

CHRISTOPHER WOOL and SEAN SCULLY

by David Carrier

CHRISTOPHER WOOL

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SEAN SCULLY: *CHANGE AND HORIZONTALS*

THE DRAWING CENTER | SEPTEMBER 27 – NOVEMBER 3, 2013

SEAN SCULLY: *NIGHT AND DAY*

CHEIM & READ | OCTOBER 30, 2013 – JANUARY 11, 2014

Now and then we can learn much about the nature of painting thanks to the coexistence at one time of antithetical personalities, whose opposition reveals the changing limits of this medium. Titian (1490 – 1576) and Michelangelo (1475 – 1564), like Ingres (1780 – 1867) and Delacroix (1798 – 1863), are such artist “frenemies.” So too are Sean Scully (b. 1945) and Christopher Wool (b.1955).

The Guggenheim’s spiral imposes a linear narrative and is therefore not always a kind site for one-man retrospectives. But it is the right place to show Christopher Wool. Coming of age artistically at a time when painting, especially abstract painting, was said to be dead, his early art employs impassive frontal images like Jasper Johns and incorporates words like did Bill Beckley, Robert Indiana, and Richard Prince at the same time as Wool. Just as comic books use words to supplement their visual images, these artists used words to keep visual art alive when it seemed to be on life support. Wool’s early painting was an answered prayer—he showed how to make abstractions at a time when that was in peril. Rejecting the spontaneous gestural compositions of Abstract Expressionism, he employed paint rollers and pre-existing phrases



Sean Scully, “Night and Day,” 2012. Oil on aluminum, 110 x 320”. ©SeanScully. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

as linguistic ready-mades, as word fragments in “Trouble”(1989) reveal. Nothing could be more Warholian than his deskilling of the craft of painting. The words in “Untitled”(1992)—“fuck em if they can’t take a joke”—comment aptly on the expressive affect of his early art.

Wool’s early paintings were sullen and immediate. In the 1990s, he extended his repertoire of techniques by applying looping lines with a spray gun to the canvas. And he employed erasure when, in “Untitled”(2002), for example, one of his “gray paintings,” he wiped away lines with a rag soaked in turpentine. He also made photographs, travelling in Europe and documenting his nightly walk home from his East Village studio; these black-and-white images of graffiti and street debris suggest correspondences with his paintings. More recently he’s reworked silkscreened photographs of his paintings on new canvases and employed digital processing to manipulate painted marks. In “Untitled”(2009), a strong picture, the black line is a diluted gesture from one of the gray paintings, while the brushwork at the edges comes from a photoshop of a work on paper. Wool’s seemingly narrow starting point provided the basis for an impressive body of art.

Change and Horizontals is a snapshot of one crucial, brief moment in Sean Scully’s career. After early success in England, the country where this Irish-born artist was educated, recognizing that New York was the home of ambitious abstract painting, he moved to America. This show of paintings on paper, with “Change” (1975) on the left of the gallery, “Horizontals” (1975) on the right, and drawings in between, defines that moment of transition. How does a change of location influence a painter’s life? If he is an abstract artist, then what can be at stake is a “turning outwards toward the world itself,” as the fine catalogue essay by Joanna Kleinberg and Brett Littman notes with reference to Mondrian’s move to Manhattan. That is exactly what happened to Scully as can be seen most dramatically in the transitional “Untitled”(1975), made in London just before his departure. When he left England, he took the vertical out and thus broke the grid, liberating himself.

Night and Day is also a snapshot, this one of Scully’s current paintings. In the front room, the somber stacked horizontal bands of “Landline Blue” (2013) reveal the inheritance from his horizontals circa 1975. Then in the main gallery comes “Night and Day” (2012), a marvelous monster, more than nine feet high and 26 feet long. The eight vertical sections are composed of blocks of color which, reading left to right mirror one another without exactly matching, section by section. Here we see a magisterial master in full command of his means of expression. It is instructive to compare Scully’s “Wall of Light Infanta” (2012) with Wool’s “Untitled” (2011), one of four silkscreened ink on linen paintings. Let’s focus on the second, the work in the Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz collection. Both are frontal images using a small range of colors. But where Scully builds upon an architectural framework, with reference, as the title signifies, to the palette of Spanish old master painting, Wool is appropriating enlarged digitalized markings from his own earlier works on paper. Here, as in all of his recent art, Scully links himself with the larger European visual tradition. Wool, by contrast, especially in his recent paintings, creates very narrowly focused art that feeds on itself, in an uncanny revival of the old formalist vision of “art about art.” This is why Wool nearly always works in black, white, and grey, while Scully is a colorist—any contemporary art that seeks to

relate itself to the larger tradition needs to employ coloristic resources. Scully's splendidly luminous "Wall of Light Arles" (2012), with blocks of orange, blue, black, and pink, for example, alludes with those colors to the site of Vincent van Gogh's late art.

Ultimately for all of his amazing development, Wool has only one mood, presented with variations by varied means. He can be your artist on a bad day when some nasty aggressive person pushes you out of line and no one comes forward to help; at a depressed moment when you believe that your life is never going to get any better; at a time when you despair about the realization of the utopian hopes of leftist politics. Scully, a more volatile personality, is the artist of hope *and* despair, for his art is about extremes. You need only look from "Wall of Light Heat" (2013) to his pastel on paper "Doric" (2013) to see this. He shows you that getting what you don't rationally deserve, what believers call "grace" might just be possible. He gives you reason to hope against all appeal to so-called reality that, however miserable you may feel right now, you might yet become blissfully happy. But also, I must add, Scully can show you how bad your existence might become. One very real option revealed by his art is that life in hell would be nothing compared with living on in the hell that this world can be.



Installation view: Christopher Wool, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay © Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Scully is my artist—who is yours? Does it seem odd to announce my choice in this way? Well—nothing could be more Sculleyesque than banging together opposites, as happened frequently in his painting in the 1980s. Even we who are passionate admirers of Scully have reason to be thankful for the achievement of Wool, for just as Michelangelo showed that Titian's painting was not the whole story, and Delacroix grew artistically thanks to the opposition of Ingres, so too does Wool's Guggenheim exhibition demonstrate that he plays a legitimate role in the story of painting today.