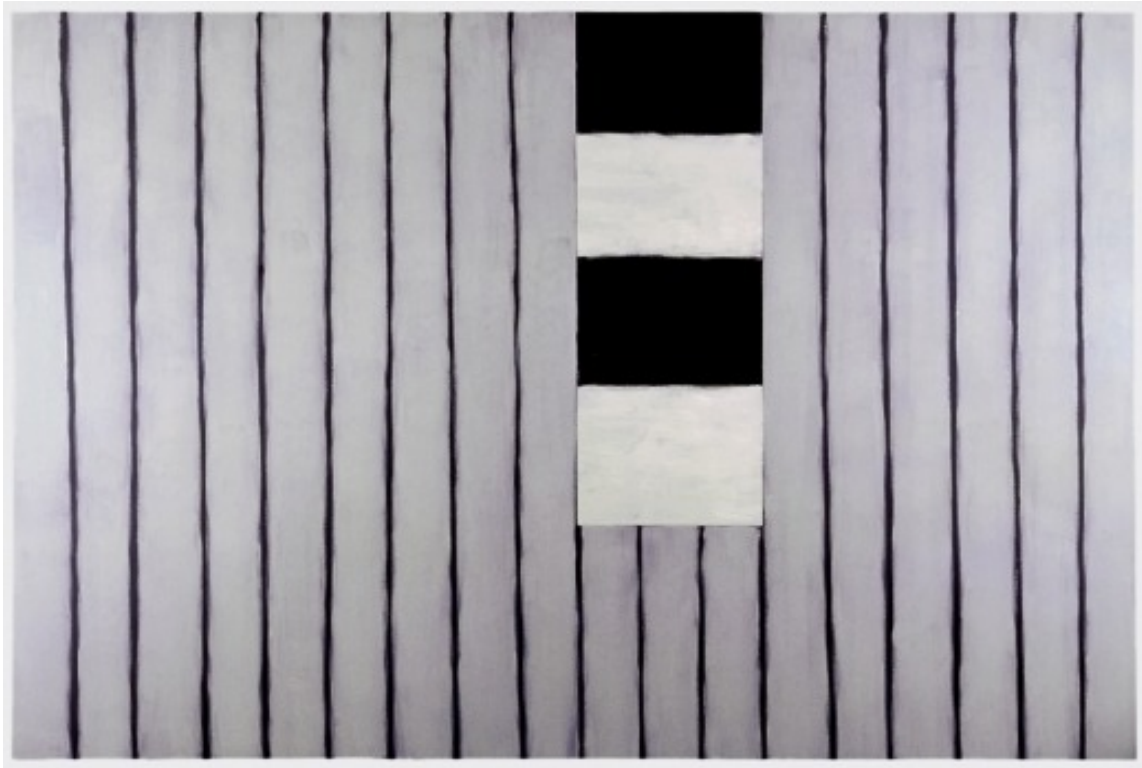


A poverty of feeling: how Sean Scully exhausted Arthur Danto

Arthur Danto was enraptured by Sean Scully's painting—but he was never sure how to explain why

by Pac Pobric | 24 April 2015 | The Art Newspaper



Sean Scully, Catherine (1996) © Sean Scully

When the philosopher and critic Arthur Danto died on 25 October 2013 at the age of 89, he died—as we all will—in the middle of life. Not that he was a young man; nor that he was unaccomplished. By the time of his death, he had written around 30 books, including *Encounters and Reflections*, which won the 1990 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism. But neither age nor success has any truck with finality. Ambitious thinkers like Danto can never be entirely satisfied: there is always more to see, more to read, more to learn and the end of life is necessarily full of loose ends. There is never that perfect, final neatness we dream of. Life and art go on and change without us, even if we are never quite finished changing ourselves. As the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips once wrote: “every death is a crisis of continuity”. That is especially true in a life of the mind.

More deeply than any other art critic of his generation or since, Danto plumbed the problem of continuity and its fissures. He demanded to know: what held modern art together, despite its messy explosion into the pluralist world of contemporary art? What was art's essence in a time of limitless aesthetic possibility, when anything could be christened a work of art? Amid the shifting seas of pluralism, Danto's

anchor was his academic training in German Idealist philosophy. When art appeared bankrupt (in 1989, Danto lamented “bad aesthetic times”), philosophical tradition paid in dividends. Danto was our last true Hegelian; the last thinker who believed, with limitless sincerity, that a straight line could be drawn through historical upheaval. Continuity could always be found in a shattered world.

Danto’s framework, in all its comprehensive integrity, is a gift. When he coined the term “the artworld” in his 1964 essay of the same name, he gave us the tools to understand how Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box (1964) was more than just a replica of a store-bought item. Only in “the artworld”—that imaginative community of artists, critics, historians and the museum-going public, all of whom were engaged in a vigorous dialogue—could the Brillo Box be more than a mere object. Danto understood that there were some questions the eye could not access. “If you have two things,” Danto once asked, speaking on behalf of Warhol, “one of which is art, and one of which is not—but they look exactly alike—what explains the difference?”

How does something become a work of art? What makes those gears turn? It is an important question. But it does not take precedence over the problem of why the gears turn. What does philosophy have to say about why a painting is beautiful? What can it tell us about why art makes us feel? Philosophy is speculative. It lives in the world of ideas. It fails when it becomes too grounded, or when it tries to explain instinct. It has nothing to say about the way oil on canvas can affect the imagination.

It is clear throughout Danto on Scully, the philosopher’s collected writings on the Irish painter Sean Scully, which includes five essays written between 1993 and 2006, that Danto has a depth of intuition. In front of Scully’s rich, abstract slabs of glowing colour, Danto is enraptured not by an idea, but by a feeling, one that enlivens his literary sensibility. In his finest flourish, Danto writes of how Scully’s work is always associated good things: “circus tents and beach umbrellas, tigers at the zoo, their stripes dancing past the bars of the cages they pace in”. If Scully “belongs on the shortest of short lists of the major painters of our time,” as Danto writes, this is why: because his work transfigures the imagination.

Yet Scully’s riches can impoverish language and Danto’s writing is made particularly weak by abstract painting. Too often, his philosophy stands in the way of his criticism. Throughout the book, Danto excels more at explaining how Scully fits into a grander art historical narrative than he does at describing his own intuition in front of the work. He compares the Catherine series of paintings to Robert Motherwell’s *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* and to Richard Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park* series (even if Scully’s pictures do not refer to the painter Catherine Lee, his former wife, “in the way in which the Spanish *Elegies* refer to Spain or to the spirit of Spain”). Danto ties Scully to Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism and puts him at the centre of debate about the relevance of painting (although Danto “rules out entirely the very possibility of a comeback of painting, at least as Queen of the arts”). He even has an essay on the architectural aspects of Scully’s work (“anyone who looks at Scully’s paintings sees them as made up of concrete entities, like slabs”). In

each case, Danto makes room for Scully in the story of modernism. Scully has both precedents and progeny. He fits into an unbroken tradition.

Yet none of this is enough. It never accounts for the strength of the work. Scully's beautiful pictures slacken Danto's philosophy. And Danto the critic never makes up for the loss. Some of this is due to his stumbling prose—he was never the most graceful writer—but the deeper problem was his desire to be comprehensive. He was never as systematic as his German Idealist predecessors, but he still held fast to the Hegelian dream of continuity. How art worked and where it fit into the story were always his most important questions. But these are problems only for philosophy; criticism begins elsewhere, with the question of whether the art works at all.

Danto's ambition was admirable: he wanted to have it all figured out. But Scully's abstraction pushes his story back and away. It refuses interpretation that is not born of intuition. Danto is right when he says that the paintings "have their meanings and their associations, which they bring into painting from the world without." It is true that nothing we make is born ex-nihilo; we are always in the middle of life, in the middle of conversation, in the middle of our thoughts. The chain of inspiration is difficult to trace. Who knows where our ideas come from? Scully's must come from the world outside painting as much as they come from the world inside painting. This alone puts a strain on Danto's hope for continuity. Criticism emerges when the straight line disappears and when feeling has to make up for the poverty of ideas.

Danto was never truly able to put his feeling into words, but art criticism did a tremendous thing for him: it ruptured his beautiful grand narrative. It made him to subordinate his mind to his feeling. In front of Scully's work, the philosopher was caught between the ideas he believed in and the complications introduced by great painting. Scully forced Danto to reconsider, as all great artists do. Death interrupted any hope for a perfect ending. But Danto was not naïve. He knew there would be questions left unanswered. He knew that he had limits. At the very end of the book, in an essay written seven years before his death, Danto writes of his belief that Scully's abstract pictures are "flooded with meaning, and connected to the world in just the way the great Abstract Expressionist paintings were." But that meaning escaped him:

"I can't really speak about abstraction right now. Let me just use some nice abstract ending words, from Sean's countryman, James Joyce: 'End here. Us then. Finn, again! Take. Buussoftlhee, mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the...'"

Danto on Scully
Arthur Danto
Hatje Cantz, 107pp, €35