

Sean Scully's Subtly Political "Doric" Paintings Make Their Athenian Debut

Language

English

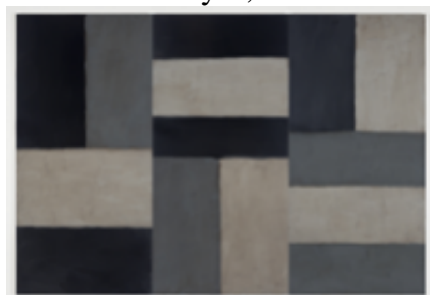


© Sean Scully/Neo Neo Inc
Sean Scully in his New York studio

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Sean Scully's "Doric Athena" (2011) / © Sean Scully/Neo Neo Inc.

Art that references the present while managing to transcend it can be both immediate in effect and leave a lasting impression, like **Sean Scully's** "Doric" painting series, which is being shown internationally for the first time at the **Benaki Museum** in Athens. The six featured paintings from the nine in the so-called "Doric" series, which Scully began in 2008, are partly a response to the financial crisis that has spread throughout the Western world and is particularly acute in Greece. They also offer a more profound reflection of the Western values of humanism, moderation, and humility that our culture of

excess seems to have abandoned.

"The current work has been germinating for a very long time, but seems a propos at the moment because Greece is so underappreciated," the artist said. "My work is a homage to Greece, but was also inspired by the battles fought against Cyrus and Xerxes, and the sacrifices that were made for all those values."

A room with a selection of earlier works (including a series of elegant watercolors inspired by the architecture in the Greek island of Simi) leads to the core of the exhibition. The six monumental "Doric" paintings create an imposing space that combines austerity with a poetic sensitivity, a sense of order and symmetry with harmony and delicacy, and infuses airs of solidity with movement and rhythm. Chromatic variations of black, grey, and off-whites are arranged in broad, horizontal, and vertical bands, and formulate an abstract visual language that contains elements of Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and especially Suprematism. All of these art movements, together with the work of **Goya** and **Rembrandt** — particularly in respect to their use of black — have been consistent sources of inspiration for Scully.

Each of the large paintings (roughly 10 by 14 feet) is constructed as a triptych and can be disassembled into three panels in order to underline the "physical" and "three-dimensional" quality that the artist considers essential to his work. The broad, vigorous brushstrokes further underline the idea of the physical and material as a metaphor for what Scully calls the "toils of humanity." "I am interested in the idea of an artist as a builder, an artisan, in that sense of modesty that this profession implies," he said. "The 'Doric' series refers to architecture and has a connection to stone."

Appropriately, he thinks of his works as walls. "Walls, especially old ones, are custodians of memory, witnesses to the passages of human beings, surfaces that bear the traces of history," he said. "The idea in my case is always the wall or the evaporation of the wall, the wall upon which we write, the wall that divides, protects, encases."

Scully has travelled the world exploring the traces of history and looking for the unifying principles that connect humanity. His itinerary has brought him to ancient Greek temples — those in Sicily had an especially profound impact on him. The "Doric" order impressed him the most for its simplicity and force. "Ancient Greek architecture expresses the physical dimension of democracy," he said. "The spaces between the columns provoke light and the right to ask questions — they express freedom."

Fittingly, the Benaki Museum exhibition is designed to imitate in abstracted, minimalist form the architecture of a temple, with the "Doric" paintings installed in the sacred, innermost chamber. Spirituality, another central notion in the artist's work comes into play here. Led by an idealistic approach and belief in progress, Scully seeks out those universal truths that connect different cultures across time. This is a political stance — a belief "in internationalism and universality" — that Scully says permeates his entire artistic production.

"I am an integrationist," he says. "I have always liked to experience the other point of view and learn from it. I think that people who take hard positions are dangerous. I often think of myself as a bridge-builder. I do not want to make art that is isolating, but art that connects."

At a time of instability this sense of connection can be both comforting and productive for drawing attention to the broader picture and to life's larger questions. The "Doric" series points in that direction. The compelling exhibition celebrates the classical values of western culture, and does so through a visual language that fuses diverse stylistic elements for a powerful visual effect.

"Sean Scully: Doric" is on view at the Pireos annex of the [Benaki Museum](#) in Athens May 9-July 15. The exhibition will travel to Spain and Dublin after its Athens debut.

[Contemporary Arts](#), [Museums](#), [Benaki Museum](#)

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