; there is going to be an exhibition that explains this story. I am one of the few artists knocking around now that made the transition from realism to abstraction.

What was it that steered you towards abstraction?

I would say that the drive to abstraction is fundamental to everything that follows, and that comes from an interest in Irish music – I mean, that's in my soul, and the idea of rhythm, the sense of rhythm, that's deep within me. The idea of universality has always been big in me, and still is, and I don't abandon that, even though we are in a period that is basically called post-modern. You can still make very engaging abstraction – or I can anyway – after the fall of modernism, that's not dependent on that context or that matrix, or a belief in that. That said, fast-forwarding to a man in his mid-60s, having just talked about a man in his late teens, I had an idea to make these paintings that came from a lot of things.

How did the concept and theme of abstracting Doric architecture develop in your work?

Once, when I did a film interview with the late Robert Hughes, the greatest art writer of his generation by far, he said of my work: 'His paintings have a silent sense



Ancient order –

1. Sean Scully in 1992, standing in front of the Doric columns of one of the temples at Agrigento in Sicily.

2. DORIC ORANGE, a painting inspired by the pale orange colour of the stone of the temples at Agrigento.

3. The artist in his studio in Mooseurach, in southern Germany, in 2003. To his right: Wall of Light Ice, 2003, oil on linen, 90 x 72 inches (228.6 x 182.9cm). Public Collection: Hilti Art Foundation, Schaan, Liechtenstein. To his left: Figure in Orange, 2004, oil on linen, 96 x 84 inches (243.8 x 213.4cm). Private Collection.

of gravitas and there is a kind of Doric order about them.' That's when I first got the idea of making a group of paintings called *Doric Order* – or referring to the sense of Doric order. But, before that, I had visited the temples at Agrigento in Sicily. They are very beautiful. I loved the pale orange colour of the stone; one of my paintings is called *DORIC ORANGE*. Those temples stand alone on an empty landscape against the sea. You have there an architectural sense of eternity against a body of water, poetically and geographically, or at least in our localised sense on planet Earth. This was of great interest to me.

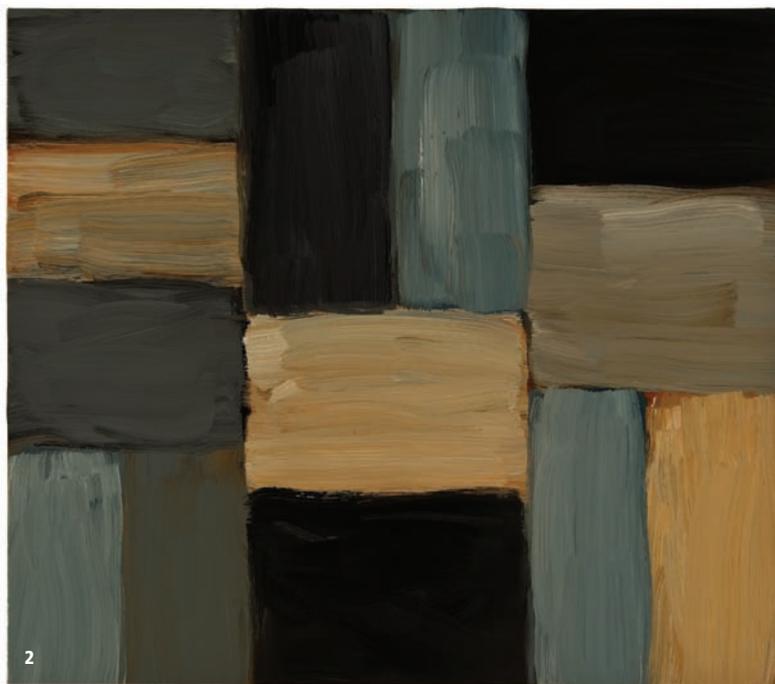
Did any other factors in your early life influence your work?

The idea of standing things one on top of the other has always been of great interest to me, the idea of stacking. When I was young I worked in Woolworth's. I operated a baling-machine, baling old

cardboard boxes, and I always was very fascinated by this idea of stacking, and just being able to go up by stacking, which is what, in building terms, is called 'post and linteling'. I have made 11 trips to Mexico, where I visited practically every temple – Labna, Coba, Sayil, Tulum, Chichen Itza of course, Uxmal – every site except Bonampak, which is in the jungle and a bit inaccessible. Those temples are also built in that way, by stacking. This idea of human stacking to create spaces in which we think and grow culture – spaces of contemplation – is very interesting.

The legacy of ancient Greece is strongly present in your work. Is it a tribute to that great civilisation?

I think about Greece and what we owe the Greeks, and how personally indebted I am to Greece. I wanted to make something for them. When I was thinking about it – not consciously thinking about their current economic plight but



2

new art

perhaps subconsciously – in some way I wanted to come to their rescue as an artist, to speak up for them, to say this is what they gave us, this is what we stand in, this is what we base everything on.

Why do the Ionic and Corinthian orders not inspire you?

Because they are not fundamental – they are an elaboration built on the Doric. I'm only interested in fundamental forms. Look at the paintings; there are no twirly bits in my paintings, no decoration, no elaboration. I make my paintings out of absolutely fundamental forms. I have no interest at all in the idea of elaboration. It's antithetical to what I do.

Aside from Greek architecture, do any other aspects of ancient Greek art strike a chord with you?

No. This isn't really about artefacts. This is bigger than that. This is philosophical, and the subject of abstraction, once it left the figure behind, or once it left behind the appearance of figures, became

philosophy. That's what Western abstraction is based on. Of course, abstraction has been around for thousands of years. Our abstraction was invented to accompany the Russian Revolution. That is what took hold with me, not the appearance of things, but the meaning of things. That's why I converted from figuration to abstraction, for political reasons, because I was a fervent Left activist. I believed in social order, social justice, I still do. I was attracted to abstraction because of that and because of the way cities are built. My early work was based on super-grids. I looked at the way highways overlapped, at the way city blocks went up. I was reacting to that, so my work has always been urban in one way or another.



3

You work both in Barcelona and in New York City, but you also have a house out in the countryside in southern Germany. You have mentioned that, since living there, your paintings have acquired 'a softness'. What did you mean?

The first painting I produced when I moved to Germany was called *Mooseurach*, which is the name of the little village where I live. It was a painting with green in it. Green is a colour that sort of got away from me over time. When I moved to the countryside, it made me very nervous, because I have always fed on the city, on the syncopation of the city, and on urban rhythms, and my work has always been in dialogue with architecture, and the idea of





doors and windows and stacked floors and so on. But when I moved to the countryside I found that I could use the things in nature – the colour of the sky, the way in which the light in the sky hits the Alps at different times in the day and transforms the stone into luminous matter. I found that I could bring that into my paintings in my studio, because I paint next to a big picture window, and right next to me is a huge forest where the mist hangs around a lot, which makes fantastically mysterious colours, and also there are the Alps. What has happened is that a kind of pink-purple colour has come into my work, and you can see it in this painting right here – that pink colour and those strange purpley colours, purpley greys, are the colour of the Alps in the evening. It has enriched my palette immeasurably. What has happened is that the paintings have become informed by forces outside the studio that are visual and more directly connected to landscape, as if the sensations of landscape are superimposed onto timeless architectural form.

Your *Wall of Light* series marked an especially prolific phase in your career in the late 1990s. What inspired these paintings?
It was 1984 and I was on the beach at Zihuatanejo in Mexico when I got the *Wall of Light* idea. I made a

4. Sean Scully's studio in New York.

5. *Mooseurach*, one of a series of paintings named after the village in southern Germany where Sean Scully lives for part of the year.



painting, a watercolour, as a direct result of looking at the temples. You can't help but be impressed and moved by the silence of these places, and how the stone is transformed by the morning and the night. People were spiritually inhabited by this theatre of architecture, and that affected me very deeply. I didn't think about the title. I just wrote underneath the watercolour: 'Wall of Light'. I parked that painting for about 14 years, then, in about 1998, when I was ready, I started making

all the *Wall of Light* paintings. I'm a person who needs a lot of time. I think that my work is deeply romantic. That's why I go back to the Doric idea. I'm so moved by the sacrifice of the 300 Spartan warriors [at Thermopylae] who defended our future.

When you visited the Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins last year, you were interested in the principal concept behind the museum in that it displays ancient art alongside





I'm only interested in fundamental forms... there are no twirly bits in my paintings, no decoration, no elaboration



7

6. The design of Sean's tattoo is a megalithic tri-spiral taken from a carving inside Newgrange, a 5,000-year-old passage tomb near Dublin in Ireland.



6

7. *Wall of Light Sky*, 2000.

8. The artist pictured in Mooseurach in 2003.

All photographs © Sean Scully.



8

Baroque, Neoclassical, modern and contemporary art.

This idea is very interesting because there is a huge connection between antiquities and contemporary art. And the reason is in some sense primitive: both are primitive. It's like my tattoo; it's exactly the same thing as my tattoo. My tattoo design comes from Newgrange – you could quite easily incorporate items from Newgrange into your museum, in the same way that the British Museum does. There is a stone in the British Museum that has exactly the same drawing on it as my tattoo. The idea of putting ancient art with contemporary art is very interesting, particularly anything that has been influenced by minimalism, because minimalism is something that you can almost see in art of 4,000 years ago – very

simple forms. The first thing that I saw in the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens was a stone cross, made 2,000 years before Jesus Christ was born, a kind of rough, fat carved stone cross that looked almost like a piece of minimal art, like something that you would have seen 20 years ago. So the idea of closing down the space between ancient art and contemporary art is true – it has about it a truthfulness because it is an art that tries to be somehow direct in its appeal or direct in its approach, and it dispenses to a large degree with narrative and perspective, which was really invented to illustrate Christianity.

Why did you decide to stage your exhibition, DORIC, in the Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins?
The idea of making small shows is

something I do for my life, for my own spirit. It's not about positioning my work in the sense that a show at the Metropolitan Museum does – it doesn't necessarily or immediately impact on my position in 21st-century art. It is something I do because I want to. It is an act of pure engagement with a fascinating collection, with an extreme vision, which I also have. It is an extreme vision within an extreme vision. ■

- *Sean Scully: DORIC* is on show at the Musée d'Art Classique de Mougins (www.mouginsmusee.com) until 29 September.
- *Sean Scully: Triptychs* exhibition will open at Pallant House Gallery (www.pallant.org.uk) in Chichester on 2 November and will run until 9 February 2014.