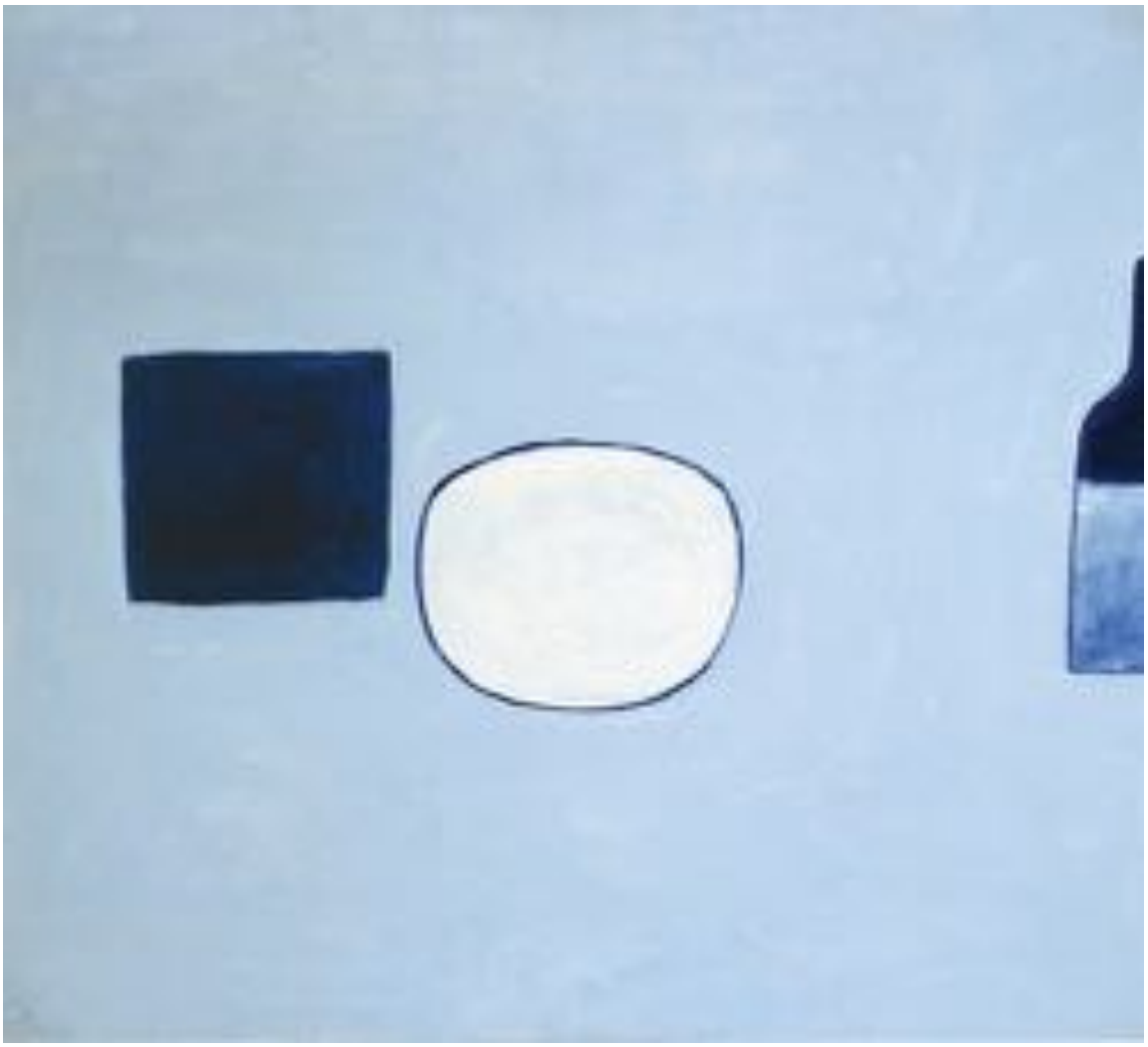
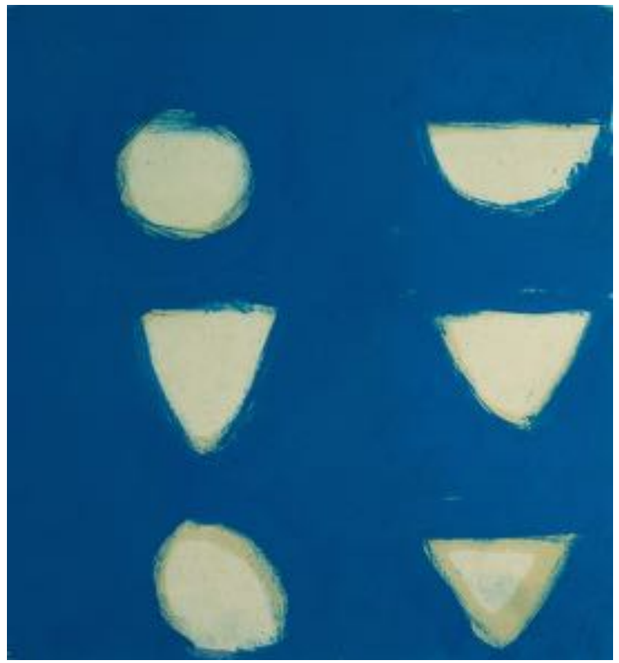


WILLIAM SCOTT

PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

FIFTIES THROUGH EIGHTIES



WILLIAM SCOTT

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October 16 - December 21, 2019

Anita Rogers Gallery

SoHo, New York

WILLIAM SCOTT - PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS
FIFTIES THROUGH EIGHTIES

2019

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EXHIBITION
OCTOBER 16 - DECEMBER 21, 2019

FRONT COVER: *Poem for a Jug, No. 21*. 1980. Oil on canvas. 32" x 36"

INSIDE COVER: *Blue Message*. 1972. Oil on paper. 9.25" x 9"

RIGHT: Portrait of William Scott (on left) with Mark Rothko (on right) at the Scott home in England. 1959. Photo by James Scott.
©Copyright James Scott.

BACK COVER: *Black, Yellow and White Composition*. 1953. Oil on canvas. 40" x 50"

Still Life Framed, Hallatrow studio, 1956. Photo: William Scott

INDEFINABLE

David Anfam
2019

Having grown close to William Scott's art over the years, this essay starts on a personal note.[1] A decade ago I visited Brazil to research a curatorial project on the postwar painters in that country who were, and still are, deeply engaged with color. Viewing diverse canvases at the University of São Paulo's Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC), I suddenly encountered one that came as both a surprise and a reassurance. It was by William Scott. A surprise because for a moment I hardly expected to see a pictorial emissary, so to speak, from an artist who was born and lived some 6,000 miles away in another global hemisphere. After all, few nations are more removed from each other in distance and culture than Brazil and Scotland. A reassurance because it immediately brought to mind Scott's historic global reach and reputation. Reassuring too because color played a powerful role in his painterly vision. In a sense, therefore, Scott had serendipitously found a second home with a lineage of distinguished painters stretching from the now celebrated Alfredo Volpi to the present, albeit all utterly different from him in style and outlook. Such details suggest that Scott remains hard to "place" and, I would argue, the better for it.

Being something of a maverick who seems to fit or have affinities everywhere and, ultimately, nowhere has nevertheless proven a mixed blessing for Scott's critical fortunes. On the one hand, it bespoke an uncompromising creative integrity: Scott was nothing if not always his own man. Indeed, his exacting honesty comes across in an oft-quoted statement: "I was brought up in a grey world, an austere world: the garden I knew was a cemetery and we had no fine furniture. The objects I painted were the symbols of the life I knew best."[2] The wonder is that from this bleak, hardscrabble Northern Ireland background Scott managed to eventually conjure images of large, glowing amplitude – exemplified by *Blue, Grey, Blue* (1960), *Ochre Theme* (1978) and their like. On the other hand, artists who feel hard to categorize can slip more easily from public attention than those who cling to a movement or label. Scott is no exception. As such, he stands worthy of being reintroduced to a new generation – an audience probably less familiar with his achievements than they should be.

Make no mistake, Scott's enduring status and recognition in the long term rests beyond doubt. The painting *April 3rd* (1961) at MAC proves that Scott merited inclusion in the sixth São Paulo Bienal (1961) – from which it was acquired – as well as the award of the Sanbra (International Critics) Purchase Prize. Furthermore, *Black, Yellow and White Composition* (1953) attests to Scott's having already been chosen eight years before for the second Bienal, where it was displayed with eleven others. Moving further afield, that year director James Johnson Sweeney had the acumen to exhibit and purchase a Scott for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

In fact, Sweeney went so far as to quip that Britain at last had a painter (!), a view later seconded in spades by *The New York Times*'s art critic Hilton Kramer. At the same time, the artist met the dealer Martha Jackson. At her New York gallery Scott would show regularly from 1954 to 1979, establishing without doubt his transatlantic credentials.

During that first New York trip – Scott had stopped there at the last minute on his return from teaching in Alberta – he also met Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, becoming the first major British painter to do so. Rothko, highly discerning in his likes and dislikes, reciprocated the friendship in 1959 by staying with the Scotts in Somerset, England, en route to Cornwall. By then, Scott had represented Britain at the twenty-ninth Venice Biennale and would subsequently be made a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) as well as a Royal Academician. Today his works are in public collections as geographically widespread as New York's MoMA, the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, and other notable museums in Germany, Italy, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Four of his paintings were even owned by no less a luminary than the savvy pop star David Bowie. For a person coming from the humblest roots (his father was a house painter and sign writer who met a tragic death in a fire in 1927), it represents an impressive track record. It would be unnecessary to enumerate these facts had Scott not receded from art history's proverbial limelight.[3] Using myself as a kind of litmus paper, I often drop names in sundry art world circles, especially in the United States, in order to surreptitiously test how well known or otherwise they might be. On more than one occasion mentioning "William Scott" has drawn a blank, even with relatively knowledgeable people, that speaks volumes. Now more than ever is the watershed when the situation deserves to change, recuperating Scott's storied past.

Here, the uncompromising nature of the art may well be responsible for how Scott has swung in and out of view. Its formal vocabulary has a sparseness that, like many a single-minded idiom, at once fascinates and tests our visual stamina. At first glance Scott's compositions might look straightforward, yet they hide complexities (shades of Rothko, who once wrote about "the simple expression of the complex thought"). As Scott himself put it with regard to a picture from the early 1950s: "It is probably one of the first instances when I make a double image, in that the picture has even less meaning than it had before as a number of objects coming together. These objects now take on another meaning, which is obscure, and I don't personally like to point it out."[4] In Freudian parlance, the word that springs to mind for this strangeness and other tantalizing expressive qualities is "overdetermined". Simply said, overdetermination happens when multiple factors cause something that could have been due to any one of them alone. In turn, multiplicity lurks behind the apparently uncomplicated, planar unity that emanates from Scott's tableaux. Nor is mentioning Sigmund Freud fortuitous.

These rectangular shapes, slender trails, curves, ragged or smooth circles, layers, and so forth hold more than meets the eye. To be sure, at one level they signify and/or derive from table tops, pots, pans, cups, green beans, pears and fish. But remember that Scott was no cook let alone a gastronome. So, to recall his hint, the objects assume another "obscure" meaning that he did not care to state. Close scrutiny of the oeuvre, including Scott's poems such as those in the book *Private Suite or Dubious Love* (1970), reveals a strong, if largely sublimated erotic impulse in play (note also that associating fruit and other foodstuffs with sexuality is as ancient as the biblical apple that led to the Fall).[5] Hence the schematic clefts in the pigment (rendered initially to be tactile and not facile), the bulbous outlines, the open vessels, protruding pipes, stiff beans and upturned fish perhaps have a less innocent dimension than the observer might assume outright. However, neither do they just perform as mere Freudian sex symbols. On the contrary, other layers – literal and metaphoric – subtend Scott's surfaces.

Firstly, Scott in the main painted from memory, not observation. His perceptual process sought a "time lapse, 'a waiting time'" to take effect.[6] This temporal delay induces abstraction and simplification, evoking in particular the importance of memory in nineteenth-century Symbolist art and literature. In contrast, other traits look to link Scott with American Abstract Expressionism. Among them is the rough facture that he employed during the 1950s and early 1960s, the palette by turns earthy (parallel to, say, Robert Motherwell's penchant for ochers and umber) and ablaze with blue or gold tones (need one summon Rothko's ghost?) alongside the archaic and cartographic aspect to various paintings.

But the chronology demonstrates that the Abstract Expressionist idea is false, not to mention that Scott returned from the 1953 American trip concluding that it had reinforced his sense of being a European artist.[7] Furthermore, insofar as Scott worked on maps while in the Royal Engineers during the Second World War it undercuts attributing the cartographic element to a knowledge of early Motherwell collages, Adolph Gottlieb's schematic pictographs and David Smith's aerial perspectives.[8] As for the primitivist aura, Scott declared that "the pictures which looked most like mine were painted on walls a thousand years ago."[9] His visit to Lascaux in 1955 lends credence to this sentiment. Likewise the graphic minimalism, clarity and crisp contours increasingly evident in the 1970s and early 1980s stem not from American Hard Edge and Color Field painting. Instead, they echo with characteristics that commentators have elsewhere attributed to "late" style in art and music, replete with a hint of gauche capriciousness. To quote the literary scholar Edward Said, "Late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present."[10] Said's *aperçu* offers an excellent description for Scott's idiosyncratic mix of modernity, ancient overtones and sheer self-sufficiency. Without knowing its date, a charcoal drawing such as *Abstracted* (1963) – abbreviated, raw yet touched by a curious grace – looks simultaneously as fresh as anything by a contemporary hand and almost as though it had sprung from the Paleolithic Lascaux and Altamira caves. We have come full circle to the difficulty of "placing" Scott in art history.

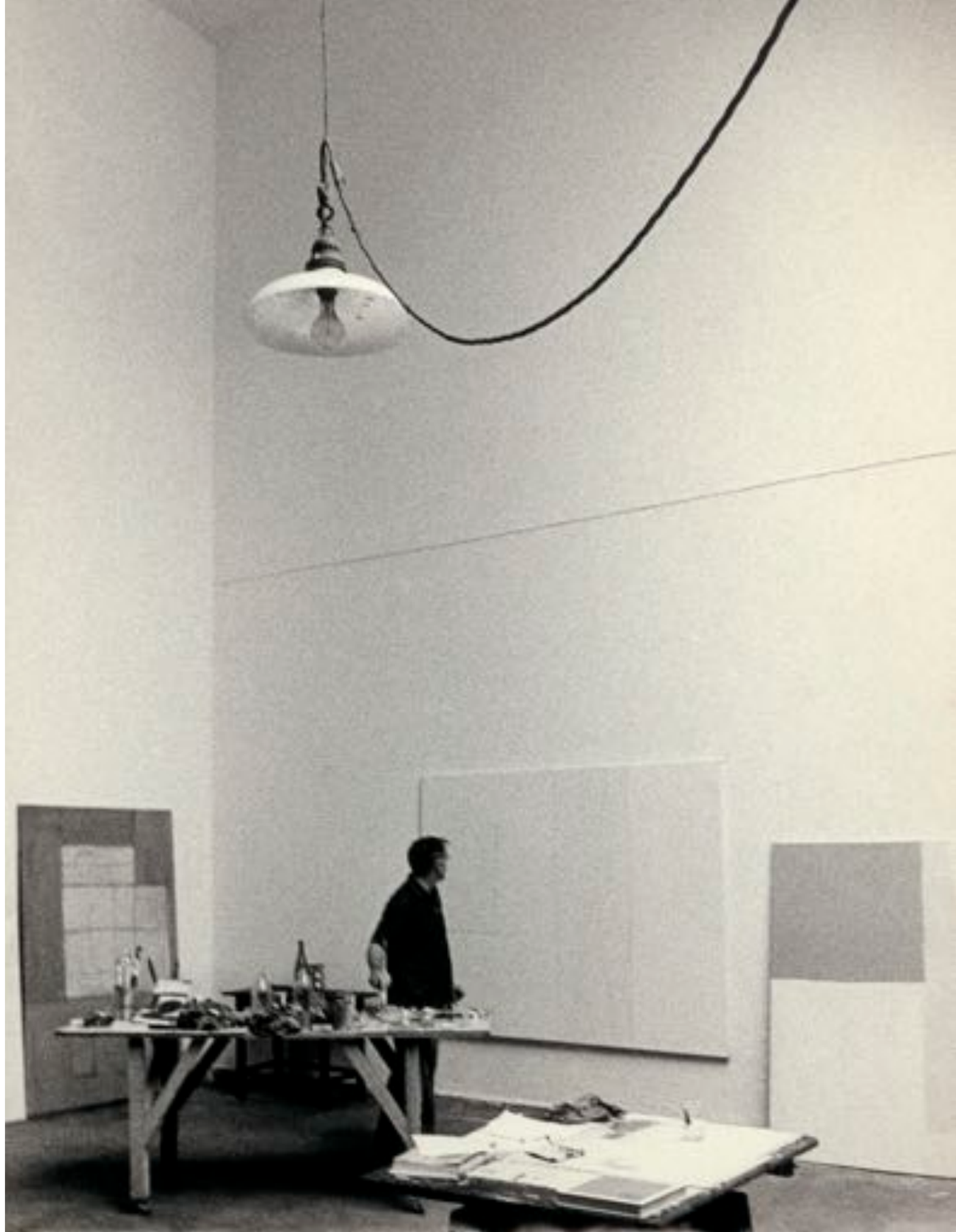
Or maybe the truth is that Scott never wished to be "placed", instead preferring to go his own timeless way – a Scotsman in Ulster and England, a European in America and an abstractionist in love with figurative double meanings wherein sensuality and sublimation rub shoulders. If so, it helps explain perhaps the most striking feature about his art. In short, "what matters to me in a picture", he observed, "is the

'indefinable'."[11] The latter also happens to be an attribute of beauty, which ever "thrives on keeping quiet and never explains itself."[12] What need is there for Scott's works to explain themselves too? None. Since their beauty – whether plain, tough, richly chromatic and luminous or serenely close to monochrome – is indefinable.

My particular thanks to Robert and James Scott, Sarah Whitfield, Anita Rogers, Elizabeth Thompson and the Brazilian color painter Marco G. Giannotti.

[1] It is also concise because I do not care to recycle. for further thoughts, see David Anfam, *William Scott* (New York: McCaffrey Fine Art, 2010).
[2] Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory* (London: A. Tirani, 1954), p.37.
[3] The starting-point for scholarship is Sarah Whitfield and Lucy Inglis, *William Scott: Catalogue Raisonné of Oil Paintings* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013), which documents 1,136 works. The best monograph is Norbert Lynton, William Scott (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004).
[4] Alan Bowness, ed., *William Scott: Paintings* (London: Lund Humphries, 1964), p.8.
[5] The *locus classicus* for a Freudian reading of the modern still-life is Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne" (1968), in ibid., *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries. Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), pp.1-38.
[6] *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), p.75.
[7] Bowness 1964, p.9.
[8] Rather than Abstract Expressionism, a seascape done in 1939 by Scott owes its flatness to the Cornish self-taught "naïve" artist Alfred Wallis. See Lynton 2004, pp.40-41.
[9] Alloway 1954, p.37.
[10] Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p.24. See also *Willem de Kooning: The Late Paintings, The 1980s* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995).
[11] Alloway 1954, p.x.
[12] Denis Donoghue, *Speaking of Beauty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p.1.

Opposite: William Scott in his studio at the Kunstakademie, Berlin in 1964. In the background can be seen *Abstract (Blue East)* (page 20)
Photo: Max Jacoby
Brüder Hartmann, Berlin © Presse und informationsamt de landes Berlin gessamthestellung



WILLIAM SCOTT (1913-1989)

William Scott CBE, RA, acclaimed British artist of the Post-war generation was, together with Peter Lanyon and Patrick Heron, considered one of the giants of the Modernist movement in the UK. Patrick Heron, who also doubled as 'one of the finest art critics of the century', wrote perceptively of Scott's work. 'It is the sensation of space and depth in a painted flatness,' he explained in 1953, 'that inspires much contemporary painting. Scott is a brilliant exponent of it.'

After visiting a Scott show in London in 1953, James Johnson Sweeney, then director of the Guggenheim, wrote to the gallerist Martha Jackson: "At last England has a painter." That same year Scott became one of the first British artists to visit New York, where Martha Jackson introduced him to Rothko, De Kooning, Kline, and Pollock. The following year, Scott, with Hepworth and Bacon, took part in a three-person show at the MJ Gallery going on to exhibit with Jackson regularly through the next decade. The influence of Rothko was particularly strong, and in 1959 the Rothko family visited the Scott's at their cottage in England. Rothko had just finished his Seagram paintings while Scott was working on his Altnagelvin mural; both artists discussed the issues and problems of where and how an artist can best show his work.

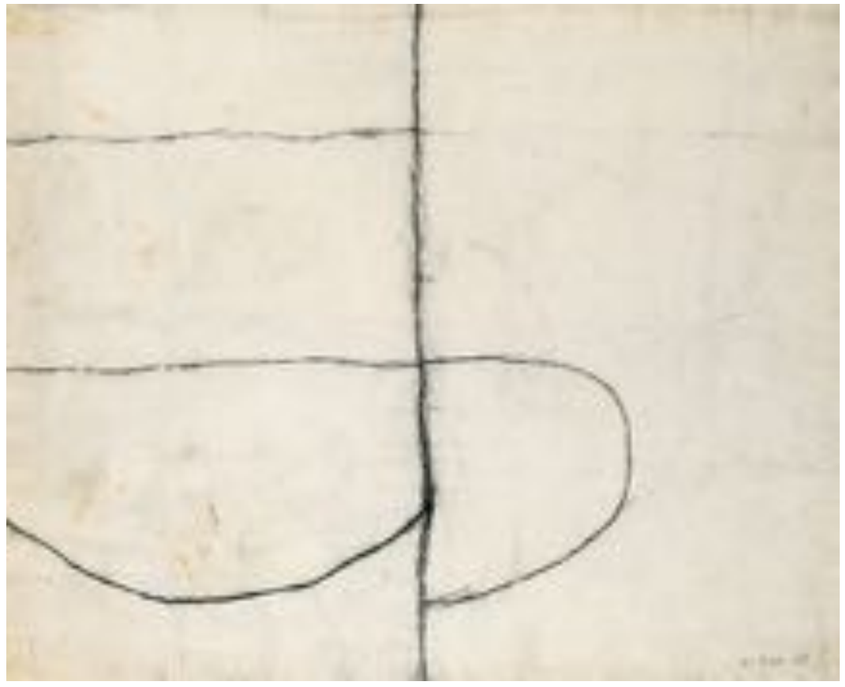
It was after that first trip to America that Scott returned to his European roots invigorated by the dynamism, confidence and scale of the work that he had seen in New York. In 1958, he represented Britain at the Venice Biennale where he was stunned to see the first Johns flag painting. But, although his reputation was now expanding internationally, it was with the advent of Pop and Conceptual art in the sixties and seventies that Scott's work began to be overshadowed by younger artists such as Rauschenberg, and Warhol.

This exhibition aims to highlight a selection of works from the artist's mid to late career, and introduce, or in some cases re-introduce, the artist to the New York public. The exhibition will feature work from the early 1950s through the 1980s, including abstract work as well as his domestic still-lifes. Images from his iconic Poem for a Jug and Orchard of Pears series are included.

In 1957, an exhibition of paintings from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum was shown at the Tate Gallery, London that included Scott's *Black, Yellow and White Composition*, 1953, an early abstract work which is now part of this exhibition (pictured right).

Black, Yellow and White Composition. 1953. Oil on canvas. 40" x 50"

Blue, Grey, Blue. 1960. Oil on canvas. 48" x 73"



Abstracted. 1963. Charcoal on paper. 20" x 24"