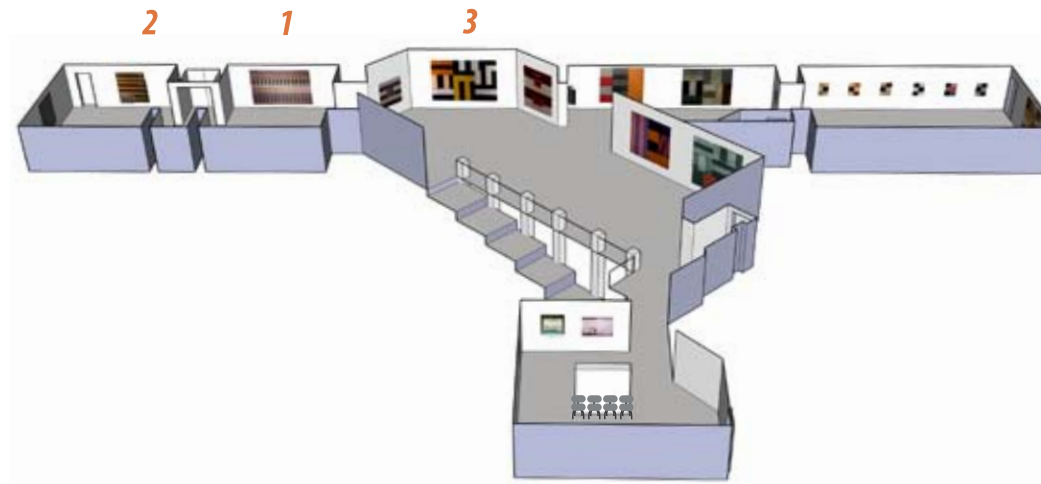




## LOOKING AT SEAN SCULLY'S PAINTINGS



## A GUIDE TO HELP VISITORS ENGAGE WITH ABSTRACT ART



**Look around and you'll find that stripes—both natural and manmade—are a part of your world. Books arranged on a shelf. The windows of a building. Corn rows in a field. Parking spaces at shopping centers. Patterns on animal fur. The list could go on and on.**

Since 1969, Sean Scully has been painting the stripe in many different forms; the result of this relentless pursuit is a body of work that has universal relevance and appeal, making him one of the leading abstract artists in the Western tradition.

Since its inception, abstract art has had its supporters and its critics. The careful arrangement of colors and forms on a canvas can seem puzzling to viewers, prompting the question, what is it about? For Scully, creating something that is not a realistic depiction of a specific person or place is precisely what he likes about abstract art:

*Abstraction is the art of our age... it's a breaking down of certain structures, an opening up. It allows you to think without making oppressively specific references, so that the viewer is free to identify with the work. Abstract art has the possibility of being incredibly generous, really out there for everybody. It's a nondenominational religious art. I think it's the spiritual art of our time.*

**There is rarely one way to approach a work of art, and this is especially true of Scully's paintings. In this brochure, you will find five different looking strategies to help you explore the richness of Scully's paintings and revel in their ability to engage and sometimes even transform us. As Scully says:**

*Like a book, a painting sleeps when it is not being looked at. It is possible to ignore a painting. A painting is mute and yet mysterious. Naturally it is possible to overlook a painting in a world that is populated with screaming images. But these images are almost exclusively empty and exhausting. With a great painting, more is radiating than one can understand logically. In that sense, even though it slumbers on the wall, when it is engaged an emotional experience can take place in a moment. So it functions well in a world of momentary engagement. A glance is enough to start it up.*

### 1. BEGIN WITH A GOOD, LONG LOOK

At the Hood Museum of Art, we often use a technique that we have dubbed **Learning to Look** as a way to explore the visual cues that every artist gives the viewer. It has four basic stages: close observation and description, preliminary analysis, "research" (incorporating additional information), and interpretation.

Choose any painting—one that you like, or even one that you don't. The following prompts will lead you through the looking process.

**Stage 1: Close Observation and Description. It may be easiest to focus on two of the obvious elements of art that Scully is using: colors and shapes.**

**Begin with the really broad question: what do you see?**

#### Colors

- Describe the colors and the differences among them.
- How did Scully arrange the colors in this painting? Did he use any color repeatedly?
- Is there a pattern?
- Are there layers of colors?
- What do you notice about the texture of the colors? Smooth and shiny? Rough, with visible brushstrokes?

#### Shapes

- What kind of shapes did he use?
- Describe the shapes. Are they all the same?
- Do these shapes seem as if they are right next to each other, or are there spaces in between?

**Stage 2: Preliminary Analysis. Think about the painting, using analytic questions about the artist's choices.**

- What do these colors make you think of? Why?
- Do the colors feel as if they are a harmonious or discordant blend? Why?
- Does there seem to be a relationship among the shapes?
- Do any of the shapes remind you of anything (doors, figures, windows, and so on)?
- Do any of the shapes suggest action? Movement (fast or slow)? If so, are all of the shapes moving in the same way? Are they running into each other or sliding under and around each other?
- How does this painting make you feel? Why?

**Stage 3: "Research" (finding out more about the work of art and the artist). You can do a lot just in the museum.**

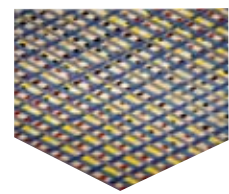
Peruse the gallery guide and read about Scully's life, his work, and these specific paintings. If you want to take the time, you can watch a video where he talks about his work or look at some of the books and articles in the reading area. Adding all of this information to your careful looking and questioning adds to the richness of the looking experience and may even alter your thoughts and reactions to Scully and his work.

**Stage 4: Interpretation. Bring it all together to understand what this work of art means, always keeping in mind that there are no absolute right or wrong answers.**

- What do you think this work of art is all about?
- What do you think Scully is interested in saying with this work?
- What does it reveal about Scully?
- Does the title that Scully gave the painting help you to think about its meaning?
- If you were naming it, what would you call it?
- What do your thoughts about this painting reveal about you?

## 2. WHAT KEEPS THE STRIPE FASCINATING TO SCULLY?

Scully has experimented with different kinds of stripes throughout his career. We're going to compare the stripes in three paintings that were created over a span of twenty years and also put them in the context of what was happening in Scully's life.



*Overlay 2, 1973*

Scully's earliest works are in Room 1; please see the map in this brochure. Find *Overlay 2*, the painting that is shaped like the bottom of a necktie.

### How would you describe these stripes?

To create this painting, Scully sprayed acrylic paint to give his stripes an even, flat finish. He layered the stripes using masking tape to make the edges straight and prevent the colors from mixing with each other. Sometimes this is called a "hard-edged" style of painting.

Scully also made photographs at this time of the railway system and bridge structures that he saw in England, where he grew up and attended art school as a young man. And he was influenced by Op Art, a style in which colors and shapes are often defined by hard edges and seem to move and vibrate, playing on the optic nerve.



*Blue, 1977*

Let's move to *Blue*, which Scully painted in 1977. It is also located in Room 1.

### What is different about these stripes?

During the time this was painted, Scully was struggling with what he wanted to do as an artist. He wanted his stripes to be more expressive, explaining, "I want my brushstrokes to be full of feeling; material feeling manifested in form and color."

### What feelings do you think he intended to express in this painting?

Scully had become interested in Zen Buddhism and had also taken up karate. Both of those interests involve meditation, repetition, and self-discipline.

### How does this seem to have influenced this work?



*Because of the Other, 1997*

Find *Because of the Other* in Room 3 at the top of the stairs.

### How are these stripes different from the previous paintings?

By the early 1980s, Scully had settled into painting with oils. Expressive color, visible brushstrokes, and broader stripes with imperfect edges became increasingly important to his work.

This painting is actually organized into three parts (a triptych), and in the central panel the arrangement of the stripes creates a doorlike space.

## A door into what? What surrounds the door?

This painting was created when Scully had begun living with Liliane Tomasko, a painter to whom he is now married. He has said that in the title *Because of the Other*, the "other" refers to Tomasko.

### Could Tomasko be the door, opening up new ideas and new feelings in Scully's world? If so, do the surrounding areas evoke the presence of Scully?

Feel free to keep exploring the differences in Scully's stripes; the dates of each object are listed in the gallery guide.

## 3. DECODING SCULLY'S VISUAL VOCABULARY

Scully has become so immersed in stripes that he has created something of a visual vocabulary, wherein stripes arranged in certain ways can be about him specific ideas, emotions, actions, or places. This vocabulary is nonetheless tricky—it shouldn't be taken literally. Keeping that in mind, though, it can be useful to factor it in when looking at his paintings.

Try connecting some of his ideas while looking at paintings in the exhibition:

- Horizontal lines can refer to "the eternal horizon" and vertical lines can be "assertive, like us standing," places, or people.
- A painting inset within a larger painting can be like a window in a wall, or a relationship, such as a mother and child.
- The color blue can make us think of light, sky, or water. Black can mark a space that is solid or impenetrable.
- A two-part painting (a diptych) can evoke a couple and their relationship.
- Scully has said that the spaces between the slabs and blocks (particularly in the *Wall of Light* series) could represent openings for people to enter paintings, or for light to exit paintings.
- The imperfect edges of stripes may relate to decay and loss or the space between, a transition, or the "less tangible."

## 4. FIND SCULLY'S RHYTHM

Scully has said that the key to understanding his work is rhythm—"the rhythm of life, the rhythm of everything." This idea can refer to the rhythms of life that go together, such as birth and death, disharmony and harmony, separation and union. Many of the shapes in his paintings are about relationships. Visual rhythms can also relate to music, such as the vibrations of a stringed instrument, the melancholy tones of a cello, or the thick horizontal lines evoked by a strong and steady beat.

Sean Scully often listens to music while he works. He has said that rhythm and blues music has informed his work, with its uncomplicated form that "stays close to the base, saying what you mean." The cello is his favorite instrument because it "holds all of life's tragedy," and melancholy is prominent in his work. When asked what music would go best with his paintings, he replied, "Schubert string quintet opus 163 and any Brahms chamber music. I love it all."

You can use the personal player and CDs that are located in the reading area to hear music that Scully likes and has listened to when he is painting. Try walking around with the music, looking at the paintings and thinking about the artistic process.

### Do you feel a connection?

**As you listen to the music, think about how it makes you feel. Is there a painting that makes you feel the same way?**

## 5. EXPLORE THE DRAMA

Scully's stripes can be abstract stand-ins for figures, directions, or emotions, and they can therefore represent a drama themselves, with no need for a curtain to rise. It is all right there before us, as he points out:

*You can do certain things with painting that are unique to painting that you cannot do with anything else. With a painting you can contain within borders a lot of experience, narrative, emotion, poetry, idea, thought, time, references, and so on, all within a frame . . . Painting has a unique potential to stop time and compact feelings and experience.*

Try exploring this idea of a painting as a dramatic production, complete with characters, setting, dialogue, mood, and personal meaning. You can choose any work, but *Come and Go* offers especially rich dramatic possibilities, given its title.



*Come and Go, 1981*

This painting is located in Room 2

- Who are the **characters**? Are the lines at the bottom of the painting the stage, or another character? Who is coming? Who is going? What do the sizes of the "characters," as well as the widths and directions of the stripes, tell us about them?
- What does the **setting** tell us about what is happening in this drama? (You could think of the setting as the background color.) Where are the characters coming from and where are they going to? Are there colors behind those you see?
- What kind of **dialogue** is happening? What are the characters saying as they are coming and going? Do they get along? Are they fighting? Are they related to one another, or have they just met?
- What is the **mood** of this drama? How do the characters feel about coming and going? Is it an action-filled drama, a fast-paced comedy, or a talky think piece?
- What is the **meaning** of this drama on a canvas? What might this coming and going symbolize? Is there a search for something? If so, what?

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Cover: (above) *Tiger*, 1983, oil on canvas, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Massachusetts; Gift of David and Renee Conforte McKee (class of 1962)  
*Dakar*, 1989, oil on linen, private collection (below)