



Regina Scully: *Origin of Dreams*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 39" high.

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# *Regina Scully & Japonisme*

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BY TERRINGTON CALAS

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REGINA SCULLY/JAPANESE LANDSCAPE:  
INNER JOURNEYS  
New Orleans Museum of Art

REGINA SCULLY: WORKS ON PAPER  
Octavia Art Gallery  
New Orleans, LA

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“. . . Japonisme brought to Europe a new sense of color, a new decorative system, and . . . a poetic imagination which never existed even in the most perfect medieval or Renaissance pieces.” (Edmond de Goncourt, Journal, April 1884)

REGINA SCULLY’S FORTE is her sovereign brushstroke. It steers her art — and fairly epitomizes it. At first glance, the method seems freewheeling: all gesture and dash and images of clotted incident. But at core, there is a veiled rigor or, at least, a strategy beneath the teeming surfaces. And, to be sure, a pondered goal. This is paint-handling of some fierceness. It feels resolute. Thus, in a work like *Origin of Dreams* (2017), you perceive far more than the apparent wildfire of markings and detached planes. Like all of Scully’s work, the painting is an astute variant of landscape abstraction. It flirts with the anti-syntax of old-line “pure painting,” but, in fact, keenly pursues structure. In it, every shape is an emphatic shape. Briskly uttered contours and contrasts are everywhere. In passage after passage, Scully takes abstract motifs and

toughens them, vivifies them, renders them with the cogency of figuration.

And notably, she retains the landscape subject — a constantly insinuated presence. What might be a zone of slack geometries assumes the “thereness” of a hill or a riverbank. A bravura swipe becomes a dense foliage mass. Such leaps from technique to experience are, in the main, the chief pleasure in a piece like this. But Scully’s singular way is to put pleasure in the very vehicle of that leap: the brushstroke itself. It seems intended to gratify on its own. It suggests a fresh take on the traditional “artist’s touch.” You come away with a sense of roused nature, but equally with a sense of galvanizing technique. And it provides a lucidity rather wanting in much contemporary painting.

The enlivening effect of Scully’s technique is bolstered, in part, by a distinctive linearity. A pronounced edge and an implied scoring are persistent in everything she does. The paintings look graphic — but not entirely and not predictably. There is nothing of the mechanical character you might expect, nothing of the rigidity. Her line searches. It has the kind of grace and flow you see in Japanese prints and paintings. And seldom is any graphic approach so protean as this — or so versatile. Scully seems capable of managing every painterly trope — from staccato jottings to calligraphic whirls to buttery swaths — all of them within a single, chaos-risking composition. And throughout, somehow, the linear quality asserts itself, captivates.



Regina Scully: *Delos*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of John Abajian and Scott Simmons.

An exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art — “Regina Scully / Japanese Landscape: Inner Journeys” — sought to underscore this, as well as other analogues to Japanese painting, specifically to Edo-period works in the museum’s fine Asian art collection. And those analogues are fairly evident: the stylized landscape forms, often clustered, often lyrically suspended; the shallow, “rising perspective” and; frequently, a blanketing Edenic tenor — these and her persistent, marshaling line.

Together, all of these qualities declare the keynote of Scully’s art, which is her abiding engrossment in nature. And significantly, her attitude here is complex. This may be the most intriguing revelation in the NOMA show. She obviously knows — and intimates — the contingencies we face when trying to grasp today’s natural environment. You see it in her range. At one moment, the posture indeed parallels that of much Edo landscape painting. She submits nature as a magical, poeticized sanctuary and, perhaps, with an air of the spiritual — not unlike a Nanga School work such as So Aiseki’s *Shadows of the Setting Sun*. At other moments, however, her images radiate a discernible air of foreboding. And, in a few instances, such as the powerful *Navigation 4* (2012), nature feels positively racked. Such shifting viewpoints suggest a wider purpose than the patent one of eloquent style. You sense Scully reaching beyond the racy line, beyond the

contrarian syntax. Her paintings, it would seem, evince a serious reflection on the realities of the environment in our time.

SCULLY’S MORE POETICIZED scenes are the natural entry to her oeuvre — if only because of their conspicuous beauty. They were stand-outs in the NOMA show, and similar works on paper dominated a handsome concurrent display at the Octavia Art Gallery.

They are reveries. In paintings like *Aurora* and *Delos*, though nominally abstract, you perceive a sojourn in some distant, untroubled land — a land where nature, sumptuously re-envisioned, holds sway; and where its pleasures seem all-embracing. Here, nature is something relished and inviolable. Scully conveys this chiefly with alluring surfaces — with her fluent, palpable brushwork; with insouciant composition, and, most notably, with the amiable color of a Watteau. And that color almost surfeits. It fairly declares pleasure. These pictures employ an aesthetic practice rarely warranted today: delectation. And they employ it in the service of ethical longing.

*Aurora* is a landscape, or rather a landscape intellection; it slyly evokes the felt presence of nature and, simultaneously, advances a paradisiacal tenor. Structurally, spatially, the painting feels defiant, but somehow also contained. It spreads and spreads



Regina Scully: *Navigation 4*, 2010. Acrylic on panel.

— a scatter of suavely stylized shapes that hint at vegetation and languid waters, all of it in pastoral greens and muted blue. The whole is serenity. A unique Arcadia. Scully fills the eye with easeful painterly effects. Her handling, for example, has a dance-like grace that develops into vigorous slashes. You see line and mass in what amounts to a genial skirmish. Shapes that denote natural forms — forests, lakes — are repeatedly intersected, or vaguely impeded, by undulant lines. A pattern emerges, implying an overall rhythm. And it's constant. The result is a discreetly sensuous surface. You think of the sensuousness of Claude Monet's *Nymphéas*, his final water garden paintings: those radical expanses of eddying, adagio strokes. The images approached abstraction but, at the same time, imparted an idyllic temper.

*Delos* yields a similar impression — signifying a domain of the splendidly implausible. In this case, however, Scully exalts the dream. There is now a certain lushness in her treatment, a fluidity, something akin to bravura technique, but hardly so florid. Again, cool color suffuses the field, but it is tonally richer, with a full range of lights and darks, mostly within a single hue. The image is a fête of blues and blue-greens — complex, yet lyrical, altogether frictionless. It intimates melodic space.

The rarefied aura in this work is heightened still further by specific painted details. These are would-be kitsch emblems that usually signify a romanticized landscape. Scully shrewdly modifies them, deleting their hoariness. And they become cogent metaphors. What you see are breezily eloquent pictographs — actually deft sketches that suggest far-off hills and meandering streams, sylvan idylls and ships and, it appears, temple architecture. Despite Scully's cursory-looking manner, these images convince. Together, they project an aura of idealized nature. And

they conjure a distant antecedent: the Baroque era's figment of classical Rome and the cultural bliss it implied. That world of perpetual springtime and late afternoons and utter concord is grasped and lyricized here. In *Delos*, Scully's Eden feels like an abstract Poussin.

THE AFFINITY BETWEEN Scully's work and Japanese painting has been obvious for some time. It fascinates chiefly because it appears to be instinctual, or perhaps subliminal. Until very recently, she had made no considered study of Asian art. Lisa Rotondo McCord, the curator who organized the NOMA exhibition, pointed this out. It does seem probable, however, given Scully's sophisticated education, that the Cubist-New York School axis would have been known to her. That historical phenomenon planted Japanese spatial devices and Japanese linearity onto the very surface of Abstract Expressionism. The influence is unmistakable in certain early Ab-Ex masters, to wit: Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning. And especially in de Kooning's two greatest works: *Attic* (1949) and *Excavation* (1950). This latter piece, in fact, bears some similarity to Scully's own series of the same title. It also relates to her splendid *Passage* (2012), a sweep of pulsing oranges — that notoriously vicious hue made palatable — with judiciously inserted blues and with hints of geological formations that easily evoke the de Kooning. Scully's *Passage* also echoes the famous "all-overness" that the Ab-Exers inherited from the Japanese.

Most often, however, Scully's art feels closer to the Japanese originals — closer to the dreamy, unfolding pastoral forms in Edo landscape. And interestingly, when you look at her paintings, the seminal 19th century moment of Japanese influence comes to mind. Her images possess the flavor of that East-West conflation.



Regina Scully: *Mindscape 5*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas, 40" high.

In the *Mindscape* series, and perhaps even more in the *Inner Journeys* at Octavia Art Gallery, her shapes swim and float and whirl, and they ornament their formats as if they were scrolls or folding screens. Mainly, they deliver the notion of garden, the very notion that suffused the first years of Japanese fervor in Western art. Indeed, that notion became Monet's focus. And he seems a crucial Scully forebear, an earlier quasi-abstractivist who was, in the period parlance, "Japan-persuaded." Scully's *Inner Journey 4* and *Mindscape 5* would be comfortably at home in a setting with *Les Nymphéas*.

IT MAY SEEM TODAY that the Japanese impact on modernism has been banalized by art history. But that impact was pivotal.

And it reached far.

Monet, in 1867, visited the first-ever Japanese pavilion at the Paris *Exposition Universelle*. He was staggered. There, in a display of art objects and artifacts, was the unique brilliance of a little-known culture. It seized his imagination and altered his vision utterly. He was hardly alone. *Japonisme* soon swept Europe. And from that moment, through the early 20th century, every vanguard artist was affected. Chief among them: Whistler, Manet, Van Gogh, Picasso.

After some years, Monet's own work surrendered completely. What had been his legendary, obsessive naturalism progressed into an art fashioned from — it might seem — pure style. The results were *Les Nymphéas*. To look at them is to see nature



Regina Scully: *Inner Journey 4*, 2017. Acrylic on paper, 22.5" high. Courtesy Octavia Art Gallery.

re-cast as a tapestry, a pictorial invention of nuanced color and abstracted motifs. But that artifice was, very possibly, the environment spiritualized — signaling a rapt absorption in nature. It was something not unlike the spiritualized tone in Edo-period landscape painting. And the effect was equally transporting. Monet had, in essence, created a metaphorical Eden. The pictures were a genuflection before the Japanese aesthetic.

That aesthetic, as I say, reached far. Largely, it did so in formal terms. The early moderns, at the outset, were fascinated by the “primitive” take on pictorial principles. What struck them were the extraordinary results from simple, direct methods — especially in the Japanese treatment of space. Paintings and prints were rendered in casual, spreading asymmetries. And, alarmingly, they possessed an almost heraldic flatness, a seeming anti-perspective — and, in effect, the refutation of a venerable Western tradition. Later, these novel constructs would become modernist conventions. As noted, American Abstract Expressionism adopted them fully. And ultimately, they would touch every subsequent mode of abstract painting.

Scully’s mode is no exception. There is no question that, formally, she falls in line with the long American tradition of gestural color abstraction — but only in trace measures. The fundamental elements are there — the compressed space; the energized, apparently unending terrain. But she differs. There is her exuberant stylizing of form, and her line — her singular “Japanese line.” In American abstraction, such a thing is far from common. We saw a distant counterpart in Mark Tobey’s “white writing” — a free calligraphic style rooted in Eastern mysticism; and, at se-

lect moments, it is also present in Richard Diebenkorn’s works on paper. For Tobey, despite the Asian influence, linearity was part of a purist interest in light and spatial ambiguities. His line was ceaselessly dynamic, leading to the very American frenzied tone in Jackson Pollock. That tone seems foreign to Scully’s sensibility. By contrast, her line is balletic: all grace and delicacy and a sly underpinning of force. This is scarcely part of the American abstract art legacy.

FROM WHAT WE SEE, Scully managed to bypass the sway of late-modernist abstraction and, instead, fastened directly onto one of its sources — unwittingly. The consequence is this: she has created her own private Japonisme. And it delivers. What hits the eye, no doubt, are the formal details. But after a time, you see her kinship to the other side of the Asian aesthetic — the reverence of nature.

As in the Edo landscapes on view at NOMA, as in the profoundest early modern offshoots of Japonisme, Scully’s technical control is a decided affair. And it is about surface beauty and visual impact — the loveliness of a brushstroke, the cleverness of a motif, the savoriness of a color. But all this exists to pull you into a unique meditation on nature. Her vacillations tell it all. On the one hand, she creates paradises. We need them, as the poet says — even fictive ones — in troubled times. But she also creates lands of uncertainty, lands of simultaneous desolation and the resonance of hope. Look again at *Origin of Dreams*. □