

## On Mythology, Abstraction, and Mystery

Sean Scully

Mystery in art is very important to me. I feel that a lot of that is being squeezed out of art in today's mechanized, digitized world. A number of the twentieth-century artists I most admire—artists like Barnett Newman, Giorgio Morandi, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner—created mythologies in order to keep mystery at the core of their work and to fight off a sense that they were becoming disconnected from the natural world.

By mythology, I don't mean art that refers to Greek and Roman gods. For me, the mythic involves the idea of legend and mystery and something you can't trace all the way back; you can't just unravel it or decode it. It may be something that is at least partly comprehensible to a broader audience or something more specific and autobiographical—what I am calling personal mythology—which can be hidden from all but a select few. In a democracy, where everybody becomes or is able to become their own world, people sometimes capriciously establish their own idea of myth and—in a rather extended relationship with Marcel Duchamp—declare that certain things are special just because they say so. That can close off meaning, however, and in this essay I present some of my concerns and thoughts about it. The essay is a kind of argument with myself about the function and the importance of modern myth.

Recently I gave a lecture on this topic, and I began with Barnett Newman's *Zim Zum I* (fig. 1). He made two versions of this large steel sculpture, which creates a corridor for the viewer to walk through. *Zim zum* in Hebrew can mean a number of different things, but one of them is "sacred space," and that is the way I interpret Newman's titling of the work. Newman is trying here, as on many other occasions, to create his own mythology—that he is a great religious artist, or quasi-religious artist, one who compares himself rather charmingly with Michelangelo. Thus he presents *Zim Zum* not as a mere arrangement of minimal shapes but as the cradle of a special and mystical place.

Newman tried to make a space that was spiritually charged, and that is what I try to do in my work too. I basically believe the world is filled with spiritual energy and I'm very involved with things that attract it. Of course it cannot be proven that *Zim Zum* is a "special" place, but Newman asked us to suspend our disbelief and cooperate with his reference, with his act of creation and designation.

The zigzagging steel planes might be compared to the design of an African mask, the kind that inspired Pablo Picasso and other modernists in the early twentieth century who turned to the "primitive" for inspiration. But the mask (fig. 2) usually does not attempt to tell stories like Newman did. Take, for example, a Songye mask made of wood and



Sean Scully, *Precious*, 1987. Oil,  
72 x 72 in. Private collection

- 1 Barnett Newman, *Zim Zum I*, 1969. Cor-ten steel, 96 x 72 ½ x 180 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchased through a gift from Phyllis Wattis © Barnett Newman Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



straw that I saw recently in a museum. Its point is to gain the maximum in expression with almost no consideration for the appearance of things. It goes back and forth with tremendous force between the rhythmic, stylized linearity of the drawing, which both expresses and does not express the appearance of a head—though it does express life and the continuing rhythm of life and death—and the straw. It embodies in its constant fluctuation between the straw material and the deeply stylized rhythm of the drawing the belief of the people it was made for and by. It was made to summon the gods, and the people who used it and viewed it knew this about its play of realism and nonrealism. I'm not really a collector, but I used to have a Dogon mask I kept at my house in New York, which had a repeated vertical rhythm; it's supposed to be a bird yet it looks nothing like a bird. Its maker understood that you don't make a representation of a spirit, you make

- 2 Songye mask, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1910–30. Hardwood with traces of black, red, white, and ocher paint, and fibers, 24 ¾ in. high © ABM Archives Barbier-Mueller, Geneva, Switzerland



something that a spirit would be attracted to inhabit. That was the idea of the African masks. Instead of conjuring up the spirits, they assume the spirits are already there, the way the flower and the bee work. I “used” this mask for a long time myself. It made the point that this is not mere space or geometry. In the same way when one hears jazz today the original structure of a song played by John Coltrane is constantly lost and found and brought repeatedly to the edge of emotional crisis. That’s what is happening with the mask too. It is made to attract the gods, to get the gods to somehow inhabit it.

Barnett Newman was extremely interested in attaching himself to great themes. He painted, for example, *Onement* (part of a series begun in 1948) as if it would be the one moment, the beginning, the origin. He wanted to get to something that was fundamental and pure, to sweep aside that confusing, polluting, compromising, and dialectical European shadow and make a pure

American art, a new beginning, and that’s what his paintings constantly try to present. Newman also painted *The Stations of the Cross* (1958–64), the tragic story of Jesus being tried, taken out to Calvary, and executed. He painted this in black and white stripes as if they could express this story. He has attached himself to this story. He wanted to create his own mythology and to do it with stripes. But in many ways he created an art that is for experts and for devotees. In order for a myth to take root, to have power, it must have more than one devotee. There is a schism between what an artist like Newman says and what is self-evident, going obliquely back to Duchamp. For example, I could stand on a stage, drink a glass of water, and then declare that I have just made an artwork through my performance. We have a crisis of what artists say and what they can support. I have it myself; I live with it on a daily basis.

Works become mythic in other ways. Constantin Brancusi’s *Endless Column* (1918) in Targu-Jiu, Romania, for example, is not endless but we are asked to believe in a sense that it doesn’t end, that its spirit or idea is bigger than its physical form. Alberto Giacometti’s *Tall Figure* (1949) is a figure ravaged, which stands mute and dignified; it too has in it a sense of myth, something that one can only feel, not see. Giorgio Morandi painted jars and jugs in endless silent conversations on a modest scale, and they also fit into the category of images that become mythic because they are not explainable, images that like Giacometti’s figure stand silent and reverential. A Morandi painting becomes a vessel for meaning, a vessel for feeling. In American Indian culture they have people who are called “contrary”—they are the ones who do everything backward. Giorgio Morandi was also a

- 3 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Four Bathers*, 1910. Oil, 29 ½ x 39 ¾ in. Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal, Germany



contrary. He painted too small with not enough colors and wouldn't do exhibitions; he found exhibitions to be an intrusion on his private time. Can you imagine that?

There are, of course, many myths of the land, including myths of the Native Americans. Recently I have been teaching and working in Germany, and I feel the power of the German landscape. The land in Germany gave rise to the movement that we call romanticism, which flowered in England in a similarly opulent green landscape. In nearly all countries the land, nature, is referred to as Mother. That in itself is mythic, the mythic mother, the one we walk over and through and unfortunately build upon. But in Germany it is the Fatherland, something that strikes me as rather distinct.

I have been working in the countryside, and the first painting I made in my farm studio there was green, a healing and regenerative color. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German expressionists like Kirchner felt an incredible need to reconnect with the solace of nature. World War I was on its way, riding toward us like a dark horse, and the artists were reacting to this. Kirchner's *Four Bathers* (fig. 3) comes to us with the life force of nature. His figures are flat and there is a beautiful, humble sense of material in the German expressionist paintings; they used very simple canvas and dry paint because they wanted to be with nature, not to make something separate. There are countless paintings of people in the lakes in Bavaria, which have a magical, mystical, mythic importance for the people, and the link between the people and their landscape is profound. Even now you can find people doing the same things the people are doing in that painting, communing with other human beings and with nature. Kirchner's blue is vital, a blue you would see only in your dreams. The painting is horizontal, ambitious, open, and hopeful. Above all, the water flows through the composition, giving it energy, mystical power, and movement. The painting is a section of the bigger idyllic world. It is an extremely optimistic, emotionally expansive painting, where we as human beings immerse ourselves in the forgiving water of nature.

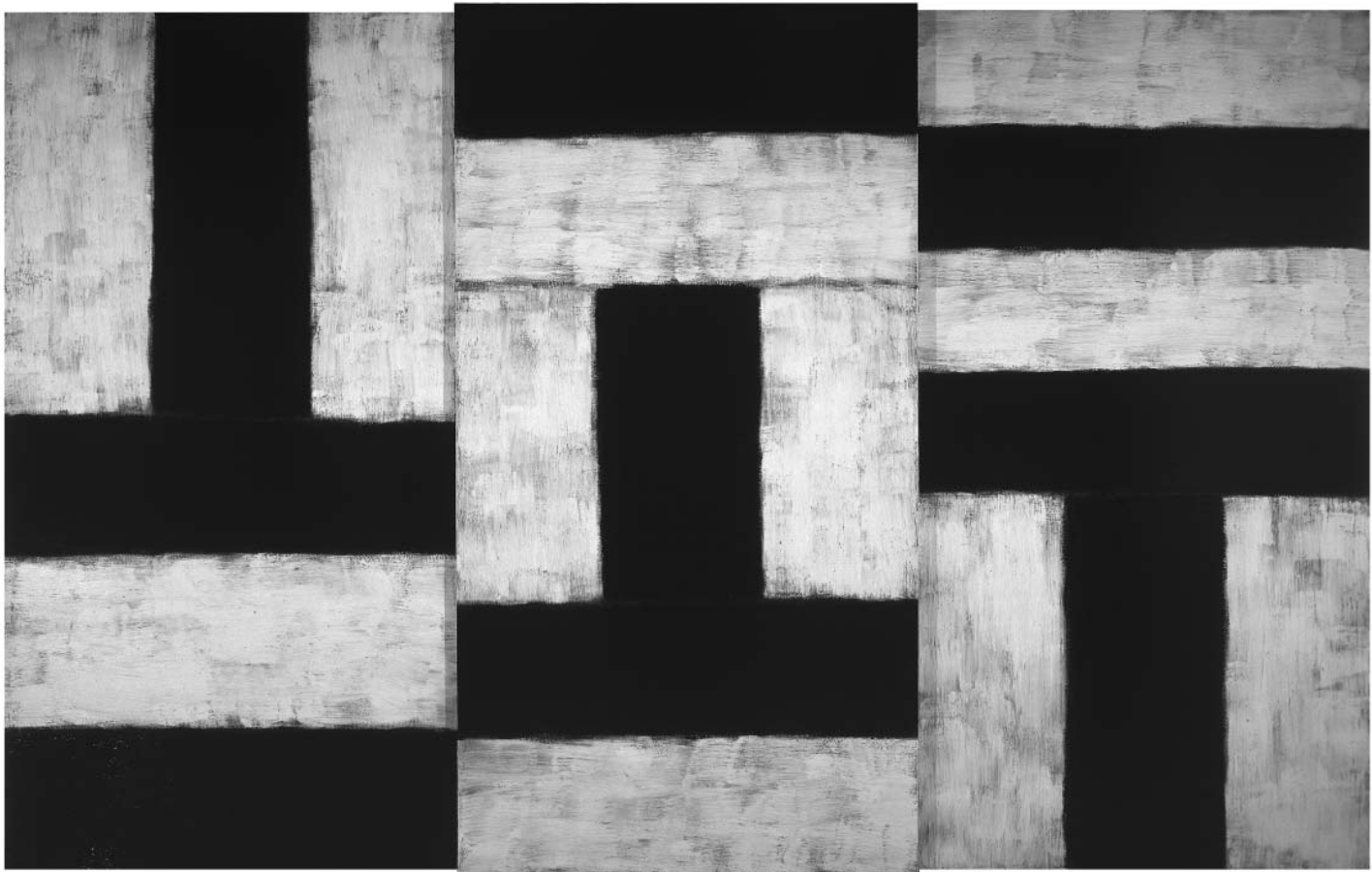
You know, a lot of people think these German expressionist paintings are all the same, but the personalities who painted them were different. Otto Mueller's compositions tend to be vertical, less open, more contained than Kirchner's. His color is extremely delicate and melancholic, the color of memory, and you might compare it with Morandi or Agnes Martin later on. He is not illustrating optimism, but only a hope, a faint dream. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff painted uncompromising pictures that release the force of nature through direct, primary color. And Emil Nolde was attracted to notions of purity. Unfortunately, he sought the approval of the Nazis, or couldn't understand why they didn't like his work—a testament to our power of self-delusion. So he went to the South Seas and identified strongly with the people there, making drawings and portraits of them. He wanted to unravel, to escape from this edifice we have built, this cultured trap that we have made for ourselves, and get to something where we are once again in union with the mythic and regenerative power of nature.

One of the best examples I can think of about making a truly personal mythology that closes off meaning instead of opening access to it is the story of the tattoo on the left arm of my student Hedwig (fig. 4), a very good painter who came to study with me in Munich because she couldn't get in anywhere else. She was in a rock band and when she arrived she was covered in tattoos. I thought seriously of not accepting her, but it has turned out great. On her arm is a picture of a bird, and the bird represents her flight from Berlin to Munich. It is not decoration, but it is also not decipherable by anybody and everybody the way the instructions in the telephone booth are. It's another example of our attempt, our need, to create personal mythology. It goes along with the freedoms of democracy where everybody becomes either king or queen of their own castle. So, if you were to see her walking along the street and you were to look at her arms and her legs and some of these symbols, you wouldn't understand what they were, but if a Masai was walking through an African village marked up, the other Masai who understand the language would know what those marks meant. And that is a big difference, for now we don't agree on anything anymore. Everything is in crisis in a sense, everything is up for debate, and it is possible that these body marks may be more permanent than any human relationship this young artist will ever have. This, I believe, is a powerful strike against the way things are going, this interest on the part of young people to mark themselves up, put things on themselves and make a commitment, the kind of commitment that you can't make on the internet, where you press a button and it's gone.

This kind of gesture, a way of doing something to yourself that you cannot undo, is body art, and there are a couple of artists around who exhibit their bodies. But people only understand the story behind Hedwig's tattoos if she



4 Hedwig's tattoo, Munich, 2004



5 Sean Scully, *Hammering*, 1980. Oil, 110 x 174 in. Private collection

explains it to them. So that means that the tattoos communicate to about ten people, and she's happy with the exclusivity of her very personal mythology.

I guess I have created my own personal mythology too. For example, I made a painting called *Precious* (frontispiece) which, like Hedwig's tattoo, involves travel, but I want my work to be more accessible. I had been talking about my leaving Ireland with my parents and how the boat got lost. I was thinking about this and I made a painting with a little insert inside. I was very small when we came over from Ireland just after the war; it was dangerous, and the boat got lost, and I remembered it, and then I made the painting. That word "precious" is based on something my mother said, that I was "precious cargo." So I made a painting within a painting—it's encased, protected by a bigger painting, a six-foot painting. So there's personal mythology right there.

In a sense my work is a question of trying to retrieve the irretrievable. My work has a lot of yearning in it. There is a structure, and the structure is being undone or subverted by a sense of emotion and of loss.

I'm kind of moving in a direction different from the way the majority in the art world is moving right now, I believe. I'm including mysticism, mystery, spirituality in my work. I believe the problems artists had at the beginning of the twentieth century, which caused such a reaction, which caused such an upsurge in the pursuit of the "primitive" and the mythic, again happened after the end of the terrors of the Second World War because of the crisis they faced, because of what they saw come to pass. The world became mechanized and this irresistible juggernaut rolled over everything and has given us the world

that we live in now. In my own response, I like to speak through the language of rhythm. Rhythm is direct, and you can feel it. If I stand in the wrong place in the wrong time in the relation to the history of art, I like that just fine.

The painting *Hammering* (fig. 5), for example, embodies a primitive form of rhythm. The colors I use are black and white, and *Hammering* is aggressively painted. In these paintings in the 1980s, I was trying to refind, retake, reconnect myself with something very particular to painting, the ability to do something that is in fact fundamental and impossible to improve on, technologically speaking. In other words, it is me with a brush and a bucket of paint in front of a canvas, and it always will be (fig. 6). The light in the painting obviously is a battle between light and dark, a battle is being hammered out on a huge format, but the white in the painting is not as white as the black in the painting is black. And that represents, I imagine, a flawed or damaged

sense or limited sense of hope. It is not a battle between light and dark, but a battle between nearly light and very dark.

Sometimes, when hard times come, I just do what I can do. After the death of my mother recently, I made a small painting called *Ivy*, the name everyone called her, which reminded me a little of Brancusi's *Kiss*. It was exhibited this spring in the cowshed of a Kunstpalace in Germany with a series called *Holly*, in fourteen parts.

When my son Paul died in 1984, I made a painting for him that was related to a kind of altarpiece format I had used for my *Maesta* (fig. 7), which is an homage to Duccio's painting in Siena, Italy, to the art of the sacred. The idea with both of my paintings is that the middle panel has body and weight and it projects out into space in a sense like a figure, like an aggressive figure, or a figure that could be moving out of the painting. *Paul* (fig. 8) has a central panel that is body size, the width of a body, in black and white vertical bands, and it's set into a kind of landscape of pink and gray on one side. And *Maesta* is taking the colors of Duccio's great *Maestà* from the fourteenth century. Siennese painters were very fond of blue and red, blue taken from the robes of the Virgin Mary. And then what I tried to do with the outside of that

6 Photo of Sean Scully, Barcelona, 2000







7 Sean Scully, *Maesta*, 1983. Oil, 96 x 120 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment © 1983 Sean Scully

one was to make it into something that was very elemental in a sense. It is devoid of color, because I believe that color is connected to living life, the natural world, and black and white are connected more to the world of idea, concept, or thought. That's how I tried to use it in that painting. *Maesta* came first, then *Paul*, also in the triptych format.

These autobiographical narratives can be points of reference that help explain how paintings came to be. Artists do derive images, colors, and ideas from a personal narrative, a memory bank, that can build or be called myth. But in truth the major goal of my art is that play between rhythm, the inner rhythm of things, and ideas. (I wrote my master's thesis on the rhythm transformed in Henri Matisse's *Dance*.) Art is not really a question of conclusions or closed opinion. It is something that keeps us alive and it becomes more vital as the world continues on its merry slide. I want mine to be more accessible than Hedwig's tattoo. That's nice if you know the story, but I'd like my work also to speak through the universal language of rhythm. Rhythm communicates in a primal way, directly and through feeling. You look at all



- 8 Sean Scully, *Paul*, 1984. Oil, 102 x 126 in. Tate Gallery, London, Presented by the Patrons of New Art through the Friends of the Tate Gallery 1986

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my paintings and you see different rhythms: it goes fast, then it goes slow in different sections of a painting, and then the color changes—from idea to body, and then back to idea or back to spirit.

*Abstract painter Sean Scully maintains studios in Munich and Barcelona as well as his main studio in New York City, and he exhibits internationally. This essay is adapted from the lecture “Mythology and Abstraction,” which he presented at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid in July 2003.*