

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Sean Scully: Duane Street 1981–1983

October 29 – December 21, 2024
504 West 24th Street, New York

Opening: October 29, 6 – 8pm

“They are very ‘New York’ paintings, but the city they evoke is not the foreigner’s imagined grid of perfect planes; rather it is gritty, heavy, slapped-together lower Manhattan, where Scully has his studio: the hoardings of warped plywood, the metal slabs patching the street.”

– Robert Hughes, ‘Earning His Stripes’, *Time Magazine*, 1989

Lisson Gallery is proud to mount an ambitious exhibition exploring one of Sean Scully’s breakthrough bodies of work, incorporating loans of historic pieces from the early 1980s. They include a legendary, 11-panel work entitled *Backs and Fronts*, which was last exhibited in New York at MoMA PS1 in 1982, a year after it was made. This monumental composition was extended from an earlier work, known as *Four Musicians* (painted after Picasso’s *Three Musicians* of 1921), which Scully combined using reclaimed wooden struts, in the loft space of an old textile warehouse on Duane Street, in the then unfashionable and run-down neighborhood of Tribeca.

Seven such constructions from this period, all made at the Duane Street studio, are included in this show, marking a significant break from Scully’s earlier, tighter striped canvases, as well as from the strictures of mainstream, hard-edged Minimalist painting of the 1970s. A tripartite work, *Araby* (1981), named after a short story by James Joyce, represents a midway point between his use of masking-taped lines and the removal of such aids in favor of more fluid gestures, leading Scully to describe this piece as being “in a fight with itself.” This move, towards a freer, rougher and more architectural series, enabled him, as the artist has said himself, to slice and cut through the staid field of abstract art and allowed these works to literally “stand up for themselves”.

Another major work, *Adoration* (1982), the second-largest he made after *Backs and Fronts*, comprised nine conjoined elements, inserting or stacking canvases vertically, one on top of the other, in addition to a horizontally aligned and consecutively numbered sequence on either side. This title alludes to various Old Master versions of *The Adoration of the Magi*, among other art historical influences – from Van Gogh to William Blake – occupying Scully during this period, suggesting a figurative or emotional reading of the upright, human-scaled panels, with a Holy Family at its core. These assemblages were, however, resolutely looking forwards, as well as pushing the flat plane out into three dimensions, through portions of the paintings that overlapped or jugged out in relief. *Blame* (1983) begins this breaking of the rectangular picture plane with two dark-hued overhanging sections teetering over a sandier, candy-striped base.

While this series was variously hailed for its ambition, expression and scale by critics of the time, Scully was also introducing new elements including the first use of the inset canvas; in addition to novel techniques, including the shifting heights of neighbouring panels; as well as changes to his use of the striped motif – fluid gestures, mixed color palettes – all of which still resonate in his practice to this day.

Scully’s sculptures are currently on show in ‘Broadway Shuffle’, a public trail of outdoor works organised by the Broadway Mall Association, until March 2025.

About the artist

Sean Scully's work has shifted the paradigm in American abstraction from Minimalism and its reduced vocabulary towards an emotional form of abstraction, returning to the metaphor and spirituality found in the European painting tradition. While known primarily for his large-scale abstract paintings, comprised of vertical and horizontal bands, tessellating blocks and geometrical forms comprised of gradated and shifting colours, Scully also works in a variety of diverse media, including printmaking, sculpture, watercolour and pastel. Having developed a style over the past five decades that is uniquely his own, Scully has cemented his place in the history of painting. His work synthesises a thoroughly international collection of influences and personal perspectives – ranging from the legacy of American abstraction, with inspiration from the likes of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, and that of European tradition, with nods to Henri Matisse and Piet Mondrian, as well as references to classical Greek architecture. While monumental in scale and gesture, Scully's work retains an undeniable delicacy and sincerity of emotion.

Sean Scully was born in Dublin in 1945 and raised in South London. Wanting to be an artist from an early age, Scully attended evening classes at the Central School of Art in London from 1962 to 1965, and enrolled full time at Croydon College of Art, London from 1965 until 1968. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Newcastle University in 1972. He was awarded the Frank Knox Fellowship to Harvard University in 1972, where he visited the United States for the first time. In 1975, he moved to New York full-time. Today, he lives and works between New York and London. With a career that spans more than five decades, he has received numerous accolades and has been the subject of multiple touring exhibitions. Significant solo exhibitions of his work were recently on view at The He Museum, Shunde, China (2024); Église-Saint-Nicolas, Caen, France (2024); Ludwig Museum, Koblenz, Germany (2024); National Gallery, Budapest, Hungary (16 May - 1 September, 2024); Houghton Hall, Norfolk, UK (2023); Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark (2023); Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, USA (2022); Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden, Wuppertal, Germany (2021).

Sean Scully's work is in the permanent collections of numerous important institutions including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada; Tate Modern, London; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Albertina, Vienna; and Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China, among many others.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 70 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists and others of that generation, from Carmen Herrera and Olga de Amaral to Hélio Oiticica and Lee Ufan. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Liu Xiaodong, Otobong Nkanga, Pedro Reyes, Sean Scully, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Wael Shawky. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists including Dana Awartani, Cory Arcangel, Garrett Bradley, Ryan Gander, Josh Kline, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost and Cheyney Thompson.

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