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DE-LIMITATION THROUGH EXISTENTIAL ABSTRACTION*

Abstract:

The paper analyses the artistic oeuvre of Sean Scully by applying a framework of experientiality that incorporates the concepts of monumentality, immersion, de-limitation, and empathy. In Scully's context, monumentality extends beyond mere physical scale, emphasizing perceptual grandeur. It transcends conventional notions of inaccessibility associated with its classical meaning, instead embracing the human element. Immersiveness invites viewers into a dynamic, virtual metaworld of aesthetic encounters, taking leverage of optical engagement to foster affective and intellectual immersion. The concept of de-limitation operates in a multifaceted manner across dimensions and composition, transforming both physical and visual boundaries within his paintings. However, it's the palpable undercurrent of empathy that truly defines Scully's art, saturating his work with a warmth and tenderness toward the human condition. Sean Scully's experiential aesthetics establishes a profound connection between the artwork and its audience, resulting in a resonant emotional and analytical experience.

Key words:

Sean Scully, existential geometric abstraction, abstract realism, experientiality, monumentality, immersion, de-limitation, empathy

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Art is the unfolding of the world between a work of art and its viewer, mediated by personal histories and interconnections with socio-cultural, institutional-artistic and economic contexts. It is a relationship that works by shaping a meta-world that is experienced even though it is not habitual or existential. Without any intention of romanticising that relationship, I consider art to be a world-creating activity. Otherwise, it is not art. A work that is called artistic must create an activating virtual or material reality; otherwise, it is impotent. Impotence, in the sense of impossibility to act on the audience, cannot be associated with any artistic achievement in any period of history. In painting, this effect is achieved through the traditional visual perception of two-dimensional space and the aesthetics of such a form, so it primarily comes from the optical domain. This means that there is a clear physical separation between the artwork and the audience without direct physical involvement in the making of the artwork, as is the case in participatory performances or interactive new-media installations in contemporary art. Given that, as well as the current overwhelming of the senses with technology, abstract painting has become a very demanding discipline because it is necessary to find a way to continue to affect the audience – at which Sean Scully succeeds masterfully.

Scully is an artist whose artworks unlock the eventfulness, narrativity and sensoriality through painterly colour and form, which he has been continuously researching since the 1960s, creating one of the most impressive artistic opuses in the painting medium. His art primarily takes place within the purely pictorial realm as the artistic credo of abstraction – rhythm, repetition and composition made of variations of stripes and blocks of colour, which he positions horizontally, vertically and also, at the beginning of his career, diagonally. He has thus created an abundant range of various combinations and visual transformations, at some stages superimposing squares upon the prevailing system. However, it is not mechanical seriality and its permutations as we know it from Op-art or Minimalism, at least not from the 1980s, when Scully emancipated himself from them and defined his own authentic painting language. In his by now iconic colour blocks and wide stripes, it is the expressiveness of muted, soiled tones that comes to the fore, due to which his paintings, although not monochromatic, often leave this impression. In his 1966 sketch titled *Abstract Four Square Figures*

Sean Scully, *Abstract Four Square Figures*, 1966 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

(fig 1.), the artist produced a list of colours: yellow, grey, black, blue (e.g. cobalt), pink, green, orange and red. That palette has remained characteristic of his entire oeuvre, and so has the gradation, mixing and layering of tones, along with the reshaped gesture of abstract expressionism and minimalism, with emotionality that invites a potential connection with the audience. The sensibility and poeticisation of abstraction are the goals that Scully has been striving for ever since he "realised that the alienating, reductivist principles embodied in Minimalism were anti-humanistic and sterile," which is why he "decided to open up abstraction and make relational paintings that were emotional and individual in their presences." This, he explains, he achieved by "using emotive painting and subjective color and by breaking up abstraction and re-assembling it in ways I had not seen before, causing contemporary realities and feelings" (Scully 2020, 95). Relational paintings have a strong potential for experientiality, which I believe the artist achieves through the concepts of monumentality, immersion, de-limitation and empathy, so I single them out here as key to the effect of his art.

Experientiality

I define experientiality as a relation and incentive for immersion in the artwork, resulting from the relationship between the sensory perceptions of the audience and the sensory appearance of the work. It takes place on several different, overlapping levels of experiences that are broader than a mere experience of emotions. I place the initial experience in the area of affectivity, the second in emotionality, and the third in discursivity. By affectivity, I understand the experiences that are formed in the observer beyond the linguistic, semantic and consciously comprehensible. This is the level of experience that, in the mid-1990s, initiated the affective turn within critical theory (Cf. Massumi 2002; Clough and Halley 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). It established the legitimacy to include in the perception of the work of art, in addition to the rational-intellectual approach, unarticulated bodily experiences, as well as conscious ones related to the emotional reactions of the audience. Scully's artworks evoke discrete, calm and persistent affective impulses. Undefined embodied perception is manifested in the way his art moves the facial expressions of the audience, leads their bodies to lean forwards or backwards, or halts them in front of a specific artwork – by the behaviour of corporality. Affectivity is then elucidated by being transformed into clear emotions such as melancholy, sadness, constriction, anxiety, hardness, saturation, *earthiness* or lightness, cheerfulness, gentleness, trembling, sensuality, passion, muted or open optimism and so on, accompanied by linguistically coded semantic-cognitive processes and cultural rationalisations such as this essay. All this dramaturgy of experientiality leads the observer of Scully's works to become and remain an active participant in art.

Monumentality

The term *monumental* as I use it here includes yet does not require large proportions, and by no means implies grandeur or awe. With Scully, monumentality is partly related to the impressiveness of his canvases, which can be more than two and up to six metres in size, thus exceeding the dimensions and space of the human body, the body of the observer. I take the human body as the unit of measurement for monumentality because it is directly related to experientiality. The body instinctively relates to the space and the artistic object, measuring it in currents of affectivity that move it, and evaluates the relations that contribute to the impression of monumentality. This happens when directly observing a particular painting, or when experiencing the artwork's proportions in relation to the bodies of other visitors. However, monumentality is also a feature of Scully's smaller formats, which shows that it is not only a matter of size, but rather of experientiality that results from an encounter with the *self-confident* pictorial reality. In their elemental simplicity, Scully's paintings achieve an impressive effect of fullness and volume as signs of monumentality. That is why the artist could say that at some point, "the ego of the painting got bigger" (Scully in Guttner 2010, 1:06:44–1:06:48).

The self-confident monumentality of colouristic modules seems to take its cue from nature and architecture, from the time when large blocks of stones and beams were used in construction, which the artist abstracts and transforms to acquire new qualities. By using them as metaphors, he affirms them as experiences that

Sean Scully, *The Bather*, 1988 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

retain the robustness and tectonic nature of building materials. Daniel Herwitz therefore writes about the materiality of Scully's art (2015, 11), and Arthur C. Danto about the physical presence of his paintings (2015, 41). Reinforced in paintings with deep colour gamut, this materiality remains in the impression, the visible energy of the brushstrokes and the impasto, as well as in the incorporation of that tactility of blocks in his sculptures. Presence and materiality are also formally achieved by physically dislocating the levels of a painting into space (e.g. *The Bather*, 1983, fig. 2) or by extrapolating the longer side of the entire painted object hanging on the wall (e.g. *Floating Painting #5*, 1996, fig. 3), which emphasises the layering of spatial relations – that is, the three-dimensional, sculptural character of some of Scully's painting series.

Sean Scully, *Floating Painting #5*, 1996 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

Monumentality is a property to which the creation of detachment and distancing is immanent, but not with Scully. With him, there is a certain down-to-earth quality, the impression of remaining on the level of humanity. It is enhanced by muted tonality, which calms and deepens the dimensions of paintings so that they seem to invite one to join them rather than remain distant. Scully reduces the grandeur and inaccessibility of monumentality in its classical understanding – as magnificence and admirable ideals loaded into works of art – to the affirmation and appreciation of the human far from the sublimity of the divine, royal or ideological of any kind. Scully is magnificently approachable. That is why I call his monumentality *humanised monumentality*, as it attaches importance to the manifold forms of humanity and their associated relations with the subjective and external environment – from the light that transforms the surfaces of walls, the people he loves, the horizon, down to the colours themselves – through his *fearless* and *self-confident* artworks.

Immersiveness

Speaking of artworks, every abstract block of colour has the potential to be immersive, but not all lead to the same intensity of immersion. In traditional painting, immersiveness is primarily achieved through optical-perceptual rather than

any other type of sensory immersion, such as tactile or olfactory. However, like the impression of materiality, depth or movement, these stimuli can still be experienced in their virtual form. This is also the case with Sean Scully, whose paintings are powerful emotive-contemplative monumental analogue associative depictions. By making the audience abandon themselves to impressions that result from the sensory totality of huge blocks of colour, he opens the door to immersiveness in which the meanings of relations that are valid in the real world are lost. That kind of immersiveness requires paintings in which one can be immersed due to their proportions or their attention-grabbing intensity. It causes the exhilaration of being lost in a certain place or state. Thus, his abstract works, with their magnificence, composition and colour, draw one into the immersive virtuality of the painting, which ceases to be immobile and becomes active. The virtuality of Scully's paintings is not a simulated alternative reality such as that implied by digital virtual reality; instead, I understand it as the reality of the immaterial and intangible experience of developing a relationship with a work of art, such as experiencing warmth in a certain colour that is not there in material reality, or experiencing a state of pleasure or melancholy and so on. With Scully, the virtual is based on the impact of the *presentness* of art, about which Michael Fried wrote in his famous essay "Art and

Sean Scully, *Diagonal Inset*, 1973 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist
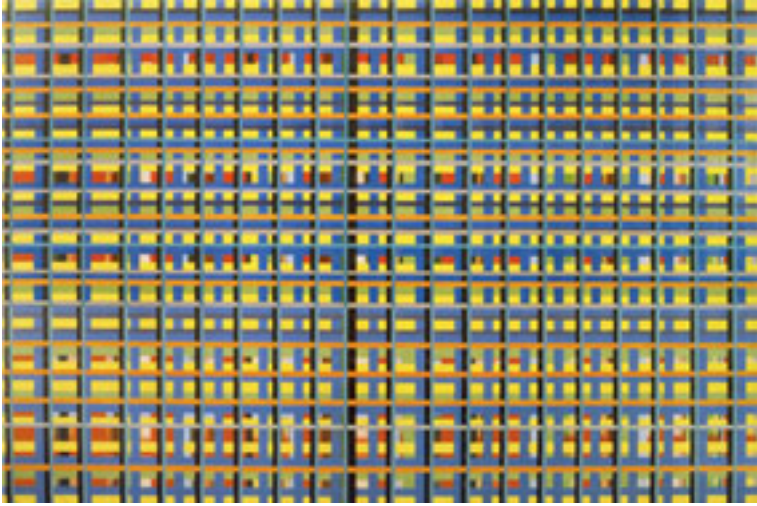
Sean Scully, *Backcloth*, 1970 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

Objecthood" (1967). For Fried, presentness is a distinction that separates modernist painting and sculpture from the semantic literalness of the objects of minimalism, which are characterised by intrusive *presence* (Fried 1998, 151, 155), and describes the immediate experience of a painting through the gaze that remains fixed on it, immersed into its self-sufficient artistic reality that is beyond the habitual (*Ibid.*, 167).

The immersiveness of Scully's soft gesturality of colour blocks was preceded in his early phase by a series of paintings called *Supergrids* in the 1970s. Their immersiveness was based on the optical effects of three-dimensionality and the flickering mobility of depiction, which he achieved by weaving a dense geometric grid with thin interlaced strips. These nets upon nets collide to create complex multi-coloured patterns with sharp edges and show his "original interest in rhythm and the beautiful effect that lines achieve when they are put next to each other" (Scully 2006, 06:20–06:33) (e.g. *Harvard Frame Painting* from 1972, which imitates a loom (Carrier 2021, 41), *Diagonal Inset* from 1973 (fig. 4), *East Coast Light II* from 1973, or *Crossover Painting #1* from 1974). These works combine influences from Mondrian's neoplasticism, Bridget Riley's Op-art, Jesús Raphael Soto's installations, and carpet and fabric patterns that captivated Scully during a visit to Morocco. *Backcloth* from 1970 (fig. 5) paradigmatically reflects the intentions of the entire series, which is to make "chaos out of order." "I've always been misusing order," says the artist, to be able to achieve "disorderly order" (Scully in Fehér 2020, 152).[1]

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1   Further on, Scully observes that *Backcloth* is "like a computer painting before there were computers" (*Ibid.*). It should be noted that by that time, examples of early computer art had been generated for some ten years (Manfred Mohr, Frieder Nake, Ernest Edmonds, Vera Molnár, Roman Verostko, etc.), so Scully's painting also stands in relation to these tendencies in the metadiscourse of art history.

De-Limitation

Monumentality and immersiveness are associated with the concept of limitation. Scully's artworks do not symbolise boundaries, such as those he photographed, for example, in Italy, Mexico, Scotland or Ireland: wooden doors in Siena (*Ten Siena Doors*, 1978), huts in Oaxaca (*Oaxaca*, 1988) and the Scottish islands (*Isle of Harris and Lewis*, 1990), and dry walls of the Aran Islands (*Aran*, 2005, fig. 6). They are the transformations of these boundaries into a visual event of colours and structure, so that they cease to be "brutal dividers" and become "positive, because many of them are not" as the artist pointed out, referring to the walls in his painting series *Wall of Light* (since 1998) (Scully in Carrier 2021, 86, 88). Accordingly, in its

Sean Scully, *Aran*, 2005 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

final form, hand-laid stones from the landscape or boards on houses become colour, and colour becomes a specific level and type of experience, such as an emotion related to that particular or some other phenomenon from the reality – the night, his wife, the sea.

De-limitation in Scully is threefold. One is the de-limitation of dimensions. Dimensions of certain paintings are on the limit to be grasped from the position of human measurement, thus intensifying the immersion into the virtual metaworld of reality shaped by art. It is the reality of colours, form, and visual sensory representation that is de-limited by giving importance to the human. The second de-limitation refers to the pictorial boundaries within the paintings. Since the 1980s, Scully's blocks and stripes of colour have not been rigorously identical geometric units. Each one has a specific character and serves as a narrative tool that separates and embraces the field it touches. The modules are painted without strict precision: open and autonomous, yet connected with each other by softened borders. This allows for a gentle entry of one block of colour into another for their non-geometric merging and fusion, and thus for an undefined, open and ambiguous border – its de-limitation. It is vibrant and organic in detail, moving away from the structure, creating cracks in it, all of which additionally invokes the human and existential dimensions of Scully's art. In these permeable borders between colours, the paintings show softness that can easily be read as the softness of the world, a softness that signifies interconnection and interaction between living and nonliving entities, or at least a gentle contact. In certain series, however, the border is sharp, contributing to the rhythm of the painting by highlighting the mode of separation between individual parts. Strictly straight lines are created when the artist physically joins separate painting surfaces, as in the series of paintings on aluminium called *Doric* (since 2018, or when he inserts one painting into another (*Without*, 1988; *Long Light*, 1998).

Border is a phenomenon that prevents crossing, that preserves what it encloses, and has an important function as an area that is referential and foundational for something new and unforeseen. The new and unexpected in Scully's paintings arises when modules are separated and joined by loosened edges, when colours are mixed, when the logic of one structure is imposed on another, as when inserting one painting into another, thus breaking it open, disrupting it, and introducing "doubt" into it (Scully 2021, 1:06:10) (*Pale Fire*, 1988 (fig. 8); *Black Square*, 2020). The latter case shows the third way of de-limiting, which the artist achieves by creating a hole, a void in the painting, which he fills with a painting of a different scheme, a different direction or rhythm. For him, these closed openings equal filling a view, such as a view from a window (*Ibid.*, 1:08:57–1:09:06). This procedure allows the differences to remain in contact, competing for their positions in the painting and metaphor. It allows a view through the window to become a view on the dialectics of inseparably connected worlds.

Sean Scully, *Pale Fire*, 1988 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

Empathy

The origin of connection with Scully's paintings is in the attitude that lies behind the pictoriality of colour structures, and this attitude is, according to the artist, the actual content of the paintings (Scully in van der Horst 2018, 07:09–07:15). Each attitude is a sort of boundary, emotion or type of instruction. Scully's fundamental attitude is empathy, which permeates the atmosphere of his paintings: "The artist who can provoke empathy is the one who simply completes your thought. Or makes visible our desire, yours and mine. I'm not trying to say anything different from what you want to say. I want to say the same thing, I want to make visible what we feel, not just what I feel but what we feel. I want my paintings to be obvious so that when you see them you feel that I have painted something that you were thinking yourself. As though I have stolen a thought from you. This is what I mean by empathy." (Scully 2006, 29:02–29:39). That is why he does not avoid the diversity of human experience in his art, including the "impurity and dirt of life" (Scully 2022, 01:59–02:08) as well as everything else that is "interesting, engaging, perverse and beautiful about human nature" (Scully in Tickell 1992, 02:32–02:38).

Scully's art contains a kind of exaggerated tenderness towards life – sensitivity to the materiality of the world and sensitivity to existence. In other words, with him, the sensitivity of abstract representation becomes the sensitivity to everyday reality, rather than a pure painterly form as in the Suprematism of

Sean Scully, *Backs and Fronts*, 1981 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

Kasimir Malevich (Cf. Malevich 1959), in which it stands close to the magical poeticity of Marc Chagall or Paul Klee, the spirituality of Wassily Kandinsky (Cf. Kandinsky 1946), or the contemplativeness of a Colour-Field Painting. By combining the emotions and perceptive qualities of painting or sculptural space with the unfolding of human existence, Scully gains a certain *firmness* that does not cancel out his *softness*, but engages them in an active relationship. That is exactly how Scully works: ambivalently. Sometimes he places the audience into the grid; at other times he draws them out of it, leaving behind not always comprehensible experiences connected to existential reality – not through the representativeness of form, but rather its expressiveness and associativeness.

For all these reasons, I am referring to Scully's opus, which has become an exceptional phenomenon of art history, as being on the intersection between elements of Lyrical and Geometric Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism, by developing a specific version of abstraction which I call *existential geometric abstraction*. He creates it with blocks of colour as the fundamental visual units for building the world in his focus – nature, emotions, moods, people, phenomena, places, activities and art. The titles of his paintings can serve as an associative guide in interpretation: *Empty Heart* (1987), *Between You and Me* (1988), *Happy Days* (1991), *Backs and Fronts* (1981, fig. 9), *Window Diptych Red* (2018), *Doric* (2018), *Oisín Sea Green* (2016, fig. 10), *Wall of Light Zacatecas* (2010), *Mariana* (1991) and others. Therefore, Scully's art is not non-representational even though it formally is, because it is filled with an attitude towards the reality of the material world; in this apparent contradiction it can be characterised as *abstract realism*.

Sean Scully, *Oisín Sea Green*, 2016 © Sean Scully. Photo: courtesy the artist

The entire artistic oeuvre of Sean Scully is flooded with his unstable and unpredictable, wonderful and sad life experience, so I also look at it as an *emotional biography*. This also applies to his figuration, with which he began his painting research in the 1960s, but returned to only in the 2010s in his series *Eleuthera* (2015 – 2018) and *Madonna* (2018 – 2019). There he constructed his figures in the footsteps of Matisse, by treating them as silhouettes indicated by patches of colour, without any details. Noticeably personal and intimate, the abstract figuration in vivid colours depicts happy family motifs on the beach: his son playing in the sand with his parents. The tenderness, sensitivity and idealisation of childhood that radiates from these paintings are inevitably related to the tragic death of his first son. This painting series seems to echo the words of Manuel Vilas: "Everything that we loved and lost, that we loved so very much, loved without knowing that one day it would be taken away from us, everything that could not destroy us with its loss although it tried to do it with supernatural forces and worked on our ruin cruelly and devotedly, eventually, sooner or later, turns into joy" (Vilas 2019).[2] On the edge of pathos, yet escaping it through the concept of joy, the writer's sentence reflects the abundance of delicate atmosphere invoked by Scully's figurative paintings.

Classical Modernity

Insistence on an empathic relationship with reality, along with the monumentality, immersion and de-limitation, additionally contributes to the experience of closeness with Scully's works. Closeness is here understood as Rita Felski used it in her book *Hooked: Art and Attachment* as a personal rather than psychological or social category, taking place through attunement and identification, which also includes empathy, and interpretation (2020, xii–xiv). This implies having personal feelings towards a work of art and taking into account that, for the person who is in contact with it, it becomes *important* and acquires intimate value. Establishing this attachment means affirming the inevitability of

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2   Translated from Spanish by Marina Schumann.

permanent emotional encounters and fusion with the artwork, which includes aesthetic, affective, intellectual and ethical aspects (*Ibid.* 28, 1). From the era of the waning vitality of abstract painting in the 1970s and the dominance of the objects of minimalism, what Donald Judd has called "specific objects," and onwards, through all the changes in visual art from conceptual to new media art in the 21st century, i.e. from analogue to digital art, or – expressed in a cultural code – from modernism to postmodernism and further to metamodernism, Sean Scully's artworks have established a connection with the audience through their metaphorical visuality. They create striking virtual realities by opening a layered possibility of inscribing personal eventfulness and sensoriality into abstract optical visuals and the complexity of painterly reality. Such immersion in the intimist monumentality of his art testifies to the vitality of classical modernist painting principles. But for the formally reduced expression of self-confident compositions, it is especially the abundance of empathy that defines the atmosphere of Scully's artworks and exhibitions as a whole. This means that the moods of his artistic spaces, which range from calmness to playfulness, are interwoven with expressions of true emotionality. This emotionality captures the deep substance of human life because, as the artist states, his artworks are experiences and incarnations, not explanations (Scully in Doyle 2009, 07:25–08:14). Each of them is imbued with warm humanity, warmth of happiness and understanding of adversity, with consideration for sensations, memory and desire, for the artist himself and, above all, for you – when you abandon yourself to it.

Translated from Croatian by Marina Schumann

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Sunčica Ostoić

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DE-LIMITACIJA KROZ EGZISTENCIJALNU APSTRAKCIJU

Apstrakt:

Rad analizira umetnički opus Šona Skalija primenjujući okvir doživljajnosti koji obuhvata koncepte monumentalnosti, imerzije, graničnosti i empatije. U kontekstu Skalijeve umetnosti, monumentalnost prevazilazi puki fizički obim, naglašavajući perceptivnu veličanstvenost. Ona nadilazi konvencionalne pojmove nepristupačnosti asocijativno povezane sa njenim klasičnim značenjem, a umesto toga prihvata ljudski element. Imerzija poziva gledaoce u dinamičan, virtuelni metasvet estetskih susreta, koristeći se optičkim učešćem radi podsticanja afektivnog i intelektualnog uranjanja. Koncept graničnosti deluje višestruko kroz kategorije dimenzije i kompozicije, transformišući kako fizičke tako i vizuelne granice unutar njegovih slika. Međutim, naizgled prikrivena, ali opipljiva empatija je ono što zaista definiše Skalijevu umetnost, prožimajući njegov rad toplinom i nežnošću ka ljudskom stanju. Doživljajna estetika Šona Skalija uspostavlja duboku povezanost između umetničkog dela i publike, rezultirajući rezonantnim emocionalnim i analitičkim iskustvom.

Ključne reči:

Šon Skali, egzistencijalna geometrijska apstrakcija, apstraktni realizam, doživljajnost, monumentalnost, imerzija, de-limitacija, empatija