

Memory of Land and Sea

IN HIS LATEST EXHIBITION, SEAN SCULLY DEPICTS LAND, SEA, AND SKY WITH ELOQUENT SIMPLICITY. BY ELIZABETH PANDOLFI



Sean Scully, *Human Too* (installation), 2017, oil on aluminum.

GAZING OUT TO sea, dreaming of a better life in a new country: This is a memory that lives in the minds of countless immigrants, and among them is the Irish-born artist Sean Scully. For so many recent migrants, memories of the sea are likely fraught with fear and anguish. But for Scully, who immigrated to the U.S. from the United Kingdom in 1975 and has become one of this country's most important contemporary abstract artists, those memories are different—poetic, melancholy, romantic.

It's these memories, as well as others from different times and landscapes, that are currently on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn. The exhibition "Sean Scully: Landline" (through May 19) includes paintings, pastels, drawings, and sculptures that refer

to the natural environment—both sea- and landscapes—through horizontal stripes or "stacks."

This touring exhibition, which began at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., marks the first occasion on which works from the "Landline" series have been shown in U.S. museums. The series premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2015, says Patricia Hickson, the Wadsworth's Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art. "Landline" refers to landscape and seascape, so Venice was the perfect setting to highlight that series. In addition, he also included works from his 'Doric' series, which focuses on the built landscape. Venice combines all of those things—it has that beautiful built landscape that rises from the water, so presenting those two bodies of work in that



setting was quite magical."

The pieces in the Wadsworth exhibition are chosen from that expansive Venice Biennale installation and will interest viewers not only for their evocation of place and memory but also because they mark a distinctive departure for Scully. As a young artist in the 1970s, he was deeply influenced by Minimalism. He produced monochromatic paintings, as well as highly geometric compositions featuring lines, squares, and triangles in a multitude of colors. Yet as his work evolved through the years, it became more complex—one might feel that the compositions were being fitted together like building blocks, Hickson says, more like wall sculptures, in a sense, than paintings.

With "Landline," Scully is returning to something much simpler: the horizontal line. "This is a kind of filtering down to something very simple in concept," says Hickson. "I find it to be a very brave body of work, because it's become so simple—it's such a departure from the trajectory of his work."

This brave, simple body of work has its origins in two photographs from 1999,

both taken by Scully. *Land Sea Sky* is one of the images, and it depicts a view of the ocean from the coast of England. The various elements—land, then sea, then sky—rise through the photograph in horizontal bands. There's little depth to the photo; instead, it feels flat, unusual. It's easy to see how this view of the land and sea has been translated into the abstract expressions, the stripes on canvas, that fill the Wadsworth's galleries.

But it's hardly only the coast of England that features in the "Landline" series. Scully has always been an avid traveler, and many of these works refer to specific landscapes, and specific places. There's *Landline Zacatecas*, for example, which depicts Scully's memory of a view from Zacatecas, Mexico, in warm reds and oranges, punctuated by bands of black and gray-blue. There's *Landline Field*, a series of greens both bright and dull, interrupted by yellow and black. *Landline Far Blue Lake* is a stack of blues, rising from a

Clockwise from top left: *Untitled (Landline)*, 2016, oil on aluminum; *Landline Far Blue Lake*, 2018; *Stack Blues*, 2017, aluminum and automotive paint.



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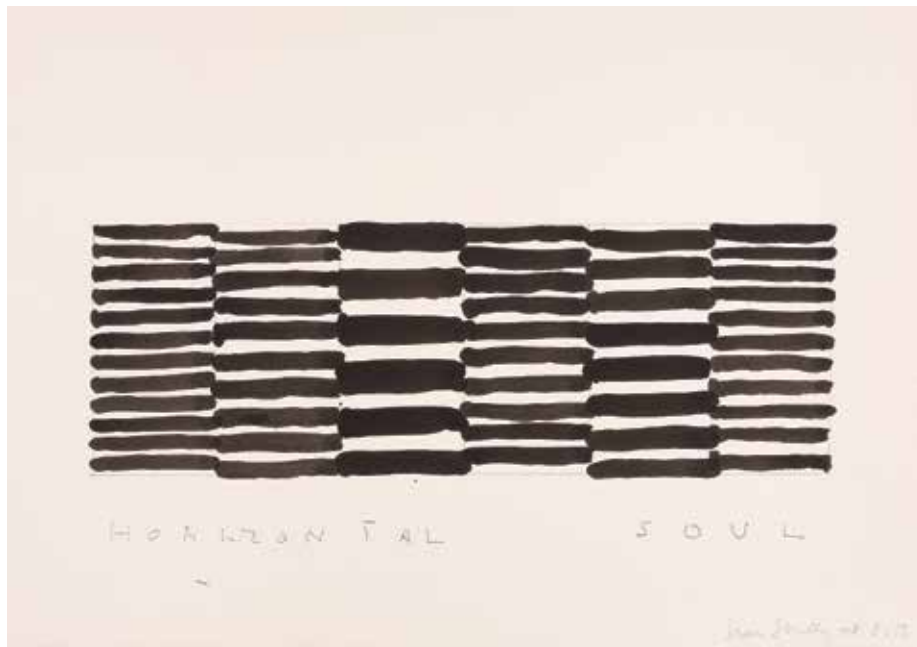
Clockwise from top left: *Landline Field*, 2015, oil on aluminum; *Landline Orient*, 2017, oil on aluminum; *Horizontal Soul*, 2013, watercolor on paper.

base of deep blue and black. The canvases are uniformly painterly, filled with the emotional, expressive brushstrokes that Scully is known for. “You can get lost in these paintings,” Hickson says, noting that many are large-scale. “They really envelop

you, like you’re standing in front of a beautiful seascape.”

Scully’s titles are representational, leading the viewer to an understanding of what the artist is depicting. In this way, the works themselves become a kind of link between the abstract and the figurative—a link between Scully’s memory of a landscape or seascape and the real, tangible place. While the pastels and drawings follow a pattern similar to that of the paintings, the three sculptures that are included in the show offer a striking contrast. Constructed of stacks of aluminum coated in bright automotive paint, these sculptures are bright and sharp—nothing like the lush pastels or warm paintings. “For him, I think it was a way to work in this same series and just switch gears and present the idea in a very different way,” Hickson says. “They’re very clean, industrial, slick, as opposed to the paintings, which are full of emotion.”

Visitors to the museum will see one of these sculptures before they even walk in the door. *30*, named for the number of aluminum layers it contains, is a multicolored installation that sits on the



Clockwise from top: *Landline Bend Triptych*, 2017, oil on aluminum; *30 (installation)*, 2018, aluminum and automotive paint; *Landline 5.20.15*, 2015, watercolor on paper; *Land Sea Sky*, 1999, chromogenic print, edition of 6.

museum’s front lawn, facing the street. Once inside the gallery, viewers will see another sculpture, also multicolored, and one in varying tones of blue. Both are an imposing nine feet tall.

There’s a final element to the exhibition, however, that adds greatly to the richness of this multi-faceted show. Hickson and her team have hung quotations from Scully throughout the galleries, contextualizing some of the works and hopefully enriching the viewer’s experience of them. “He’s a beautiful writer,” Hickson says. “We’re including these quotes to help bring the

work to life, and open a window into the artist’s thoughts.”

As the latest opportunity to view works by a highly significant abstract artist, “Sean Scully: Landline” has much to offer aficionados of abstract art. But there’s far more to enjoy here, and for anyone—not only those versed in the language of color and line. The show is also a deeply personal look into a man’s memories and experience with the natural world. “A lot of this work is about his past, when he was a young man looking out to sea,” Hickson says. “It’s a very romantic notion.”

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