

CHEIM & READ HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

How Sean Scully Bent the Grid

by Robert C. Morgan on June 27, 2016



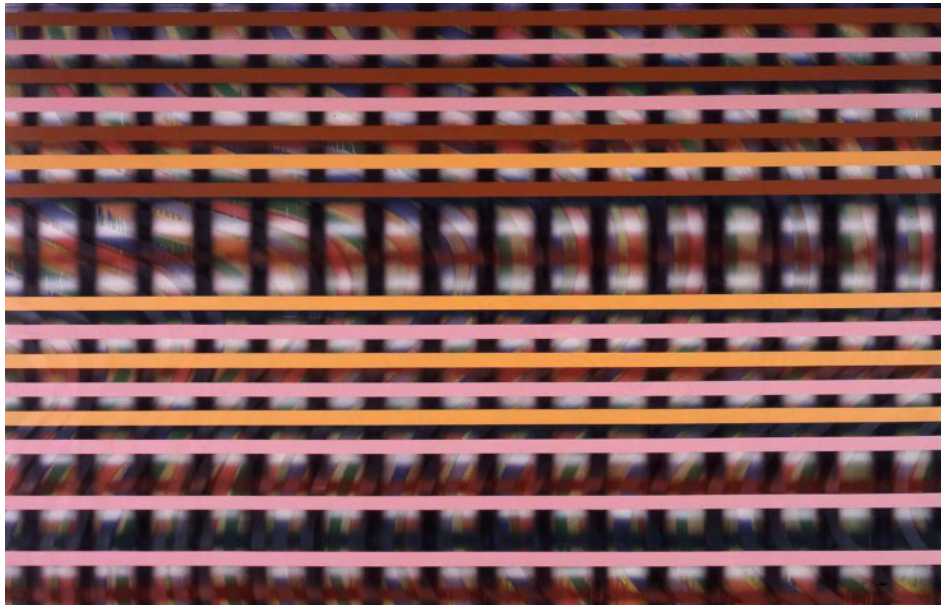
Installation view of 'Sean Scully: Circa 70' (courtesy Cheim & Read, New York)

The Irish-born, London-educated, abstract painter Sean Scully established a signature style of painting nearly four decades ago. The precise year was 1980. This was a time when his clean-cut repression moved toward expulsion, and when all things prior began to come together. He found the linkage. His search for romance as a painter finally took hold. It literally fell into place. This was the period when Scully's paintings pushed forward his many early attempts to retain a vivid and exaggerated dynamic edge, when his coy and brilliant hedonism found its *écriture*, and when earthy bands of color became wider and more expressive as if to protrude into a deeper tonality through his pulsating, gestural applications. It was a monumental breakthrough period in the painter's career, which has been accelerating and regenerating (for the most part) ever since.

547 WEST 25 STREET NEW YORK NY 10001 TEL 212 242 7727

FAX 212 242 7737 GALLERY@CHEIMREAD.COM

Cheim & Read's current exhibition of large Scully paintings spanning 1970 to 1975, staged in Ridgewood, Queens, and fugitively titled *Circa 70*, holds a certain intensity at this moment in his painterly pursuit. I say this unwittingly, because I have followed this trajectory more or less step by step since the early days on Duane Street, where he began each morning by practicing karate. But those days were a bit later than the paintings included in *Circa 70*. I remember an interview from those Duane Street days in which Scully was searching for a synthesis, a kind of synchronic moment — in other words, the point in the middle between the paintings of Robert Ryman and conceptualists who painted like Sol LeWitt. As an artist coming from London to New York, he was interested in the boundaries of what was happening in abstract art.



Sean Scully, "Shadow" (1970) (© Sean Scully; courtesy Cheim & Read, New York)

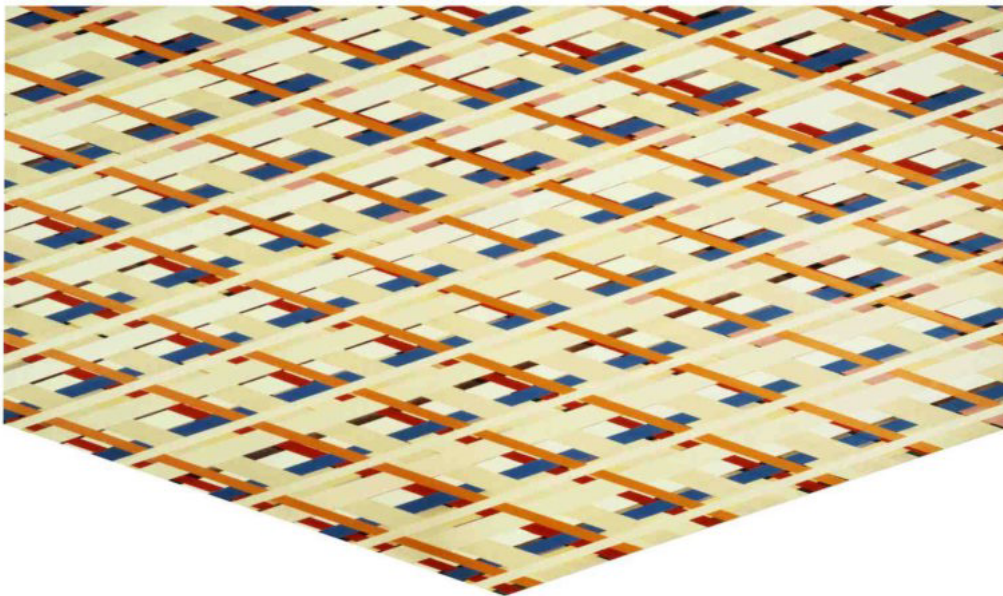
But *Circa 70* reveals little of that. Eager to dispel any and all traces of what he knew was "out there," Scully assiduously began to paint in relation to layering. Rather than forsaking the grid, he blew it up, colorized it, and morphed it in such a way that it nearly disappeared in the process of its expulsion. The emotional effervescence was unmistakable yet remarkable in its off-hand control, a quality I often compare with Henri Matisse in his Fauve period, around 1905. I am attracted to paintings that make me reflect on how he did it. This should not be mistaken for a matter of technique; rather, it was a manner of taking optical control of the substance in painting. Take a look — a hard look — at paintings like the early "Shadow" (1970), where the surface is layered with at least four motifs. Swaggering, curved lines from beneath are held in check by streaming, blurred, white horizontals with blurred black verticals on top; and if that were not enough to disquiet the soul, Scully marches forth with another layer of ochre and pink striations at indeterminate intervals, seamlessly putting each of them in place.

In the following years, 1971 and 1972, he introduced bold, repetitive diagonals, nearly but never quite alluding to Pop — given his penchant for Classicism, this would have been anathema. Nonetheless, the highly visible regiment of optical diagonals in "Blaze," "Newcastle Bridge," and especially "Red Slide" herald another type of pictorial interface, stealthily contained within the harrowing torrential frames that are consistently at play in Scully's early work. In essence, the diagonals are employed to usurp the grid. In each case, their dominance produced the disorienting effect that the painter has summoned. Yet, at the same time, we understand the limits in terms of their energy, something well known by both Theo van Doesburg and László Moholy-Nagy.

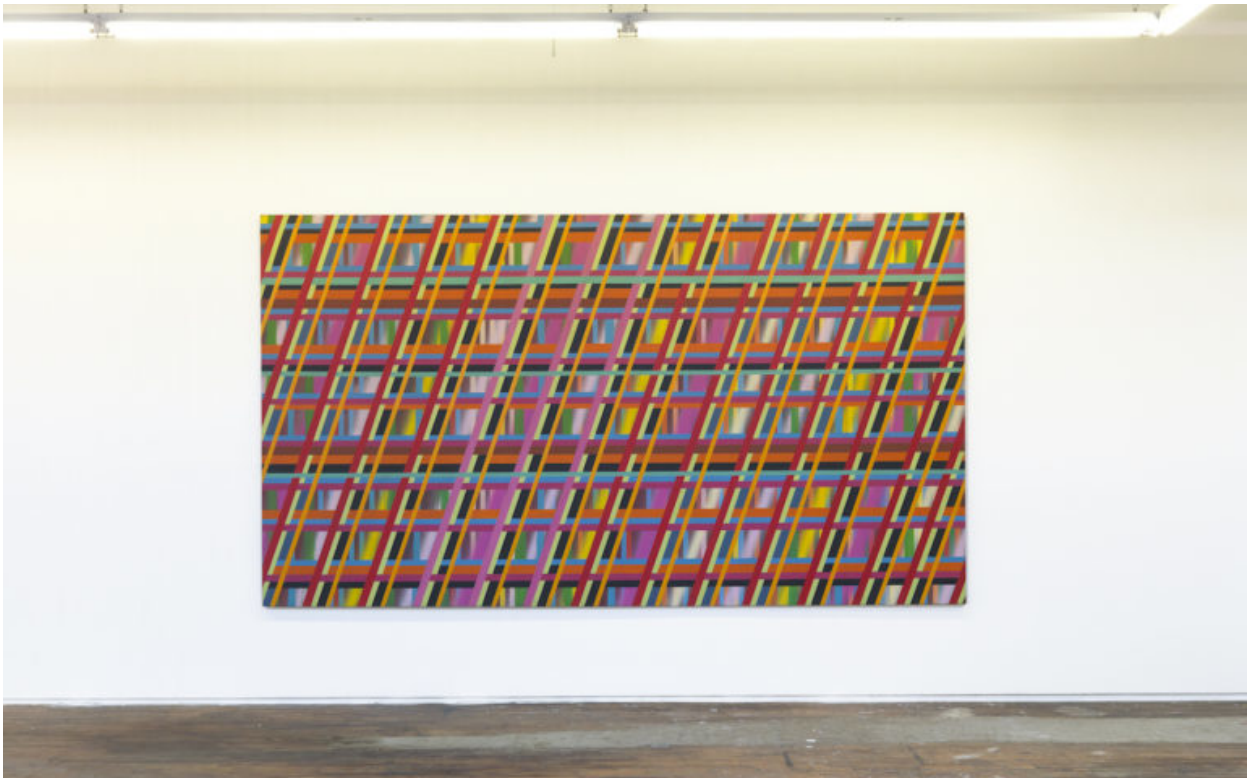


Sean Scully, "Red Slide" (1972) (© Sean Scully; courtesy Cheim & Read, New York)

Nonetheless, these paintings are remarkable and difficult to compare with any other painter, at least in terms of their eloquent stridency. It is only appropriate that Scully would eventually come to the shaped chevron issuing forth a grand perspectival illusion in "Cream Red Cream" (1973). Here, the focus is toned down and enunciated in such a way as to open a new chapter, a necessary step in Scully's evolution, by which to explore what the painter needed to know about color and linear effect before moving onward, to the stage where his paintings continue to revive the radical domain of errant Classicism today.



Sean Scully, "Cream Red Cream" (1973) (© Sean Scully; courtesy Cheim & Read, New York)



Installation view of 'Sean Scully: Circa 70' featuring Sean Scully, "Blaze" (1971) (courtesy Cheim & Read, New York)

Sean Scully: Circa 70 continues at 16–13 Stephen Street, Ridgewood, Queens through July 1.