

Mr Chancellor,

New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, London, Dublin. This sounds like the touring dates for a rock band on the back of a T-shirt. Our honorary graduand and esteemed guest today is certainly a music lover but is not a rock star. No, the venues for his art are the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Smithsonian, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and the Tate Gallery. These are the world-leading art institutions that exhibit the work of Sean Scully described by one of his contemporaries as simply the world's most talented living painter in the abstract tradition. It is Sean Scully whom we are honouring today.

Sean Scully was born in Dublin in 1945. In 1949 his family moved to South London where he grew up, although the suburbs were ultimately not an environment in which he thrived. The Irish influence never left his work, though. He knew from the age of 9 that he wanted to be an artist. He left school at 15 without formal qualifications and joined a commercial printing shop. Later he worked in a graphic design studio. His early working life had enormous influence on the technical excellence that has always accompanied his artistic genius. It was an early experience of a world of hard work where you need determination to achieve what you want.

His art training began in evening classes at the Central School of Art in London where his initial interest was in figurative painting. In 1964, however, he encountered Van Gogh's Chair, the eponymous painting; at that time in the Tate Gallery in London. At lunchtime he would travel across London on his

scooter from work simply to spend time with the painting. It changed the direction of his life.

It was in 1968 that his connection with Newcastle began when he joined the University's Fine Art Department as an undergraduate. And what a fine choice. The department was, and still is, one of the most influential in the country with its important direct link to the Hatton Gallery. This was a time of great creativity and success in the city. Of pop and pop art. The Club AGoGo was featuring the cream of British and American Music. Bryan Ferry had just left the same art department that Sean Scully was joining and living in a flat on Eslington Terrace, Jesmond that, bizarrely, I later lived in. If only walls could tell stories. Jimmy Hendrix had only recently stopped living in Heaton and busking on Chillingham Road and, perhaps most extraordinarily of all, Newcastle United were winning a trophy.

In the Fine Art Department of King's College, University of Durham, and latterly the University of Newcastle, the influence of Richard Hamilton, one of the pioneers of Pop Art remained, as did that of Ian Stephenson famous for providing the paintings for Antonioni's defining film of the 1960s "Blow Up" and for pioneering the wearing of white denim. This was the world that Sean Scully walked into stating that his ambition was to fuse Mondrian and Pollock, an approach described by someone there at the time as "rather bold for a new undergraduate".

In 1969 he made his first of many trips to Morocco. A country that influenced him hugely. In his own words he was struck by, the "frantic, relentless patterns". And the colours. The colours would return in triumph.

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After graduating, he worked as a teaching assistant in the Department and also taught at the City of Sunderland College of Art. His time teaching was key and became a theme of his life and career. One of giving back through teaching the next generation.

Later in his career he taught a young Ai WeiWei at the Parsons School for Design in New York. Ai WeiWei recalls placing Chinese calligraphy paper on the floor and quickly finishing a painting. His colleagues were surprised and one said “wow, if he can paint this quickly there is no point in us studying any more”. Sean Scully came over looked at it and said “it’s no good”. Ai WeiWei realised he was right and regarded that as an influential moment in his career. How did Sean Scully know the art was terrible? ...well maybe he was well taught!.

In 1972 he was awarded the Frank Knox fellowship to attend Harvard University. In 1973, on his return to the UK he held his first solo exhibition at the Rowan Gallery in London. This was a triumph selling out the show.

After teaching at Chelsea College of Art in 1975, he was awarded the Harkness Fellowship which took him to New York. A hugely influential city that has remained an important influence on his life and work. He is unusual amongst visual artists in being renowned for his published writing as well as his visual art. A true polymath.

Amongst many accolades he was nominated twice for the Turner Prize in 1989 and 1993 and elected as a Royal Academician in 2012. He is unique amongst living British artists in being honoured with a solo exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; his seminal *Walls of Light*.

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What of Newcastle and the North-East and what it meant to him? In many ways he was returning to roots that were important to him. To Durham where his grandparents lived and where he would live during his time as a student. This world was the real world. His grandfather was a former miner and the reality of Northern life was both inescapable and authentic. Newcastle inspired him both as an artist and a person. Newcastle as a proper city, a live city, a single community not a collection of the suburbs like Sydenham that he had left behind (although it probably suggests he didn't spend much time in Gosforth).

It was also a world of history, of space and of beauty. As he himself said "we didn't have the Tate but we had a history of distinction and, close by, the long spectacular beaches of Northumberland that no-one wanted to visit thus their majestic loneliness was permanently uncompromised". Martin Luther King, our distinguished Honorary Graduate, once said "We are not makers of history, we are made by history". Sean Scully was made by his history and the history of the North-East.

To have worked and studied art in the evening to get the qualifications to come to Newcastle, to have sacrificed lunch for Van Gogh is to have a formidable work ethic that has never left our graduand. Whilst immersing himself in the Fine Art Department in Newcastle he was working all night in a petrol station to pay his way.

And finally, influences. The influence of Morocco and Mexico on colour, the patchwork of Irish fields on shape are acknowledged influences. But what of the grid shapes that define his work. The lattice that resembles metal work? Simple. It is the bridges of Newcastle observed every day. For most of us the

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Tyne Bridge is a source of pain. For some, it is the inspiration for images that give pleasure to millions and are seen around the world.

I too am the grandson of a coal miner. I recognise the striving, the valuing of the opportunity that you have created for yourself. The work ethic. When I told our graduand that I also came from a mining family he told me “you are all right”. Well, Sean Scully, inspiration to a generation, writer of the highest quality, teacher and world-renowned artist. I think you are all right as well.

Mr Chancellor, for his outstanding contributions to the visual arts and the inspiration he has given to countless others I present to you Mr Sean Scully for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by David Jones, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2018*