theguardian

Sean Scully: 'My therapist sent me away'

Brought up by warring parents, Sean Scully wet the bed until he was 20 and went 'insane' when his son died. Throughout it all, he kept painting. He talks about pet rabbits, living in the land of guns - and why he thinks Ai Weiwei has it easy

'I'm not in control' ... Sean Scully. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

Mark Lawson

Wednesday 7 January 2015 03.00 EST

With their grids of stripes and squares, the paintings of Sean Scully resemble playing boards for games not yet invented, or the flags of imaginary countries. But, though these abstract compositions are not conventional landscapes, his sense of shape and light is influenced by the three places he knows best: Ireland, his birthplace in 1945 and the homeland of his parents; north London, where he grew up and went to art school; and New York, where today he mainly lives and works, now a US citizen.

So which of this trinity of influences figures most in his dreams and ideas? "I'm Irish in the mythic, romantic sense but, in the living sense, I'm a Londoner. My wife [the artist Liliane Tomasko] is Swiss and, at home in America, we like to sing Maybe It's Because I'm a Londoner and take the piss out of it."

On the day we meet, he is briefly visiting the Timothy Taylor gallery in London, his UK representative, on a stopover between New York and Shanghai, where he has just become the first western artist to have a major retrospective. Follow the Heart covers five decades of his work, and will transfer to Beijing in March.

But he has been spending increasing amounts of time in London recently - summer trips and visits to the funerals of elderly relatives - and is increasingly tempted to remigrate from the US: "My son is five and he is my most important project, and I don't want to bring him up in the land of guns."

He fantasises about buying the house in Highbury, close to the old Arsenal stadium, where he grew up. The first art he remembers seeing was at the local Catholic church, the series of devotional paintings known as the "stations of the cross", which show the scenes leading to Christ's crucifixion: "They were very geometric, like Russian paintings."

Catholicism also influenced his artistic development in another way: "As a child, the most important people in my life were my pet rabbit and Mary, mother of Jesus. Plaster of Paris was pretty cheap, and so I'd make sculptures of Mary and the rabbit and play games with them. They'd get married and have tea parties and so on."

'I don't know how a painting is going to come out' ... Kind of Red (2013) by Sean Scully. Photograph: Christoph Knoch/Arla Borel

The Scullys had left Dublin for London when he was four and, though Ireland remained present in the accents and anecdotes of relatives, it was a long time before he went back. He was unable to go on a secondary school trip there because he suffered what is medically known as nocturnal enuresis until the age of 20: "And if you'd been brought up by my parents, you'd have wet the bed as well." Throughout adolescence he wore, in a now discredited Pavlovian experiment, a sort of urinary-chastity belt at night that triggered a ringing bell when it became wet, waking up the wearer.

So what was it about his parents that brought on this condition? "Constant extreme anxiety. It was like living in a warzone. My father was a genius footballer, a natural two-footed centre-forward who had played for Arsenal juniors, but he was sent out to work aged 14 and so lived out his life in a frustrated, rageful way. And my mother was a fucking force of nature, man. So, between them, it was always warring and discord and the constant threat of violence in the air. She would provoke my father until he couldn't take it any more ... "

So he hit her? "He had. And he hit me a few times. But he also saved me a few times from gangs and so on - because we grew up very rough. Although they probably have cappuccino there now."

Growing up poor in north London, did he have much exposure to art? "Not art, but showbiz. My mother used to sing Unchained Melody, which is a profoundly melancholic song. And my art is very melancholy. We used to go to places like Margate in the summer and there'd be talent contests and my mother would enter and win every time."

It was only in his 30s, when a touring exhibition of his went to Ireland, that he spent time in his birthplace as an adult: "That was when Ireland went 'whoooooooosh' in me." He adopts an Irish accent to personify the island: "'Get over here, Sean, you're an Irishman and that's the end of it.'"

Two Irish writers - James Joyce and Samuel Beckett - are usually mentioned in connection with Scully's work, and have been reflected in it: one of the pictures he's currently working on features Lucky, the slave from Beckett's Waiting for Godot. But, for me, the artist's work has also always invoked the poems of Seamus Heaney. The square is the dominant configuration in Scully's abstracts, and the same shape - representing neat agricultural fields and the dimensions of a four-line stanza - recurs throughout Heaney's verse, overlapping, in a sequence called Squarings, with a type of throw used in a children's game of marbles.

'I've always wanted my art to be global rather than local. I want to make paintings that people everywhere can relate to' ... Sean Scully. Photograph: Martin Godwin/Guardian

Scully's wide smile lights up: "Yes, I remember that word from my childhood. Seamus and I were good friends. He asked to use one of my pictures on a book of his, Opened Ground. And then, out of that, I did a series called Cut Ground. I'm constantly referring to land, cutting into land. And a lot of Seamus' poetry is about cutting. It's a very Irish thing: cutting into soil that has accumulated over thousands of years."

Scully points to one of his paintings, which is hanging on the wall of the office we've borrowed at the gallery. "Actually, that's one of the Cut Ground series over there. It's called Battered Ground."

So what does he think when he suddenly sees one of his pictures like that? Does he remember painting it? "Oh, yes, absolutely. I painted that in Dulwich, in 1990 or so, because I'd bought that house in 1989. I thought, whatever happened, I'd always have that house, but I had to sell it and give it to my ex-wife."

He may have a vivid memory of his completed works, but there's little clarity in advance: "I'm not in control of it: I don't know how a painting is going to come out. For decades, I never used green in a picture, and suddenly I'm using it all the time. But I'm really not conscious of making those decisions."

Twice shortlisted for the Turner prize, he used to dream of a big show at Tate Modern, but insists that the Chinese show means more: "I've always wanted my art to be global rather than local. I want to make paintings that people everywhere can relate to." And perhaps an abstract artist is more likely to achieve that ambition than a figurative one, because colours and shapes are a shared international language? "Absolutely. That is one reason that it appeals to me."

'I want to live to 95 – to be there for my son – and I hope I'm still staggering out of the chair to paint' ... Blue Red, from the Cut Ground series (2011) by Sean Scully. Photograph: Timothy Taylor Gallery

Scully is an admirer of the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). Malevich's work was suppressed and destroyed by the Russian Communist authorities because abstraction was seen as a decadent inferior to the favoured artistic mode of socialist realism. But, conversely, there is a suspicion that the growing popularity of abstraction in China is due to the fact that the genre is very hard to censor. "It's uncensorable," Scully agrees. "However, that said, from what I see when I go to China, the censorship is minimal."

I suggest that Ai Weiwei, who remains under heavy surveillance and travel restrictions, might not agree. "Ah, I knew you were going to say Ai Weiwei. He was a student of mine [in New York]; I know him very well. He's manipulating all that to stimulate his market in the west; he's playing a game against China, and the west loves him for that."

But he did get beaten up by the police, didn't he? "He got whacked on the head, yes. But I got banged on the head once in jolly old London, in Trafalgar Square, protesting against apartheid. I'm not saying China's liberal, like we are, but I'll tell you something: it's on its way."

Scully has suffered painful times, including, in 1983, the death of a son from a previous marriage ("basically, I went insane but didn't deal with it because I wanted to keep painting") and, last year, near-fatal complications from medication for a back injury.

Nothing, though, has ever kept him from his studio for long. "I went to see a therapist for a while and, in the end, he told me to go away. He said: 'Although there's a lot wrong with you, you like yourself the way you are. And he was right. I've made 1,400 paintings by hand. You'd have to be a madman to do that. But it's what I want to do. I want to live to 95 - to be there for my son - and I hope I'm still staggering out of the chair to paint. I'm not one of these people who is privileged with doubt. I look at my paintings sometimes and I think they're fucking wonderful. I love them."