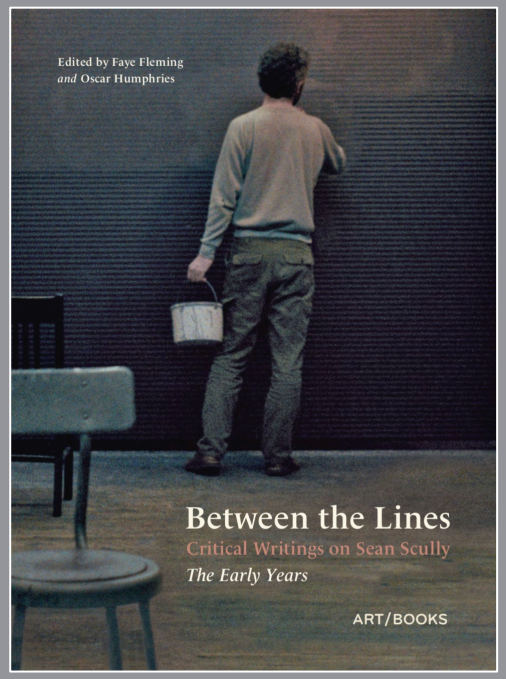
Thames &Hudson

Between the Lines

Critical Writings on Sean Scully – The Early Years

Edited by Faye Fleming and Oscar Humphries;
Introduction by Martin Gayford

A lavishly illustrated and beautifully produced collection of writings on one of today's most important and best-loved abstract painters, covering the first three decades of his career



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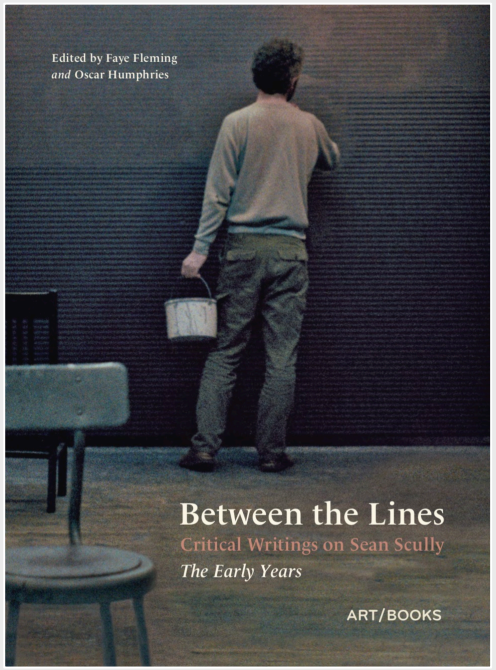
Book

Key Sales Points

- A concise and accessible account of the first decades of Scully's career as it evolved, from student days to established artist

- Includes a wide range of interpretations of the artist's practice by fifty international critics, curators, philosophers, and historians of art

- Lavishly illustrated with all of Scully's major works from the late 1960s to 1999, with dozens of installation views, behind-the-scenes studio shots and portraits of the artist, many published here for the first time



William Varley

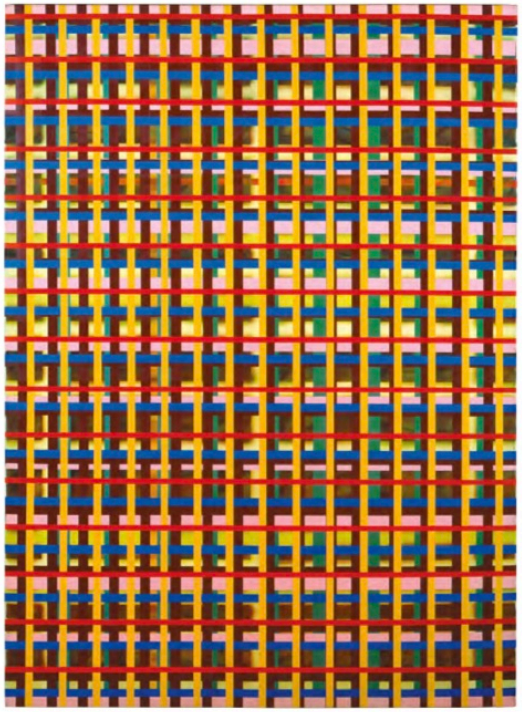
Sean Scully at the Bookshop Gallery

Guardian,
18 July 1972

First, to declare my interest in Sean Scully's current exhibition at the Bookshop Gallery, Sunderland (until 13 August). He is in fact my closest working colleague and a friend. If I can't claim critical objectivity about his work, though, the fact that I see his paintings progressing every day (and I mean *every* day – his commitment is total) might be some sort of compensation. You probably know something about it already. In the last few years he has been a frequent prize-winner at the Young Contemporaries and Northern Young Contemporaries shows, while Caroline Tisdall gave his prize-winning painting [*Red Light* of 1971] at the recent John Moores Exhibition in Liverpool her qualified admiration. Incidentally, I should correct one fallacy about his work which was disseminated at the time of that show. Like many of the other exhibits, his painting was described as being 'systematic'. Nothing could be more inaccurate. His allover grid paintings develop intuitively and at all stages are in a dangerously risky state of flux. Each new layer of colour space could potentially ruin the preceding structure, and as a consequence of this he does destroy a lot of work.

I'm defining (too briefly) its character, though one might describe it as a kind of colour-space mathematics. This still doesn't imply preconceived systems: the intervals between colour bands and levels of space are calculated precisely but visually. In the oldest painting in the current exhibition, for example, the deepest layers are sprayed in cool greys. Later, vertical and horizontal bands of celadon green, pale blues, and pink violets are superimposed until finally, stronger hues – lemon yellows, chrome oranges, and magenta – are established in stronger, broader bands. The final image is of a lattice of shifting depths, full of variety and energy and yet also stable.

Soft Ending, 1969
Acrylic on canvas,
226.1 × 226.1 cm, seen in
Sean Scully's degree show at
Newcastle University, 1972
Private collection



Red Light, 1971
Acrylic on canvas,
274.3 × 183 cm
British Council
Collection, London,
United Kingdom

Adrienne Rosenthal

Paintings by Sean Scully

Artweek, 29 March 1975

Black-and-white reproductions in no way do justice to paintings by young British painter Sean Scully, on view at La Tortue Galerie, for these large canvases are about colour. Scully uses the grid format – straightforward in its simplicity – to manipulate colour and, thus, to achieve visual depth. His past work shows complex interweavings of taut colour bands. In some paintings, these bands are brilliant and eye-dazzling, while in others they offer a contrast of great light with a little dark, as in *Subtraction Painting,* January 1974, in which subtle, intricate cream-coloured bands become a balancing foil for the lush, blood-red that lurks behind them. More recent works have fewer bands with more interest in optical effects, particularly the after-image caused by the juncture of the bands, as in *First Series,* or in the effects of a larger area of colour, as in *Overlay #7.* In this large painting (eight feet by eight feet), the nap from the rolled application of paint remains evident in the texture and near opacity of the large areas of cloudy sea-green divided by vivid, thin magenta and red strips.

'I view a work as successful if the process of creating it is evident in its final state', says Scully, and his paintings are clearly about process as well as colour. Scully begins by painting the entire canvas with one hue; then, masking off certain parts with strips, he applies a second colour over the entire canvas, repeating this process until he has layered and woven bands by painting everything but the bands themselves. This colour build-up provides a richness and depth of hue reminiscent of classical portraiture in which skin tones have an underpainting of reds, greens, and blues that give 'life' to the flesh colour. But in Scully's work each stage of developing a painting remains visible, laying bare its own skeleton, so to speak.

Scully's exploration of process is also shown in a series of paintings in which he uses the same earthy or vibrant, jewel-like colours but changes the order they are applied. Doing this, he achieves quite a different feeling in each work, although the format remains the same. Experimenting within his system, Scully may create bands with a sponge or spray a blurred band below its crisper neighbor, thus attaining a shallow distance of shadowy twins.

Scully has expressed interest in music, particularly the ability of electronic equipment to 'layer' several songs in such a way that the final sound is unique and 'organic', because it grew out of its respective

Subtraction Painting, 1974
Acrylic on canvas,
259.1 × 172.7 cm
Private collection

William Packer

Sean Scully at the Rowan Gallery

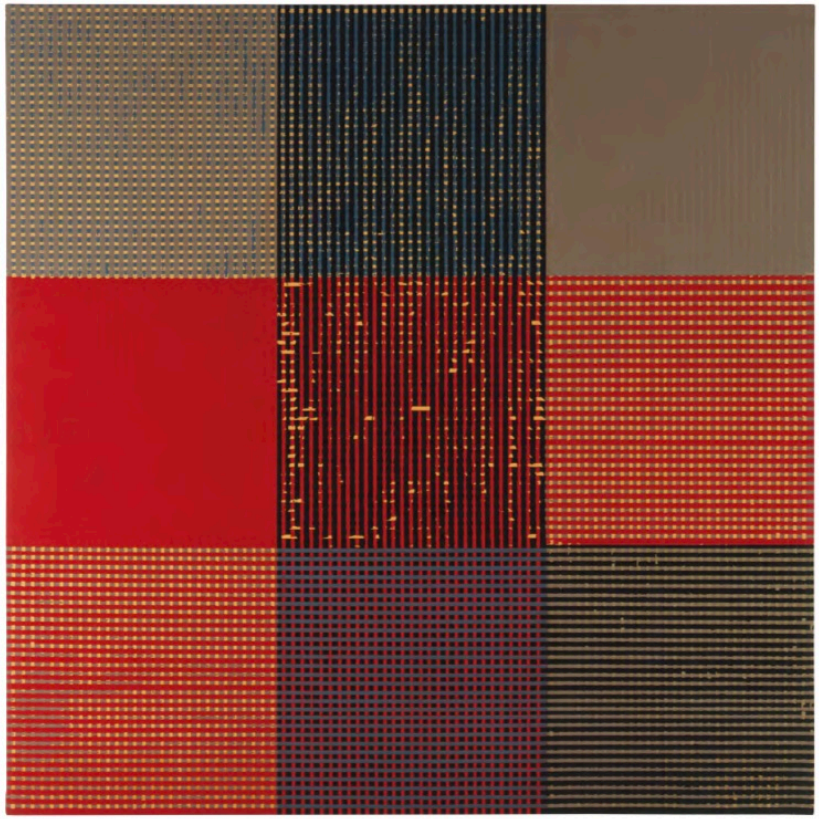
Financial Times,
22 April 1975, p. 3

Sean Scully's career, and the pattern of his success, have a decidedly old-fashioned look to them, one that would have been unremarkable in the early 1960s but is palpably anachronistic in the early 1970s. His progress, from student and Young Contemporary to John Moores prize-winner, and thence to Mayfair and critical and institutional recognition, has been swift and inexorable: for all the world it is as though Mr Macmillan were still in Downing Street and Bryan Robertson, at Whitechapel.

But a reputation achieved so precipitately, no matter how well deserved, brings with it certain difficulties. Above all, it forces the lucky victim to conduct his education in public, a discomforting imposition at the best of times. He is a very rare student indeed who does not produce student work; and that young artist, when at last he emerges from college, will naturally remain somewhat immature in his work for a considerable time. It would be surprising were it otherwise, unless we really believe the Romantic mythology of divine inspiration and youthful genius.

Such difficulties may be overcome, however: artists develop, their work growing richer and stronger the more they ask of themselves. Scully's earlier work caught the attention easily, for it was bright and dramatic, and established with great confidence. He had hit upon a disarmingly simple formula for picture-making, that could hardly fail to impress, at least at first. His rectilinear grids, laid one upon another, created a shallow pictorial space automatically and effortlessly. But system and colour were too obvious, applied neither to investigate their inherent or combined potential, nor to suggest other imaginative possibilities. The doubt grew that these paintings, perhaps, were nothing more than highly accomplished decorations: it was all too easy, too superficial.

It is also too easy, and a great mistake, to write anyone off too soon. With this show of his latest work, which remains at the Rowan Gallery until the end of April, Scully does much to allay the doubt we might have entertained. The paintings are as attractive and confident as ever, but they are also a great deal more interesting, growing more so under scrutiny. He still uses a regular system of grids, but the space they activate is now shallower and more complex, the eye, rather than diving in, being led across the surface of the canvas, and through the weave of the image rather more than before: and instead of the topmost



Hidden Drawing 10.1.75, 1975
Acrylic and tape on canvas,
243.8 × 243.8 cm
Private collection

grid dominating the entire field, now one commands, now another. Less inclined to spell things out, he leaves the imagination free to examine and speculate upon the nature of the work.

These paintings all share the same format: a large square canvas divided into nine equal panels, which, in earliest of the series, are indeed physically separate. Across the borders between them changes occur abruptly, the emphasis of the several grids shifting from vertical to horizontal, and from positive to negative: or a residual buried image will be left, a kind of crop-mark, where the grid is entirely covered by a smart and impassive sheet of paint. Successively each panel adds to the history

Ian Bennett

Loneliness of the Abstract

Financial Times,
25 August 1979

George Bernard Shaw is reputed to have refused the Nobel Prize for literature late in his life on the grounds that it was rather like throwing a lifebelt to a drowning man. At the Rowan Gallery in London at the moment there is hanging the most important and beautiful new exhibition of paintings by a British artist to have taken place for many years. More significant, however, is that these paintings are the work of the only young painter we have produced in the last decade and, if one considers the matter carefully, the only British painter working in an abstract mode born since the war who will achieve more than a parochial response.

For the past eight years, Sean Scully's career has been something of a phenomenon. Born in 1945, he graduated with First Class Honours from the Fine Arts Department of Newcastle University in 1971, and was at that time, considered one of the most brilliant students that Faculty – certainly one of the best in the country – had produced. A teaching fellowship followed, and then came the Frank Knox Fellowship to Harvard in 1972 and the Harkness Fellowship, perhaps the most coveted art award made to a young artist, in 1975, the latter enabling the recipient to live and work in the United States for two years without financial worry.

At the end of the two-year stay, Scully decided to settle permanently in New York. This was not a decision based upon a simple preference of one place to another. For the past thirty years New York has been the unquestioned creative centre of painting and sculpture; today it is the ultimate testing ground for any artist. This is in contrast to London, which has no tradition of abstract painting worthy of notice. Here there are hardly more than half a dozen galleries prepared to exhibition and support new abstract painters, and where there is an almost total lack of serious patronage. It is probable, therefore, that any abstract painter or sculptor working in England will achieve only partial success; however brilliant he may be, it is almost inevitable that he will never receive his full measure of international recognition.

The difference between New York and London is best summed up by the differing critical reactions to new work. In New York an artist's work can be subjected to absolutely devastating critical attack if it is considered of poor quality, but the work itself is always taken on its own merits. In London, however, criticism of modern art is reduced in

Installation views of the exhibition *Sean Scully: Recent Paintings*, at the Rowan Gallery, London, 10 August to 14 September 1979

Adrian Lewis

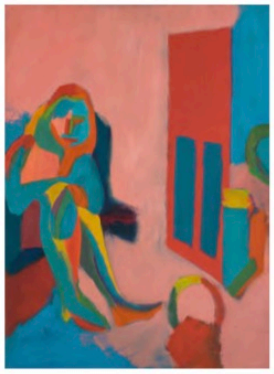
Sean Scully at the Ikon

Artscribe, no. 31,
October 1981

It is often difficult to avoid a sort of crude neo-Hegelian dialectic in discussing recent art developments, particularly if that type of thinking forms the implicit theoretical basis of a range of current art. Thus, we might be tempted to say that various aspects of Post-Minimalist work reacted against Minimalism in favour of Abstract Expressionist concerns, while retaining certain aspects of the former. One particular area of painting since the mid to late 1960s tends to be described as *rejecting* Minimalism's emotional anaesthetization in favour of a *return* to the Romantic sublimity of colour-field painting in the late 1940s and 1950s, while *retaining* Minimalism's crude fetishization of materials (in terms of emphasizing paint-application, surface, and support) and its anti-illusionistic stance (in terms of removing figure-ground distinctions). Of course, it is perfectly valid, as far as it goes, to describe artistic intentions in this way, if this is how artists present themselves, but it is wrong for artistic self-presentation to structure art criticism under the guise of 'neutral' description; and there is a tendency, often in the interests of journalistic brevity, for this sort of description perhaps unwittingly to make styles into historical agents.

We can approach the development of 'Post-Minimalist' painting in a more distanced manner if we show initially that there was no fundamental change of base-theory. Minimalist styles (no longer a contradiction in terms), for example, asserted distinctive personalities within an art context highly differentiated, in terms of social behaviour, from the 'outside world', and underpinned by a transcendental view of stylistic development. 'Post-Minimalist' painting, then, becomes simply a response of certain avant-garde artists to the Minimalists' initial outmanoeuvring of Greenbergian reductionism, a conscious attempt to fuse 'literalness' and 'opticality' within a traditional medium deemed more 'dense' in its visual and emotional complexity. The relationship between painted factuality and spiritual expression, though, has proved uneasy. Ryman does not seem to bother about this linkage, whereas Brice Marden does. The high-minded moral earnestness that often accompanies this sort of painting places the artist (in aesthetic and sometimes existential terms) on a knife-edge.

What has all this to do with Sean Scully? Well, Scully derived from Minimalism a 'more primary or sculptural attitude about painting surfaces' but wants the unified experience of these surfaces to 'release



Untitled (Seated Figure), 1966
Oil on canvas,
105.4 × 74.9 cm
Private collection

Square, 1968
Acrylic on canvas,
205.7 × 205.7 cm
Private collection

feeling, without giving up classical structure'. By settling in New York in 1975, he deliberately placed himself within this context and claimed, as it were, his artistic heritage in the work of Rothko, Newman, and Reinhardt. Now, of course, this whole generation finds itself in a somewhat embattled position, disapproving the moral 'dissolution' of hard-won values in recent 'decorative' and 'new image' painting. New York, ironically, is looking increasingly at recent European painting. Scully's 1977–9 works were archetypically 'threshold' paintings, which appeared undifferentiated from a distance and, as with Seurat's dots, revealed their constituent banding at a particular moment of approach. Their colouristic though close-valued richness differentiated this tonal sombreness from proper monochrome painting. Successive colour-layers were built up over taped horizontal bands, gradually cancelling out chromatic brightness. Their 'absolute' format revealed the contingent in terms of material contrasts, handling, and effects of lighting. Cursively swept layers of oil paint in physical depth offered a 'wetter' contrast to soaked-acrylic application, and picked up the gallery lighting in unstable undulations. Repetitive structure acted as a 'defocusing' device which almost hypnotized the spectator into delaying until suffused colour-clouds began to hover visually in front of the painting. These works seemed to occupy a dignified and impressive position within the arena of 'Post-Minimalist' painting quite straightforwardly in their combination of material contrasts, bands of equivalent width, and repetitive holistic structure, with perceptual ambiguity and colouristic moodiness. They were fascinating works which utilized certain well-rehearsed procedures for attaining emotionally sublime painting. However, there was a naggingly well-tailored aspect, which always seemed to me to prevent Scully from finding a chink through that well-honed pictorial structure to metaphysical qualities.

Perhaps the current retrospective organized by the Ikon is rather premature, since Scully's present work seems a still rather tentative new departure, but it does suggest a somewhat different picture of his career, in which these dark, precisely tuned paintings appear as a more exceptional and transitional phase. What immediately becomes obvious is that Scully's rather eclectic earlier work must be seen primarily against a background of British 1960s abstract painting and artistic response to American post-painterly abstraction, rather than in the context of 'abstract-sublime' colour-field and Minimalism. After some early Fauve-type works, Scully engaged in the sort of fluid painterly marks still visible in the background of *Blaze* (1971; see page XX), before settling on spatially overlapping colour grids. It is a background, then, of soak-stain's controlled indeterminacy, Noland and Stella, British 'expressionistic hard-edge' (to use Scully's term), lyrical Op (Riley), and grid painting. In fact, around 1970, British painters seem to have shown considerable interest in grid painting, which provided a compact fullness that was at formal variance with American implicit extendability, edge-orientation,

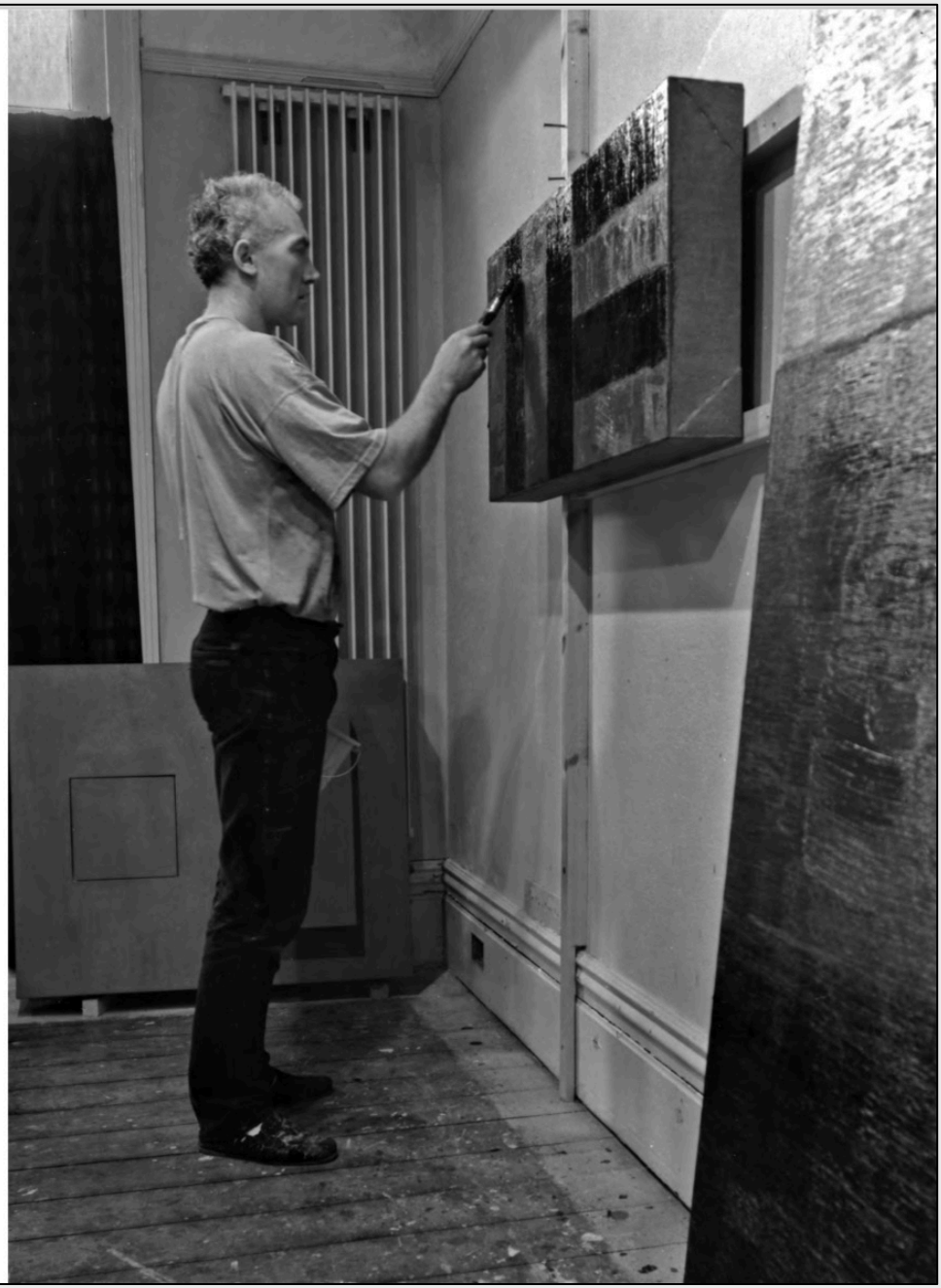
William Jeffett

Sean Scully: Reinventing Abstraction

Artefactum, No. 29,
June/July/August 1989

The rise of neo-geometric abstraction distorts the ongoing existence of abstract painting within the New York context. Abstraction has continued and continues today as a major force within the New York art world. Nevertheless, there are few artists working seriously in this direction. One of them is the Irish-born artist, now naturalized American, Sean Scully. It must be noted that neo-geometric painting is a contradiction in terms, because the point of this art is one of conceptual and theoretical criticism. Furthermore, neo-geometric abstraction is only a single tendency within the complex New York context; it is not representative of that context. Given this situation, it is not surprising that one of Scully's paintings bears the declamatory title *No Neo*, separating himself from that perspective. Neo-geometric abstraction was abundantly represented in London by the Saatchi Collection's *New York Art Now* exhibition. Sean Scully is included also in the Saatchi Collection, but curiously his painting does not merit the label 'New York Art Now'. Scully has been exploring abstract painting for the last twenty years. The 'Neo Geo' gang are more topical. The Whitechapel Gallery now gives us a chance to see Scully's alternative exploration of abstraction in depth. Sean Scully is an artist who asks the question of how it is possible to continue abstraction without sinking into an empty formalism. In other words, how is it possible to endow abstraction, or for that matter painting, with a content. As Carter Ratcliff points out in the catalogue essay, Scully is an artist attempting to go beyond the formal facticity of Frank Stella at the same time he seeks to reveal a content rooted in the intangible colour of Mark Rothko. While much of the abstract painting of the late 1970s preoccupied itself with intellectual and formal meditation on the surface and edge of painting (asking the question, what constitutes painting?), Scully has broken up the picture plane, providing a sensation of formal rupture and discontinuity, in order to establish a link to the world beyond the picture. Colour has been his principal vehicle in this project.

While he does not deny his debt to painters like Robert Ryman and Brice Marden, Scully is a painterly painter. He applies oil paint, wet on wet, in stripes, or broad bands, of colour. He concerns himself with the tactility of the paint, establishing a tension with the identity of the material surface, and object qualities of the painting. Scully began as a 'stripe painter', limiting himself to a rigorous geometry, and in his works since 1983 he has retained this restricted vocabulary. Unfortunately,



OPPOSITE
In the Ardbeg Road studio, south-east London, 1989