



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***
Smithsonian American Art Museum

May 1, 2007

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Media Preview: Tuesday, May 15; 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.

Smithsonian American Art Museum Presents Selections from Its Master Set of Prints by Sean Scully, the Only Set in a U.S. Museum

“The Prints of Sean Scully” presents for the first time at the Smithsonian American Art Museum a selection of 57 works from a master set of prints that was acquired in 2001 and is updated annually with newly created works. Scully chose the Smithsonian American Art Museum as the only museum in the United States to receive a master set. The artist’s prints range from large-scale, monumental compositions to smaller, more intimate expressions of the artist’s ideas.

“The Prints of Sean Scully” is on view in Washington from May 18 through Oct. 8; it begins a national tour later this year. Joann Moser, senior curator for graphic arts, selected the prints and illustrated books featured in the exhibition.

“I am delighted to honor as part of our opening year of exhibitions the acclaimed artist Sean Scully with this exhibition and to celebrate his important gift to the museum,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Sean Scully (b. 1945) has been making prints for more than 30 years and considers these independent but complementary works to be as significant as his paintings. Using his instantly-recognizable block shapes, Scully’s richly layered prints explore recurring themes in his work, such as the play of light and shadow, the expressive qualities of color and the spatial relationships created by the edges of his distinctive abstract forms.

“Best known as a creator of bold, monumental paintings, Scully has developed a language of abstract form and color with which he communicates a broad range of sensations, from the physicality of a wall to the transience of light,” said Moser.

Scully was first introduced to printmaking when he worked for a commercial printer in London in the early 1960s. This direct involvement with the craft of printmaking helped Scully develop a

sensitivity to its expressive character. After concentrating on painting for more than a decade, he returned to making prints with a small stark line etching, “Princeton” (1982). Even when he began working with professional printers, a year later in 1983, Scully remained in complete control of the process.

The large, bold woodcuts Scully made from 1986 to 1993 have a strong, physical presence. The deep gouges and uneven surfaces of the woodblock prints, such as “Conversation” (1986), create an energized surface of lines and have a rough texture. The triptych format of this print, in which each panel is a different height, is reminiscent of his paintings with canvases of different sizes and depths butted together to form a single composition.

Scully’s abstract imagery conveys emotion and atmosphere. He explores the evocative possibilities of texture, tone and color in his prints, and the colors, composition and luminosity of the works are often based on personal experiences. For example, the scratches and scrapes from the backs of plates and the mottled surfaces of his spitbite etchings conjure up the texture of timeworn facades captured in his photographs. The surface texture of “Wall” (1988) evokes the crude boards of fences and doors. Occasional glimpses of paper between areas of color suggest a sliver of sky seen through a broken fence or an open window. The blue tonality in the left half of “Mirror Yellow” (1998) recalls dusk, while the yellow glow of the right half hints at dawn. Scully is comfortable with these associations, as long as they do not become too literal.

Scully’s “Wall of Light” prints from 2000 to 2005 emphasize luminosity and transparency. Their rectangular forms seem to float and overlap, with soft edges that create delicate lines of indeterminate shape between them. These prints are rooted in the artist’s hand-drawn forms, his subtle touch humanizing otherwise geometric shapes. These works speak of transience and spirituality.

In 2004, Scully was invited to make lithographs while he was in Paris. He agreed to try the process for the first time since art school, enticed by the masterful lithographs Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec made there in the late 19th century. The lithographs Scully made in Paris depart from the refined surfaces, colors and forms of the “Wall of Light” prints. Scully embraced a more physical, autographic expression in these works. The prints he made, such as “Paris Black” (2004), emphasize the basic principle of the lithographic process, which involves oil and water. For this work, Scully did not clean his brushes carefully, and water accidentally mixed with turpentine and oily ink, creating what he calls a “brutal roughness.”

Scully has placed four of the five master sets of his prints in museums around the world. His gift to the museum in 2001 included 131 etchings, aquatints, woodcuts and screen prints and two

artists' books. New work is added to the set each year, which consists of 183 works currently. "Blue Fold," on view in the exhibition, is one of the most recent works to enter the museum's collection. In addition to the prints, Scully's major painting "Maesta" (1983) is on view in the permanent collection galleries. "Maesta" came at a critical point in Scully's career, when he was developing a more physical and emotional approach to abstraction, and is considered by the artist to be one of his most important paintings. The museum acquired the painting in 2004.

About the Artist

Scully was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1945 but was raised in London, where his family moved in 1949. He attended classes at London's Central School of Art (1962–1965) and at Croydon College of Art (1965–1968) and received a bachelor's degree from Newcastle University in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1972. That year, he traveled to the United States for the first time for a one-year residency at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass. He moved to the United States in 1975, settling in New York City. He taught at Princeton University from 1977 to 1982 and was a professor at Parsons School of Design in New York City from 1981 to 1984. In 1983, the year he became a U.S. citizen, Scully received a Guggenheim Fellowship and an artist fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Scully was nominated in 1989 and in 1993 for the Turner Prize that is presented annually by the Tate Gallery in Britain. His paintings, prints, pastels and photographs have been exhibited internationally, and his work is in the permanent collections of some of the leading museum in the U.S. and Europe. Scully maintains studios in New York City, Barcelona, Spain; and Munich, Germany.

Public Programs

Saturday, May 19 at 3 p.m., Scully will discuss themes prevalent in his prints. Seating is limited; free tickets will be distributed in the museum's G Street lobby one hour prior to the program. A full schedule of exciting events, from talks with artists to performances to behind-the-scenes tours, is available at americanart.si.edu.

Publications

A catalog raisonné of Scully's prints is forthcoming from the Institute of Modern Art in Valencia, Spain. Moser wrote the lead essay.

Credit

"The Prints of Sean Scully" is organized and circulated by the Smithsonian American Art Museum with support from Gisele Galante Broida, Don Brown, Ruth Holmberg and Norfolk Southern

Corporation. The exhibition's tour is supported in part by the C.F. Foundation, Atlanta and the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment Fund.

Tour

After closing in Washington, the exhibition travels to the Naples Museum of Art in Naples, Fla. (Nov. 10–Jan. 13, 2008); the Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minneapolis, Minn. (March 1, 2008–May 4, 2008); and the Hyde Collection in Glens Falls, N.Y. (Sept. 5, 2008–Nov. 2, 2008).

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

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Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum's online press room at americanart.si.edu/press.