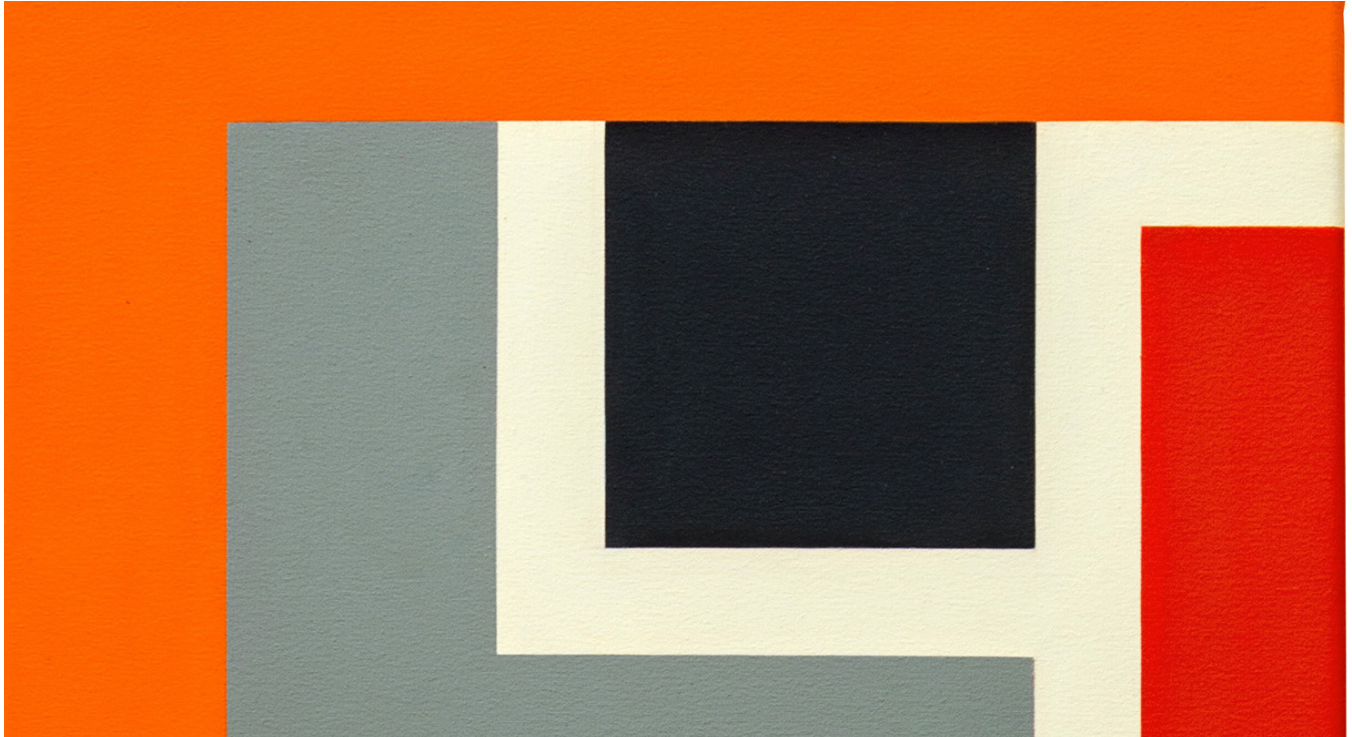


MARY WEBB

Emyr Williams, Paintings by Sean Scully and Mary Webb,
Abstract Critical, 25 June 2014



Mary Webb, UTAH XI, 2014 (detail)

Sean Scully is showing new work at Timothy Taylor Gallery. The title of the exhibition *Kind of Red* is a direct reference to Miles Davis' seminal album *Kind of Blue*, which Scully absorbed whilst making these paintings. Modal jazz, with minimal chordal movement, is intended to create a freer space and calmness in the music. Painters have always been affected by music, with Matisse's choice of *Jazz* as a title being the current high profile case in point.

Scully has tried something a little different to his usual approach, letting his slabs of brushed colour "float" over centres. The background support is aluminum, unyielding and clangingly harsh, a literalism maybe with its own references to "imagined" sounds. The paint is applied in familiar ways, with heavy, oil-loaded brushmarks. Scully can be subtle in his use of colour, but has always worked tonally in the main, with repetitions, stripes, bars, blocks, almost always on the vertical/horizontal axes. At first glance the paintings have that "big space" chic – the sombre colour, the "this is art" seriousness vibe. The ensemble of five large paintings holds you at a

distance. I paced out an optimum viewing point, which was five meters away. They need a big space: get closer and things start to fall apart. For one thing, the oil paint and aluminum pick up too much reflection and you can't see the works in their entirety. I assume this was never the point, though, as there is little to reward close inspection.

Scully says: "I wanted to set up something that was very rhythmical, so that the images were on the support but not secured to it, so that they could float around and set up these rhythms between them, up and down and from side to side, playing with the edges. Those drips gave them a kind of lift off." That first phrase seemed to me to shut down possibilities. I have always felt that for painting to become great there needs to be an inherent vulnerability to it. For example, when Pollock says "Is this a painting?", not "Is this a good painting?". It could be argued therefore that setting off with a definite intent is at odds to what painting is really about – you need not second guess it.

Artists often have a feeling or idea in their heads that they

wish to realise. Think of this as a boxing match, and the thing in the head is the perceived champion. As we proceed and start to make our work, we produce the challenger. It is our jobs to knock the champion out (if one exists at all); to have faith that the qualities this challenger brings are in fact the right way forward, to let go of preconceptions, to respond to what is actually happening in front of us. The work must take us to places we could not foresee. There can be a role for set intentions, but it must be transcended by discovery. Attempting to set up something rhythmical could thus be considered much the same as illustrating it.

I enjoyed and was intrigued to read the Sabine Tress/John Bunker conversation on this site and her mentioning Claude Viallat, an artist whose work I know quite well and one who visited my space when I participated in the Triangle Artists' Workshop when it located to Marseille for the year in the mid-nineties. Viallat invited a group of us out to his studio and it was fascinating to see his working space – a sort of beatnik studio full of draped, un-stretched canvases. The reason I mention him here is that he shares something with Scully. Viallat has been producing paintings since the sixties with the same shape in them. He uses this visual leitmotif and repeats it with colour applied on, in and around the shape. It is a deliberately neutral element that gives him the reasons he needs to use colour in expressive ways. He has a good eye for colour, though at times it's strangely like watching a John Wayne film. Stick a different hat on John Wayne and he becomes a soldier, a fireman, a gladiator and of course, a cowboy, yet it's always John Wayne. We are aware of him before we know him as the character of the cowboy or the soldier etc. In the same way we see Viallat's glyph and wonder what it's going to do next. Scully's bars of colour function in much the same way – so they can be set up to be rhythmical, or maybe they'll become exotic and hotter, or icy and bleak. In this way the work always references something external. Scully talks about the soft uncertain spaces between these bars, which are used to animate the shapes from the outside, and the brushstrokes aerate them from within. They do what he says they do. I would like to see him make ones which have much more surprise and not be so self-aware, to lose the brand Scully and venture more into the unknown... a greater truth is humming in the distance.

Not far from this blue chip world, Mary Webb is showing new, smallish, 45cm. square paintings and 3 screen prints. All the work is a response to her experiences in Utah. There is a wry irony present when one considers Utah's vast, seismic wonders and panoramas of glowing hot colour, transposed to the small subterranean space of the crypt at St Marylebone's church near Baker Street.

Much in the same way as Scully does, Webb sets up an intent; in this case, a grid is used to imply a staircase – the rock formations of The Grand Staircase Escalante to be specific – an astonishing natural feature in the American mid west. Within her paintings' grid structure she creates zones punctuated by thinner strips with 90 degree angles. Her palette is one of hot colours – oranges, reds and creams, cooled by greys and black. The paintings are sensitive musings on colour, placement and relationship, taking the essential and re-imagining it through this abstracted, almost codified approach. Each section is cleanly masked off in the familiar way.

I was struck by the screen prints; their immaculate crisp edges and surfaces were better suited, I felt, to their even-handed colour. One print was a direct version of a painting and it sharpened this point. Paint can do more than fill in, and the surface can be so important. Here we have unfamiliar geographical territories responded to in familiar artistic ones. It's a well-worn trail of an approach.

Although the classic cross-hairs weighting of modernism is the structuring device that these artists share, Webb is much more about colour than tone. Her works are at their best when black is inside the painting rather than at the edge. It is a difficult "ask" to make black work on the edge of a painting without it pressing in and creating holes inside the painting; the screenprint succeeded more in this.

The gridded zig-zag of colour is something that Kenneth Noland used so effectively in the sixties and indeed many times his work seemed to point to landscape. He once said that he felt landscape painting was closely related to abstract painting. Noland went on to produce a dazzling array of nuanced surfaces which amplified or tempered his colour (Matisse used to talk about the "play of the brush"). Noland, like Webb (though less so), has references to external colour values and spaces, which are revealed by a neutral layout, thus attempting a transposed and distilled summation or approximation of these values and spaces.

Both Webb and Scully are working out of taste, neutralizing layouts to explore the emotional, maybe lyrical, impact of colour. Whilst each show affords enjoyment, the question is: can colour do more than suggest external factors – be they rhythm, sound, landscape, localised light? Can it stake its own new territory – one as vast as a canyon, yet not one checked back by having to wear any particular hat?