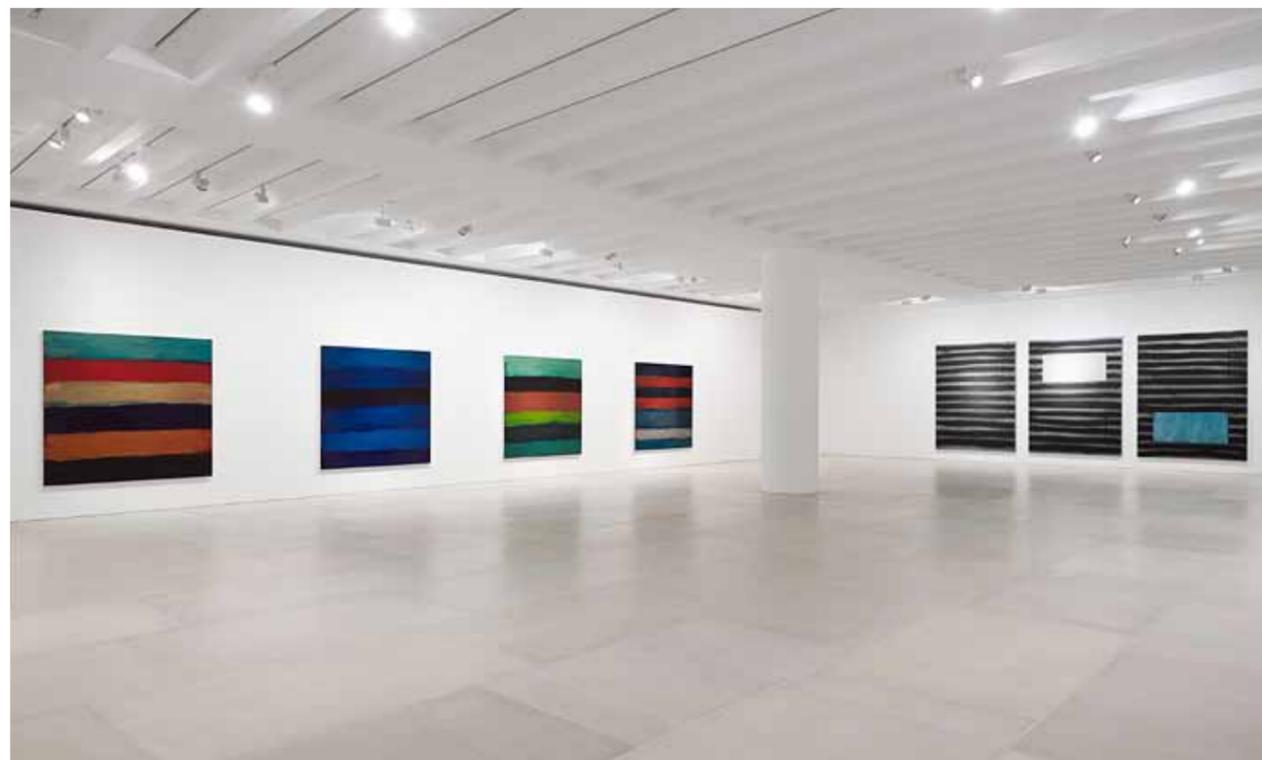


# MINIMALISM'S EMANCIPATION

## SEAN SCULLY INTERVIEW

RAJESH PUNJ



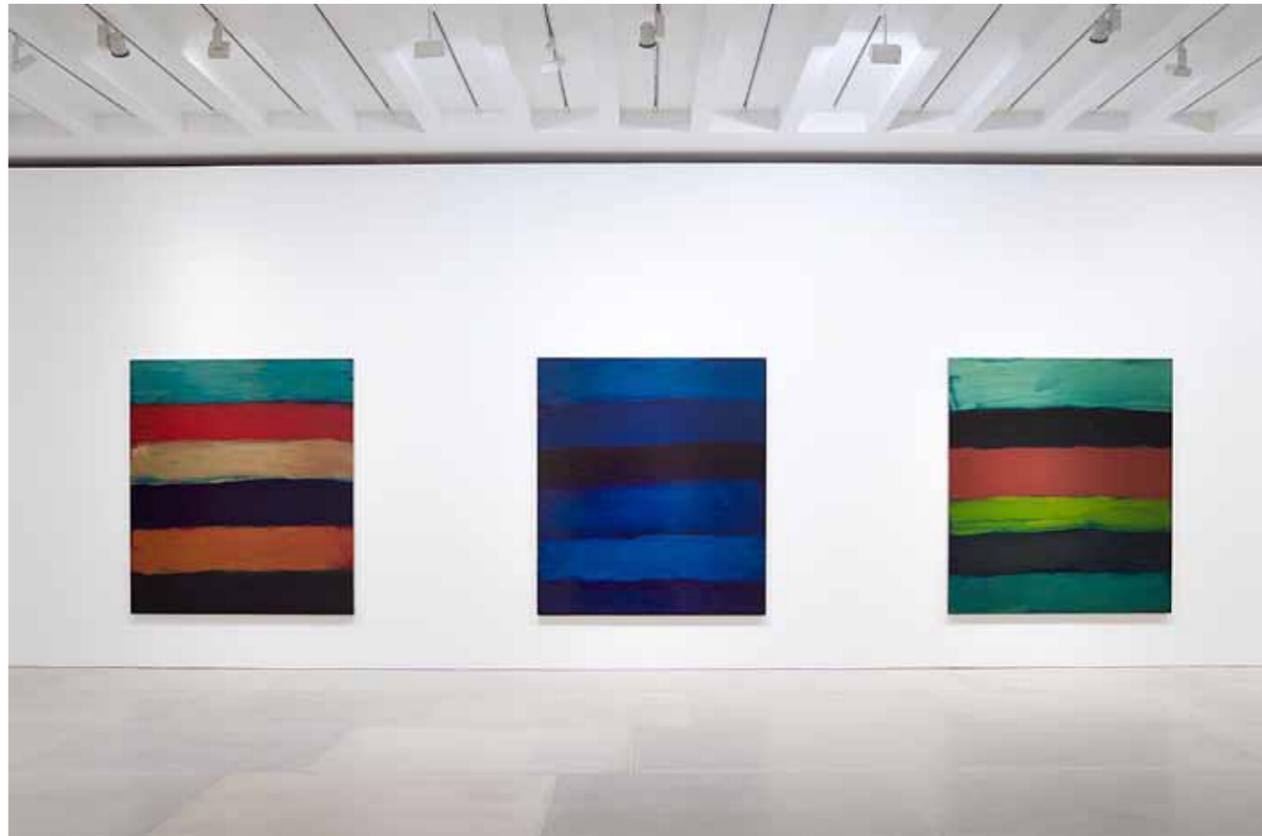
If modern minimalism was about the slow withdrawal of everything from aesthetics, then for Irish born-American based artist, sculptor Sean Scully, his work is about the return of the real. By making minimalism 'emotional' as he sees it, Scully advances his own personality over his cross and hatch canvases, as though the loosely formed rectangles of algid colour are somehow a way of explaining his sentiments. His interest the truth lies in his will to emotionally emancipate his works from the Sol LeWitt like cage that art had become subject to; and of the freedom to apply himself in a way that Ed Reinhardt and Barnett Newman in their day refused to do. Concentrating on his associated feelings for materials, Scully calls upon his own human experiences as a sure-fire way of entering into the works.

Revivifying what he saw as the dry determinism of minimalism, Scully feverishly explains how he expelled his own blood, sweat and tears into his work. As the autobiographical element of a body of works that conjure a mix of heady emotions, that he insists allow the audience to feel the artist's presence again. Citing his years of labouring in London as an unconscious influence, Scully

^ Sean Scully  
Uninsideout, 2018,  
Installation view  
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Photo Peter Mallet

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Installation view  
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Photo Peter Mallet





Sean Scully  
*Uninsideout*, 2018,  
 Installation view  
 ©Sean Scully  
 Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern,  
 Photo Peter Mallet

the other way, leaving England for the US.” And of the value of being the outsider, adding “but I don’t think Cy would have been able to make his work, if he hadn’t gone to Europe and become more of a European artist. And I think this adventure gives his work some kind of breadth; a physiological breadth that you certainly don’t find in a lot of American art.”

Everything comes back to what it is to have lived, and for Scully the greatest sensations are those that are human-made; that when impressed upon materials, ‘paint’, ‘canvas’, ‘board’, ‘metal’, ‘steel’, ‘stone’, energise their critical and cultural presence. And without emotion, as with the work of so many sculptors as he sees it, it is only ever hard art. Distancing himself from many of the masters of modernism, Scully sees beauty in the indentations and unevenness of materials that for their idiosyncrasies introduce an audience to a work’s authorship; which is entirely lost with a machine aesthetic. Art as he forcibly explains it, has a duty to deliver something greater, when too many artists have by intellectualism and loft ideals, alienated rather than engaged the spectator; in a way that impoverished aesthetics of the toil and tears that humanise the world we live in.

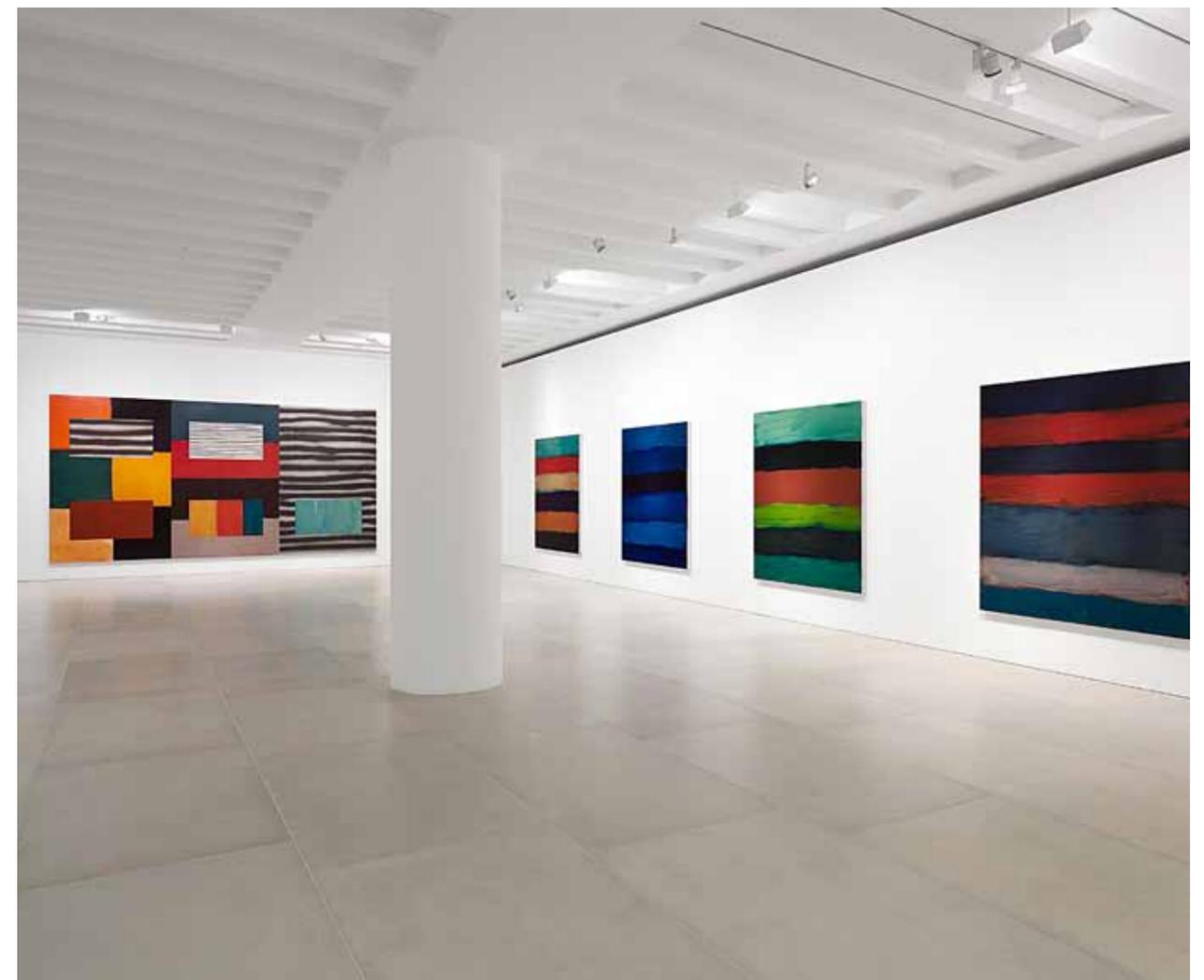
suffered for his art, saying that for all of the difficulties that he endured, at the hands of fate and a lack of fortune, enriched him enough to want to paint everything out onto canvas, and ‘stack-up’ as sculptures, that hang in space like monuments to his mental state of mind. A man almost bereaved by a lack of money in the beginning, Scully applied such hardships thereafter to a self-inflicted suffering, that of driving for weeks and months at a time, through the brutal beauty of locations and landscapes devoid of anything. Removing himself to Mexico from where everything became entirely about the elemental, as its only source of oxygen.

***“I see it as minimalism ‘unminimalised’. It is minimalism transformed into something else. Because of course there was something there that interested me.”***

Another influence, more artist, was American painter Cy Twombly, who saw himself, like Scully, as the catalyst for an evolution of ideas, saying in his day “to paint involves a certain crisis, or at least a crucial moment of sensation or release.” And like Twombly before him, Scully sees art that is devoid of any kind of emotion as being dishonest to the environment that it comes from. Wanting to dissolve Donald Judd to dirt, Scully explains his work as an invitation for an audience to feel something, and to apply such sentiments to their own wellbeing. His art is a cathartic act he says, that deserves to have happened, and that is the best of its kind.

Enamoured by Twombly, as he mentions him time and time again, Scully saw in him something of his own enforced displacement. Explaining how “he was the American who had to go out and live in a Palazzo in Rome to be okay, and I see myself as the European who went

^ Sean Scully  
*Uninsideout*, 2018,  
 Installation view  
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**Interview**

**Rajesh Punj:** *I am writing this piece for Washington's Sculpture, possibly you are aware of it.*

**Sean Scully:** Yes of course, I know it.

**RP:** *I am sure you have featured in it previously.*

**SS:** Yes my friend Jonathan Goodman wrote an article (which wasn't very good).

**RP:** *I am here as one of their international correspondents to discuss the sculptures at YSP (Yorkshire Sculpture Park). And it would be interesting to begin by returning to your introductory speech, that involved your love, hate relationship with 'abstraction', and its cousin if you like 'minimalism'.*

**SS:** My first encounter with minimalism came from when I was in New York, which had actually already started while I was back in England. I was very attracted to its austerity and moral rigour, because dare I say it I am quite a moral person. I found it very attractive at the time because it was taking no prisoners. I saw it as a very tough kind of art. People would call it 'tough' at the time, and there was a big thing about tough art, which as I said, I was very attracted to. But then of course I famously rejected it around 1980, and turned into the traitor who was accused of misusing minimalism. I started with thick paint and things that didn't necessarily fit together so well. Creating portraits of the city by physically forcing things together that didn't necessarily want to fit. So the underlying relationship to minimalism was still visible of course, you know, but I decided to pair it up with 'emotionalism', and that makes all of it very different.

*"I see myself as the enemy of impurity, because out of purity comes nothing, and I thought that was what had happened with abstraction, which was hijacked by the Americans of course... everything is like that, you have to have raw material, and so I decided to 'rough it up'".*

^ Sean Scully  
What Makes Us, 2017  
©Sean Scully  
Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern,  
Photo Peter Mallet

**RP:** *It really appears that way, minimalism without the machine aesthetic.*

**SS:** I see it as minimalism 'unminimalised'. It is minimalism transformed into something else. Because of course there was something there that interested me. But if I am honest what I didn't much like about it were the people who were engaged with it, they were all aristo's, like (Giuseppe) Panza and Heiner Friedrich; all these kinds of people. They seemed to be somehow lofty or entirely disconnected from everything.

**RP:** *Minimalism appeared motivated by a level of intellectualism that intentionally detached it from the ordinary and the everyday. Hard art as high art.*

**SS:** Artists like that really seemed disconnected, above life in some way, and I really wanted to reintroduce all of the dirt of life, and collect it all for the studio. Recently I did an interview with (Swiss curator) Hans Ulrich Obrist, like everybody else had to do.

**RP:** *A doctor's appointment.*

**SS:** Yes it was like a doctor's appointment. Which was fine, entirely painless of course, and towards the end of the interview he asked me my one word definition of art, and it was easy. I said 'impurity'. So I see myself as the enemy of impurity, because out of purity comes nothing, and I thought that was what had happened with abstraction, which was hijacked by the Americans of course. They produced some wonderful things, but the work was so refined that it couldn't be manipulated any more. It is comparable to refined sugar; you literally cannot keep on refining it. Everything is like that, you have to have raw material, and so I decided to 'rough it up', and I can recall

^ Sean Scully  
What Makes Us Too, 2017  
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Photo Peter Mallet



Sean Scully  
*Inside Outside*  
 Yorkshire Sculpture Park  
 Installation View 05  
 © Sean Scully.  
 Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
 Photo © Jonty Wilde

I was in a New York public library, invited to talk about the issue of impurity, and this lady in the audience said, 'what is all this talk about impurity, what do you mean by it?' And I replied 'interracial sex', because I was quite fed-up, and when I am fed-up I can usually become quite rude. And she said 'ahh all right', and then she understood. It is the same in art; it is the same in human beings, everything is the same. Cross breeding of everything, cross-pollination. If you want to have fruit trees, they require cross-pollination, otherwise they won't grow; they can become entirely sterile. The royal families (of Europe) were for a long-time inbreeding, and they suffered with stupid children. So my point is that I think that things have to combine, becoming anomalous, in order to make something, and to keep growth vital.

*RP: When I look at your work, your sculptures in particular, it is as if you are almost creating human beings; objects that are entirely imbued with all of the emotional sensibilities of a person, in so subtle a way as to suggest there are traces of life in everything. The body has been removed, but the aura, the emotional evidence of them is still present, for the manner in which you apply paint to aluminium, and of the arrangement of forms, rocks, bricks, metal, steel, one on top of the other, so as to substitute man for a choice of materials. It is as you say, about introducing 'the emotional' onto a minimal landscape - of giving colour to the black and white. Is that how you see it?*

*SS: If I can do that, if I can introduce the sensation of human experience to an object, then I would have done what I wanted to do. It is incredible you think that of my work. Of my doing that, or even being close to doing that. I have to say I find the stone triptych, Wall Dale Cubed 2018, to be one of the most stupefying sculptures I have since in the twentieth century; it leaves me speechless. I find it so incredibly powerful, and it is beyond what I could imagine it was going to be. The big stone sculptures were made in Limerick, possibly more minimalist, which had something to do with being in Ireland. The country has an automatic relationship to minimalism, because of the stone houses and severe paint, which fits very well with the sentiments of the original work. Then there was the Château La Coste piece, which was very expressive. It had colour and rough-cut stones in it. I don't know if you have seen it?*

*RP: Unfortunately I missed the opportunity to attend Lee Ufan's Château La Coste opening last year. But I did see images of Wall of Light Cubed 2007, which relates entirely to Wall Dale Cubed 2018. Of the two works, as I see it, this work, the YSP stone sculpture has a greater physical coherence to it. That possibly has to do with the colour of the stone that is particular to this part of the world. The similarities between the new work at YSP, and that*

*which was in-situ at the Château are entirely obvious, but beyond their gravity, it is incredible to consider something of their grace, and to look at works of such scale and magnitude, and think as well of subtlety, and the work's sensitivity. Of the interlocking relationship of the individual stones, as though holding hands in an emotional embrace. It is your involvement of the 'emotional' that makes your work become extensions of one-self if you like. Do you feel that?*

SS: 'Wall of Light Cubed' was a fantastic thing. With that work I was becoming more emancipated, because as I have mentioned already, ultimately my work is incredibly emotional, deeply humanistic as am I as a person. I suppose we have naturally progressed to this work 'Wall Dale Cubed', which is something that holds my attention. I look at it with total wonder. There are passages within the work that are incredibly beautiful. The insets are wildly beautiful, as is the material, and that is where I separate from the minimalists, which I have already mentioned. I talked about this, about the (Sol) Le Witt, Le Witt seems so dead in comparison.

**RP:** *But isn't Sol Le Witt's work, like Piet Mondrian before him, closer to a kind of mathematics. Introducing a level of calculation and control that removes the human heart and hand entirely.*

SS: Absolutely, Le Witt's work is very inhuman.

**RP:** *Closer to a machine aesthetic, as I mentioned.*

SS: Almost like an American version of Bridget Riley, but much cleverer of course, because he moved all of it off of canvas, so that you can (see it for its physicality). Le Witt took minimalism much further than Riley. But of course there is something in America that is very hard, and that is not very attractive, I have to say.

**RP:** *What fascinates me is the notion of hardness against the American expanse of space. Unlike England the US has space in abundance. Greater space allows for more light, for greater volume, and a championing of scale. Thus does space have something to do with the scale of so much of what we see in America?*

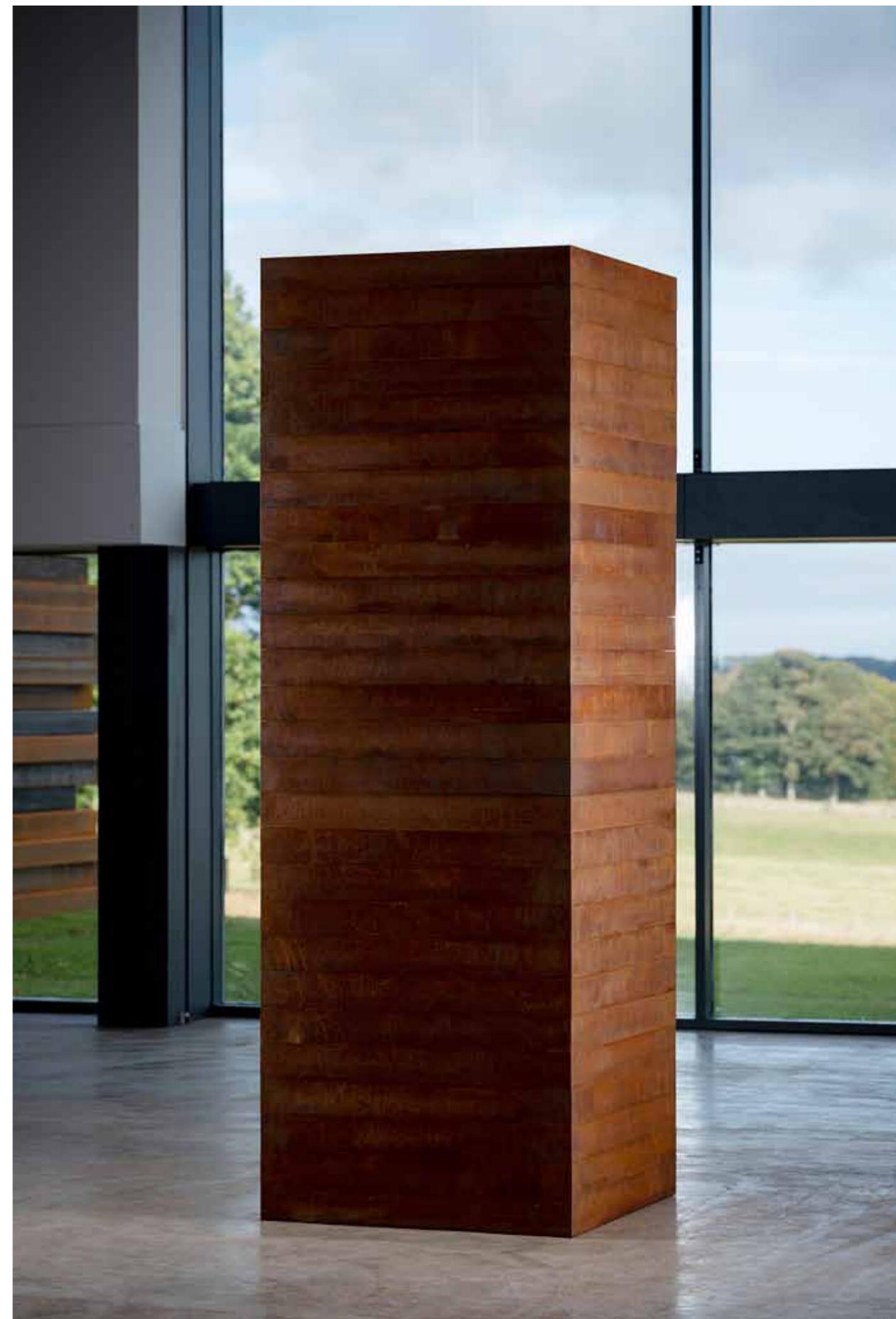
SS: Unquestionably.

**RP:** *Does that amount of space, and the emancipation that comes with it, deliver a greater confidence that is otherwise not entirely there in England, and in the way we understand and experience sculpture in the UK? Or are the rudimentary elements the same?*

SS: Well for myself the answer is no. I am not a 'Martha' artist. I am not doing the 'lighting things', or anything like that. I cannot stand the work of Donald Judd. I cannot deal with it. I mean to me it is like (looking at Ikea furniture). However I made that work (Wall Dale Cubed) here, and I think that work needed to be made in

*"I cannot stand the work of Donald Judd. I cannot deal with it...I think that work needed to be made in England, and it needed an English guy to help me make it. The sensitivities of such a work, of the material living and heaving, pushing up against each other, making this beast, could only have been made here.."*

> Sean Scully  
 Untitled (Tower), 2015  
 © Sean Scully  
 Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
 Photo © Jonty Wilde





England, and it needed an English guy to help me make it. The sensitivities of such a work, of the material living and heaving, pushing up against each other, making this beast, could only have been made here. Because it has a soul that is entirely connected to the landscape that belongs here.

**RP:** *As though it is of the earth, of this location. And Clare (Lilley) talked of how the materials, including the stone is very local. Which affirms the work being English, and of it belonging to this part of the world.*

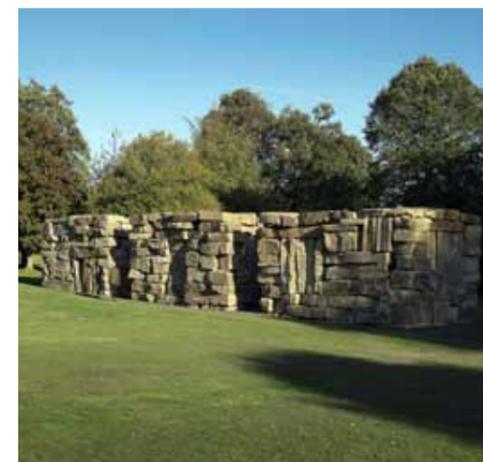
**SS:** Yes of course, the material is from here, beautiful. And if we talk of America, I don't think I could have got anyone to make it like this there.

**RP:** *There is a level of sensitivity to what we see, that makes the material transform from it being entirely about its physicality, to sensations of the ephemeral, the idea that this configuration of rocks has within them their own emotional strength; and that they embrace one another as much as they are engineered together.*

**SS:** Besides my own emotional influence, it has something to do with Paul Bradley and Justus Kewenig, my young art dealer from Berlin, who I am very close to; we are almost like family. And they, the gallery, know me so well, because Paul exhibited at Venice with me at Palazzo Falier some years ago, and he is appearing at Venice again. The next (exhibition) I have is at the San Giorgio Maggiore

**I think it is really fantastic that I am here creating these sculptures now, and the sculptures are successful, and I am not trying to make sculptures like anybody else either. There are no clear influences to my sculptures in the art world, and they are entirely original because I am self-taught, and I also did the most obvious thing I could think of.**

Sean Scully  
Uninsideout, 2018  
Installation view  
©Sean Scully, Courtesy of the artist and Blain, Southern, Photo: Peter Mallet



Sean Scully  
Wall Dale Cubed, 2018. © Sean Scully  
Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde

Basilica, Venice, which is quite a venue, and I was never going to get a pavilion was I? Nobody still quite knows what I do.

**RP:** *Which leads me to ask you to explain what you are? And by that I mean here at YSP it would appear that you are more a sculptor than painter, more a master of materials, akin to Richard Serra or Walter de Maria, than a flat fabricator. Can you be both at the same time? To draw, is to paint, is to sculpt, is to construct?*

**SS:** I think it is super exciting.

**RP:** *The confidence to construct such a thing, emotionally and materially. It is for me about a transformation you make of your sensations into these solid structures that are entirely about you.*

**SS:** I have somehow managed to do what very few artists have done. Okay you can go back to (Henri) Matisse, who was a great sculptor, but on the other hand (Pablo) Picasso wasn't such a great sculptor, and who else has managed to pull it off, to work in both mediums so successfully; not many at this level. Twombly, I love the work of Cy Twombly, fantastic, and a lovely guy too. Twombly was a big guy like me and he made super sensitive work. When you look at his work, you might think he was a mere, meek kind of guy, but he is built like me. I actually met him once at The National Gallery, London.

**RP:** *If I think of Twombly, he appeared to inject emotion into abstraction, in a way that Mark Rothko camouflaged as clouds of colour. With Twombly you feel every jerk and jest of his emotions in the crayon and colours on paper and canvas alike. And I can see how you feel an affinity with him, for his application of emotions to art. Is that what you aim for with your own work?*

**SS:** Unfortunately I can't really use his influence very much. Though I do think about his approach sometimes, which encourages me to want to make some white wrapped sculptures, or something of that nature, under his influence. But I haven't been able to incorporate any of his ideas or manners to my own work. But I do appreciate him on so many levels. I think he is hugely important to the art cannon, and I see myself as a little similar to Cy. He was the American who had to go out and live in a Palazzo in Rome to be okay, and he married an aristo. And I see myself as the European who went the other way, leaving England for the US. It is interesting. But I don't think Cy would have been able to make his work, if he hadn't gone to Europe and become more of a European artist. And I think this adventure gives his work some kind of breadth; a physiological breadth that you certainly don't find in a lot of American art.

**RP:** *Which makes me think of the Old Masters, those that travelled like Anthony van Dyck and Cornelis Johnson, in order to absorb the influences of the outside world. Your leaving England appears to have been as fundamental to you, as coming to England was to them centuries previously. Clearly great art requires broader horizons, or the cross-pollination of people as you explained it before. And that leads me to return to your introduction again, of your talking about 'stacking'*



Sean Scully  
*Inside Outside*  
 Yorkshire Sculpture Park  
 Installation View 06  
 © Sean Scully  
 Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
 Photo © Jonty Wilde

*as a process and as a psychological path, from your early years to where we are now. How do you explain that particular visual and physical motif?*

**SS:** It all comes from work, of the laborious grind of work, and of the squeezing out of space from working class life. It is very interesting with regards to labour.

**RP:** *So in a sense those works, Moor Shadow Stack 2018, Dale Stone Stack 2018, among them, are not a celebration of minimalism, but more a manifestation of your upbringing, and as an arrangement of everything thereafter. Does that ring true, and might we think of the 'stack' as a kind of brutal beauty?*

**SS:** There is something very beautiful about work.

**RP:** *The achievement.*

**SS:** There is something beautiful about commitment, of actually doing something. I remember once I was in Holborn (London), and I was given a job to make a hole through a wall. You know those Tudor ones on Holborn High Street. If you go into town from Holborn, on the left there is a run of mockbuildings, actually they are real ones, very famous and still standing. Well inside one of those years ago now, I had to make a whole in the wall, so big. I had a hammer mallet and a cold chisel, and I must have hit my hand possibly twenty-five times because there was very little light. At the time I can remember it was like making a hole through a piece of metal. The bricks were so hard, and it took me something like eight hours to make through that wall.

**RP:** *Your talking about it now, clearly meant it had a physiological effect on you. Burrowing into your brain, as much you were breaking open a solid wall. Could that have been a greater influence for you than any artist alive or dead, the idea that you were forced to face a man-made material head on?*

**SS:** As you say it was strange, but at the same time incredibly challenging. I got through in the end but the work was immense. Thinking about it I also wrote about this idea of stacking boxes onto a truck. I must get it to you. It is a lovely text about this cardboard factory where I worked, back in the 1960's, when I was with guys you couldn't read or write. They would take their money at the end of the week, and mark a cross by their name as a signature. It was an amazing place, unbelievably rough. And these experiences, unfortunate or otherwise, enriched my life. Because I was not pampered, I didn't go to art school, and then 'get good' at one thing, and spin it out for the rest of my life, like so many artists. I can apply all of this experience. I think it is really

fantastic that I am here creating these sculptures now, and the sculptures are successful, and I am not trying to make sculptures like anybody else either. There are no clear influences to my sculptures in the art world, and they are entirely original because I am self-taught, and I also did the most obvious thing I could think of. I didn't choose to second-guess myself; I just thought what is it that I can do? Well I know what I can do, because I had done all of these manual exercises if you like, as a means to make money in the beginning, and what I could do was to introduce this stacking idea, or to look to the sensation of compression. So my work is in a way 'non-sculpture', in a sense that others like Mark di Suvero would apply similar ideas to space. But he was a compositional sculptor, while my work is viscerally elemental, and I know it is different because nobody has done anything like it before.

**RP: Which appears to be part of your humanist approach, of wanting and willing yourself to determine everything, with works that are entirely about the human experience without the human present.**

SS: I agree entirely.

**RP: Which becomes incredibly interesting, given abstraction and minimalism concentrate on anti-humanist ideals.**

SS: It has to do with my travels as well in Mexico, because I speak Spanish very well, and I have travelled through every corner of Mexico, where I stayed in eight-dollar hotels.

**RP: Were you doing that for a prolonged period?**

SS: I stopped all of that about a decade ago; once my son was born I didn't go to Mexico again.

**RP: Was it your (Jack) Kerouac moment?**

SS: Yes, I would go in an old car, and I can remember going to the bottom of an old hill, and there was a place there that you could get a fan-belt, and they would come out and measure your car with a piece of string, and then they would go in and (tie it together) and that was your new fan-belt. I mean forget the model number and all of that. It was the piece of string, and they put this improvised fan-belt on this battered car and it went like crazy. I went back up this hill and onto far-flung places including Progreso, where you have all these old Canadian-American boys who have gone down there and stayed, where a lot of the city is under an erupting volcano. I have been in towns on a Sunday morning where you have to drive past all the guys sleeping on these dirt roads, because they would just collapse from drinking so much. Incredibly rough places.

**RP: You talked before about darker music, and everything being melancholic, was Mexico part of that evolution of your emotions?**

SS: I am very attracted to brutal environments. Where I live in America it has become very difficult, where you



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^ Sean Scully  
Moor Shadow Stack, 2018  
Corten steel. 4.57 x 3.66 x 3.66m. © Sean Scully  
Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde

> Sean Scully  
Dale Stone Stack, 2018.  
Yorkshire stone. 3.23 x 1 x 1m. © Sean Scully.  
Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde



can talk about a gentler quieter society, and you can get shot for your troubles.

**RP:** *Is such 'brutalism' reflected in your palette?*

**SS:** There is a huge amount of melancholia (to my work) and I can't do anything about that. The paintings are deep and dark.

**RP:** *I think of (Mark) Rothko, our having already talked about Cy Twombly; was Rothko someone you approved of for his work?*

**SS:** I actually wrote a big text on Rothko. I tend to write about people and personalities that interest me. I think that what I have attempted to do in a sense is to popularise minimalism and abstraction, or to humanise it. To make it so people who are not specialists can love it, so in other words the antitheist of Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman, who only appealed to the specialists. Rothko was the only one who came close to making abstract painting useable, and I want to do the next thing, or more than he was able to do. Because there is still a remoteness (about his work), the paintings are so barren in a way, whilst mine are more aggressive structurally and sensually. There is a lot of sex in my paintings that there isn't in his. His (Rothko's) are more the paintings of a mystic, so I have tried to make paintings that are more like (Gustav) Corbett, or (Édouard) Manet, or Rembrandt (van Rijn); paintings that people can love.

**RP:** *That you can live with.*

**SS:** Yes, that you can revisit and love. Even if you don't own the painting, you can see it in a museum, and you go and its there, and you can relate to it. That it helps your life in some way.



Sean Scully  
Crate of Air, 2018  
© Sean Scully  
Courtesy the artist and YSP  
Photo © Jonty Wilde



*RP: I wonder if that was what you needed when you were smashing out holes all those years ago?*

*SS: Yes, because a lot of these abstract artists that made work, it was just for five hundred people, which is not helping anything.*

*RP: We have to assume all painters take on a very different approach.*

*SS: I suppose so.*

*RP: Which might concentrate on the commercial end-game.*

*SS: I was never interested in that. I have never painted for money, but now I have plenty of it. When I first did the 'land-line' paintings I thought to myself nobody is going to want to buy these works, and they buy them quicker than the other ones.*

*RP: We will never know what the formula is?*

*SS: You can never figure it out. It is so unpredictable.*

*RP: I am still trying to find out a winning formula for me.*

*SS: Tell me.*

*RP: I am an art critic and collector.*

*SS: But if you are an art writer (you must have all the contacts).*

*RP: The word isn't as valuable as the work of art.*

Sean Scully  
Wall Dale Cubed, 2018. © Sean Scully  
Courtesy the artist and YSP.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde