

MNUCHIN GALLERY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Guston/Morandi/Scully



Sean Scully, *Robe Diptych 1*, 2019. Oil on aluminum, 85 × 150 inches. © Sean Scully. Photo: Elizabeth Bernstein.

By Tom McGlynn

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The humble brushstroke is never a bad place to begin when thinking on the grander significance with which it can be deployed. The curatorial correlation of these three painters offers an opportunity to make relative judgements about how each came to their individual conclusions on painterly touch. Giorgio Morandi maintained throughout his career an exquisitely modest gesture and scale. Philip Guston's brushmarks tend toward expressive aggregation and disaggregation. Sean Scully has well established his large-scale and constructively compact "walls" of brushstrokes, typically oriented in counterpoised cardinal directions and which present like proxy heraldic devices: as boldly woven as Gaelic tartans. Further extrapolating from such diverse painterly temperaments the following assumptions are observed: Morandi's quietest gestures instantiate a withdrawal from the world, as does his subject of private domestic accumulation; Guston sublimated his earlier figurative subjects of childish aggression, social injustice and war into abstract accretions of clashing and harmonizing colors in countervailing "battles" across his canvases; the mnemonic rhyme and loping meter Scully composes with his brushstroke patterns alternatively resist and succumb to a sublime type of reason. What this show suggests then is not

a grand unifying narrative of generational or ideational consistency but a deeper consideration of each individual's expression via their tactical differences.

Morandi is the painter most likely to attempt to mitigate the appearance of such difference in his modest arrangements. Five of his indelible "Natura Morta" compositions here, ranging from 1946 to 1959, depict groupings of small boxes, vases, and other anonymous containers closely packed in diminutive canvases, none larger than 11 by 17 inches. Yet pictorial tension is never quite resolved, neither through closely toned hues or peculiar formal arrangements. It's worth speculating that the artist's (reportedly ambiguous) relation to the political repressions of Mussolini's Italy may have taken up some residual psychic retreat in these loudly quietist works. *Natura Morta* (1948) is bracketed by two of Scully's recent sculptural pieces, *Small Cubed 2* and *Small Cubed 7* (both 2021), each fabricated of a variety of chiseled marble and volcanic rock. An obvious formal correlation arises between these densely packed and puzzle-like sculptures and Morandi's crowded tabletops. More interesting, though, is the phenomenal potential energy achieved between the three artworks. The interaction is a good example of where the show's curator, Sukanya Rajaratnam, creates the opportunity for both direct and indirect formal correlation.



Sean Scully, *Wall Landline High Atlas*, 2022. Oil on aluminum, 85 × 75 inches. © Sean Scully. Photo: Elizabeth Bernstein.

Scully has gotten the benefit of a larger quantity of works compared with the other two artists. The sheer number and relative scale of his works dominate the grouping. A selection of five recent "Wall" works (2021-22) are distributed throughout the exhibition making for a salient authorial imprimatur, as are improvisations on that theme, such as the mural-sized, oil on aluminum, *Robe Diptych I* (2019). While his "wall" works form the bedrock of his reputation, to his credit Scully has never fully rested against the fact. And his willingness to cannibalize his signature style, as seen in *Wall Landline High Atlas* (2022), evince a restless resistance to any easy bounds, as do his recent sculptural forays. This painting has a smaller "wall" work inscribed physically with its own borders. There is something tactfully parodic in such a self-referential

gesture but also cosmically fatalistic—a very Irish combination of a gratuitous will to propound upon (and graciously surrender to) one's fate.

Enter Guston with his existential ponderings and agonistic struggles transmuted into lyrical compositions. His temperament may be the most literary of the three, as the technical function of

narrative never seems too far from his painterly approach. That is, the way Guston generally assembled his paintings, even in their most abstract form, tended toward an epic introduction, development and (tentative) resolution. His mid-career abstractions were never completely all over compositions as Pollock's were. The most notable fissure of artistic temperaments in the show occurs between the stubbornly immediate paintings of Morandi and Scully and the discursive digressions of Guston whose *Branch* (1956–58) is a perfect example of how the artist sets a scene with marionette-like formal “characters” inside his canvas proscenium. *The Mirror* (1957) is another example of how the artist could articulately suspend his luscious reds, pinks, and blues within a larger compositional soliloquy. Underneath all his gestural sound and fury Guston maintained a solid core of classical contrapuntal tension, coalesced from his Italian influences of Piero Della Francesca and Giotto. As such he shares much with the tense formal equilibrium that both Morandi and Scully have made central to their work.



Philip Guston, *Branch*, 1956-58. Oil on canvas, 71 7/8 × 76 inches. © The Estate of Philip Guston, courtesy of Hauser and Wirth. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

In his erudite catalogue essay for the exhibit, Phong Bui importantly points to how Guston's “active resistance to a visible framework” via “reciprocal responses between the artist and his surroundings” helped to ground the artist's sensibility in its dynamic evolution, a point that Guston ultimately acted out in his introduction of the radically resistant “stumblebum” figuration of his late career. The multiple formal reciprocities evident between the three artists in this exhibition could be used to calcify immemorial frameworks, or to more hopefully resist such immutable assumptions. A concordance of universal forms, in other words, doesn't need to be framed within a construct of Universal Form.