

# A Political Artist

David Carrier

## *Sean Scully: Broadway Shuffle*

Seven sculptures located along Broadway between Lincoln Square and Washington Heights, New York  
July 2024 to March 2025

IMAGINE SOMEONE WHO, KNOWING THAT IN THE LATE TWENTIETH century New York was the center of the international art world, comes to look for art in Manhattan's public spaces. There are some good older works: Gaetano Russo's *Columbus Monument* (1891) at Columbus Circle; the lions (1911) by Edward Clark Potter, on the steps of the Public Library; and *Alma Mater* (1903) by Daniel Chester French at Columbia University, are well situated. I admire *Atlas* (1936-37) by Lee Lawrie and Rene Chambellan, and *Prometheus* by Paul Manship (1934), at Rockefeller Center. Including also works in lobbies visible from the street, two paintings, Frank Stella's *Salto nel Mio Sacco* (1984) at 599 Lexington Avenue and Roy Lichtenstein's *Mural with Blue Brushstroke* (1984-86), at 787 Seventh Avenue, are successful. On the other hand, Tony Smith's *Tau* (1965), at Hunter College, Lexington at 68th street, shows what can go wrong when a good artwork is badly installed. Little convincing contemporary public art is found in this visually busy environment. We lack an iconography apart, of course, from advertising imagery.

Sean Scully always deals with basics. That is his great strength—it's why his art speaks to so many people in diverse cultures, in America and Europe, but also in China and Korea. His classic 1980s stripe paintings mimic the rhythms omnipresent in the modern city and in blues music, abstractly presenting these basic structures. And then in the 1990s, he painted abstracted walls of light. More recently, he has done figurative images showing his son and wife playing at the seashore. And for some years, he has also been making sculptures. The early *Crann Saoirse (Wall of Light)* (2003), which is in Ireland, is a thirty-meter-long wall of black and white stone cubes, set in a checkered board pattern, a three-dimensional version of the walls of light. And now he's making stacking sculptures, "stacks of blocks that are made of objects," as he says. "They're an accumulation of objects." *Broadway Shuffle*, the first exhibition in the United States to focus exclusively on his sculpture, consists of seven of these works, which are were displayed along Broadway, on the west side of Manhattan from July 2024 to March 2025:



Installation view of *Sean Scully's Broadway Shuffle*, a public art commission presented by the Broadway Mall Association. On view July 2024 – March 2025. Photography by Tom Barratt.

Depicted: 48 (2024) at Broadway and 64th Street (Dante Park).  
Aluminum and automotive paint, 20 ft x 74 in. x 74 in.



*Shot Through* (2019) at Broadway and 157th Street (Ilka Tanya Payán Park).  
Corten steel, 12 x 6 x 6 ft. Photo: Hreedoy Khandakar.



*Shadow Stack* (2019) at Broadway and 167th Street (Mitchel Square).  
Corten steel, 14.7 x 8.2 x 8.5 ft.; Photo: Hreedoy Khandakar.



Installation view of *Sean Scully's Broadway Shuffle*, a public art commission presented by the Broadway Mall Association. On view July 2024 – March 2025. Photography by Tom Barratt.

Depicted: *Stack Blues (In honor of Arthur Danto)* (2018), at Broadway and 117th Street. Aluminum and automotive paint, 9 x 4 x 4 ft.

The seven works are *48* (at 64th St.), *Sleeper Stack 2* (at 72nd St.), *Silver Brown Tower* (at 79th St.), *Composite Grey Silver* (at 103rd St.), *Stack Blues* (In honor of Arthur Danto) (at 117th St.), *Shot Through* (at 157th St.), and *Shadow Stack* (at 167th St.)

These sculptures are varied. *Sleeper Stack 2* is made from heavy, rough wooden elements set near the entrance to the subway. *Stack Blues* is more refined looking, metal painted blue. And *Shot Through*, perhaps a tribute to the rough street life uptown, has a large hole cut all the way through. What could be simpler than placing one object on top of another? (Think of Samuel Beckett's accounts of obsessive manipulation.) But just as using urban rhythms or light on walls allows him to construct very varied paintings, so the bare activity of stacking yields very diverse sculptures.

Scully's title is simple: "I called my project 'Shuffle' after a dance, in the same way that Mondrian, another geometric immigrant, called his painting 'Boogie Woogie.'" It's instructive to make your way up Broadway, seeing how these Scullys are different as the neighborhoods change. At Lincoln Center, is the Metropolitan Opera House, and upscale restaurants catering to operagoers. Then when you get to 116th Street, you walk past Columbia University. Finally, all the way uptown, most of the signs are in Spanish, in a poorer neighborhood.

When he was a young, desperately poor Irish immigrant in London, Scully did manual labor. "I was loading huge vans with flattened cardboard boxes: transforming an empty negative space into a crowded negative space . . . The idea of stacking is obsessively interesting to me." Few artists, he notes, have his early experience of harsh physical labor. Unlike some public sculptures, Scully's stacks don't call a lot of attention to themselves. Like the brutal work required to maintain our cities, they are present but not always noticed. Banal industrial products, omnipresent in our cities, are transformed into refined works of art. By drawing attention to the aesthetics of stacking, Scully gives real recognition to the dignity of physical labor. He thus is a political artist. a

## Notes

On public art in Manhattan, see Jean Parker Phifer and Francis Dzikowski, *Public Art. New York* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000). The quotations are drawn from *Abstract Painting, Art History and Politics. Sean Scully and David Carrier in Conversation* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2021).