

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY **REV PROFESSOR ENDA McDONAGH**, Chairperson, Governing Body of University College Cork - National University of Ireland, Cork on 6th June, 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **SEAN SCULLY**
A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

The most appropriate setting in which to honour a major artist like Sean Scully would be at an exhibition of his paintings or in the presence of one of his more significant works. Unfortunately University Honorary Conferings do not normally occur in that kind of ambience and the ceremony has to concentrate on the second language of the painter, mere words, although happily completed by symbolic actions.

In mere words then Sean Scully was born in Dublin in 1945, the son of a barber. When he was aged four the family emigrated to England where he grew up in a working class area of South London. Here he experienced some of the usual difficulties of the very young immigrant compounded by the episodic violence of the place and time and in his case by his withdrawal from the convent school whose mystery and symbolism he was fascinated by, despite its other limitations, and sent to the banal and culturally impoverished milieu of the local state school. Perhaps all this fuelled his ambition to be something different, to make a difference. He had an early interest in politics but that quickly gave way to art and as he acknowledged later, while art may be politicized, “art cannot be effectively political”. However his philosophy and practice of art, as he has frequently asserted, involve a cultural mission, indirectly akin to some political idealism, the mission to save art and culture from the dehumanization so evident in their current commercialisation and consumerisation.

Of course before that philosophy could develop he had to hone his basic skills in art school, at Croydon College of Art, London, at Newcastle University and at Harvard. He later taught at Chelsea School of Art and at Goldsmiths School of Art in London between 1973 and 1975. However during his student years he visited New York in 1967 and was so bowled over by the Mark Rothko Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that he sensed at least in part the direction of his future development. It was only after he moved finally to New York in 1975 that his future as an artist began to take definitive shape, although he would still continue a difficult artistic and, as he would say, spiritual journey over the next decades. In that early period in the United States he taught at Princeton University from 1977 to 1983. In that same 1977 he had his first solo exhibition in the US and a few years later his first retrospective in Birmingham, England. Two years later he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, in the year he became an American citizen.

Subsequent exhibitions, solo, mixed and retrospective, occurred with frequent regularity during the next decades in all the major art centers of the world, from New York to London and Barcelona and from Berlin and Paris to Tokyo and back to Dublin. He now divides his life and work between New York and Barcelona while traveling the globe not only to help organize exhibitions of his completed work but also in search of stimulus and vision for new work.

Scully is an abstract painter but with a strong connection to the reality and humanity of the world he depicts. On arrival in New York he was by his own admission ready to start from scratch

again. The Minimalist tradition, then a force, might have drawn him in or even taken him over but he was strong enough to continue his own search. His great masters, Mondrian, Matisse and Rothko, remain vital influences in form, colour and even theme but the work is clearly and distinctively Scully.

The distinctive Scully has many remarkable painterly features which have earned him international recognition and awards from fellow artists, art critics, museum curators and art collectors around the world. (The list is endless. Just try the Internet.) That recognition has made him the best known and appreciated Irish-born artist on the world circuit since Francis Bacon. And his stripes and grids and inset windows provide instant recognition and endless analysis for some of the most acute art critics of our time. For the less expert his own reflections on and explications of his work are particularly helpful. Mere words can also enlighten the viewer.

In this context of the National University of Ireland in its Cork incarnation, it may be permitted to select just a few of the features he stresses. The relation between art and spirituality is very significant to him in his struggle to maintain and renew the humanity and beauty of our world. His inspirer Rothko had some very illuminating things to say and paint about this. "For art to me is an anecdote of the spirit and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness." In a university setting the quickness and stillness of the spirit need to be constantly attended to and concretely embodied, Rothko and Scully fashion. Scully's own preoccupation with light and his relating it to the spiritual in major works has a clear message for universities

Both Scully and his critics advert to the combination of exuberance and melancholy which characterize his work. This has been related to his Irishness which he still cherishes. Indeed parallels with Samuel Beckett have been invoked and one fine painting entitled 'Murphy' was completed while reading the Beckett novel.

Ideas of university and Ireland may be deemed appropriate in setting Scully in context for this honorary degree. University College Cork perhaps no less so. Whenever the Dublin Scullys emerged, no Cork person will believe that they did not originate in Cork. More seriously it is particularly appropriate to honour this great artist in this university and in this city, in anticipation of the University Art Centre due to open next year and of the nomination of Cork as European City of Culture for 2005.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testur ac spondeo totique Academiae.