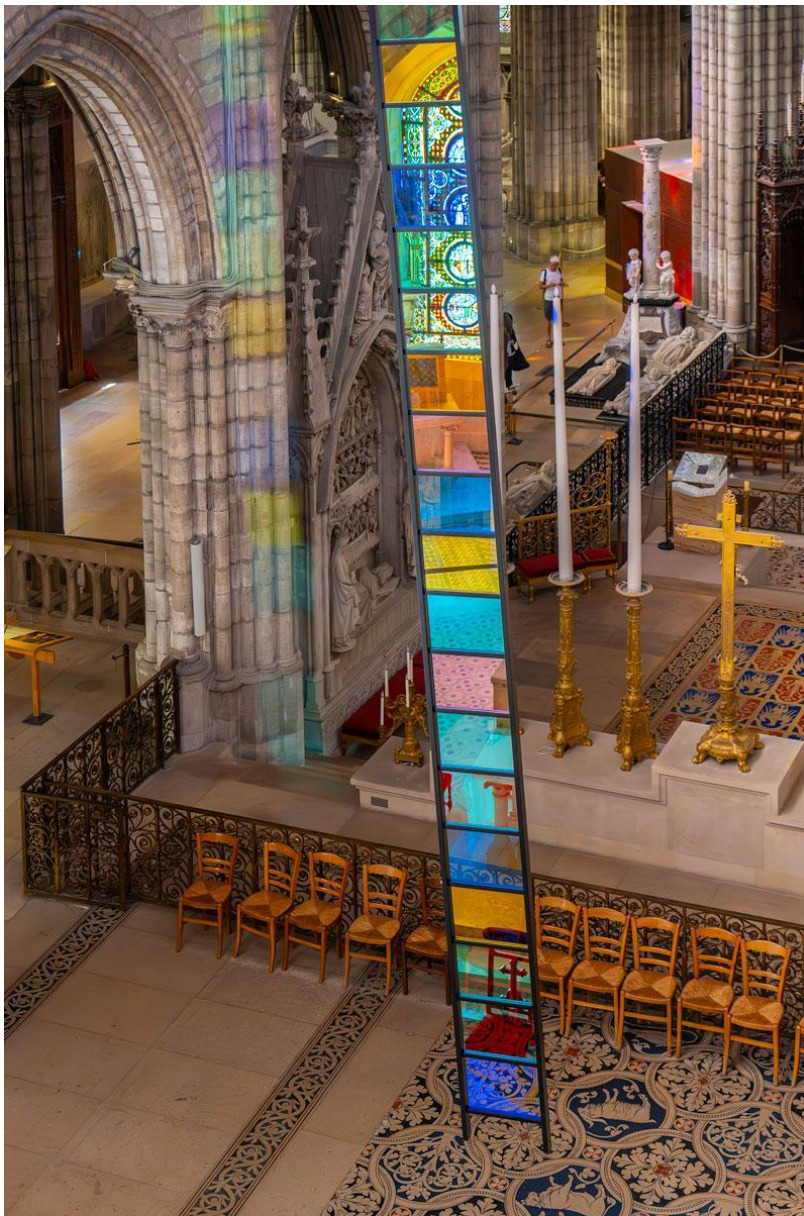


Stephen Dean: Crescendo

By [Joe Fyfe](#)



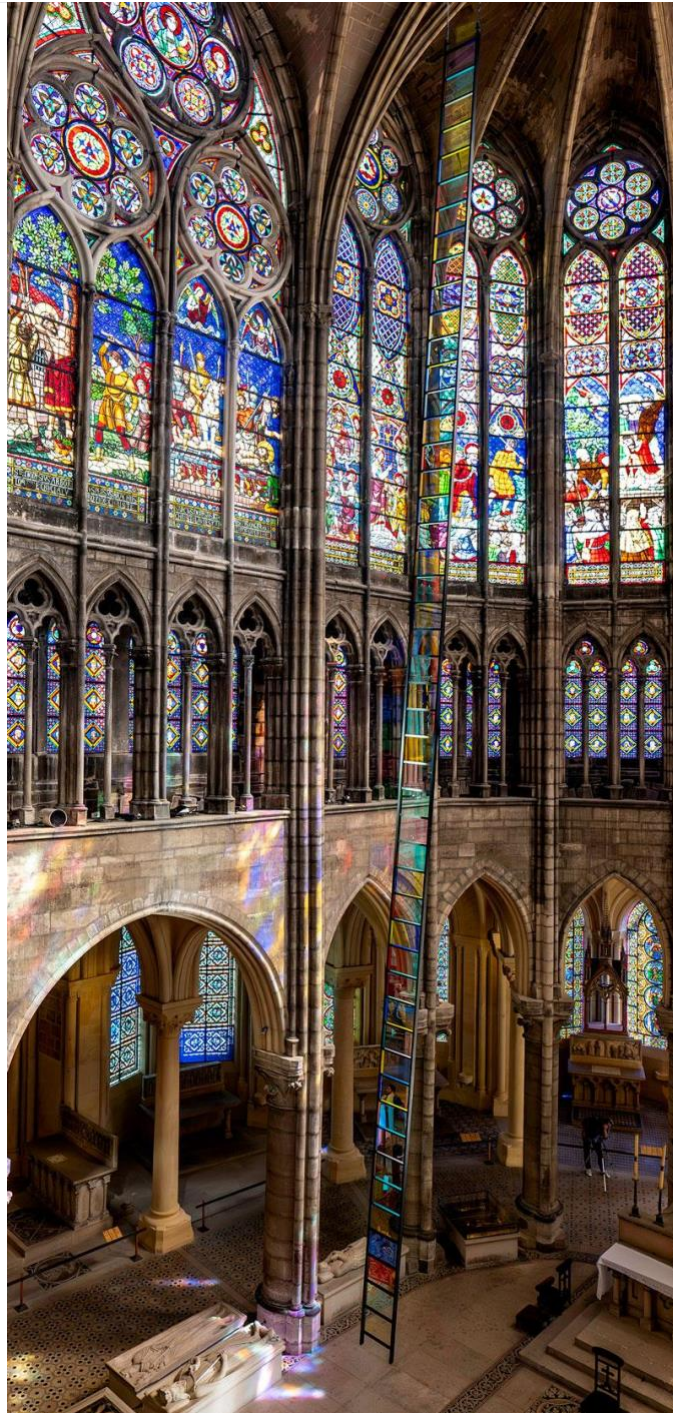
Stephen Dean, *Crescendo*, 2023. Courtesy de l'artiste et de Noirmont Art Production.

Saint Denis, bishop of Paris and patron saint of the French people, was martyred: decapitated around 250 AD in what is now Montmartre. Carrying his head in his hands, he walked four miles, preaching the gospel, arriving at a Roman cemetery where he chose to be buried. By the seventh century a Benedictine abbey bearing his name was built on the site and then in the twelfth century reconstruction began on the Basilica of Saint-Denis, the first Gothic cathedral.

It is in a northern suburb of Paris (Seine-Saint-Denis, Department 93) that has France's highest crime rate and is one of its most densely populated and poorest districts. The church sits hard by a beautiful, soiled, angular, labyrinthine, Brutalist social housing project by the architects Renée Gailhoustet and Jean Renaudie and across from an extensive souk catering to the largely Middle eastern immigrant population.

In the crypts beneath the church sleep Marie Antoinette, Marie de Médicis, Saint Genevieve and most of the country's royals of the past thousand and a half years including Louises the sixth through the seventeenth, many Henrys, and Clovis II III and Dagobert I, the Merovingian kings who died in 657 and 639 respectively.

There have apparently always been crowds here. The rebuilding of the Church of Saint-Denis was initiated due to the rush of pilgrims to the site and is the work of the Abbot Suger (1081-1151), an extremely capable cleric, both ecclesiastically and politically, an advisor to Kings Louis the VI and VII, and through his vision, and that of the builders and craftspeople involved in this undertaking that lasted into the mid-1200s, the Gothic style emerged from the earlier, heavier Romanesque. The new technology of thinner walls, individual columns and pointed arches allowed for greater height, evoking aspirations towards the heavenly.



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In the chevet, or the eastern choir, the first part completed, when Abbot Suger was still alive, in 1144, these architectural innovations allowed for much larger stained-glass windows. Its purified light sanctified the interiors of churches and symbolizes, among other things, the Holy Spirit's visitation upon the Virgin Mary, filling her with the light of God and engendering Jesus.

The artist Stephen Dean, who has installed a remarkable temporary artwork there, quotes Suger's description of this sacral effulgence: "lux mirabilis et continua": wonderful and continuous light. Entitled *Crescendo*, Dean's sculpture, a fifteen-meter-long ladder inset with variegated panels of dichroic glass that change color depending on viewing conditions, hovers at an angle above the heads of the visiting pilgrims and tourists. The glass insets, made from a material known since pre-medieval times, are embedded with metal dust, most recently repurposed by NASA on spacecraft to filter cosmic radiation and the effects of sunlight. Here, demonstrating that the past isn't even past, it reflects jewel-like arabesques off the abundant windows, further tinting them as it wraps long soft rectangular stripes of colored light on the surrounding columns. *Crescendo* was scheduled to be in place from September 2023 to September 2024, (I saw it this past January) but its popularity brought about an extension through January 2025.

Stephen Dean had worked with this colored ladder armature previously, versions have appeared in various gallery exhibitions, and there is at least one permanent installation of a tall vertical, *Ladder descending a staircase*, in Houston at the Anderson-Clarke Center for Continuing Studies at Rice University. He mentioned to me that the ladder symbol exists in every major world religion. I found in Hindu yoga the climb to the top of the ladder represents the ascent to a loving union with god, that the Buddha came down a bejeweled ladder from Mount Meru, that Mohammed ascended from Mecca on a ladder, that Jacob's ladder in the Torah predicts the four exiles of the Jewish people before the arrival of the Messiah, in the New Testament it symbolizes Jesus as the bridge between God and man.

The title refers to its site in the choir, its climbing aspect, and to music as architecture and their shared quality of immersiveness. Interestingly, Dean's intervention doesn't come off as spectacle so much as a kind of cinematic kaleidoscope. One can imagine the ladder as a filmstrip. His work has always involved finding available supports for lapidary color. His watercolors utilize found grids: pages of want ads and crosswords are frames filled in with colors, as are his videos. *Pulse* (2001, 7 min., 30 sec.), for example, the hit of the 2002 Whitney Biennial, documented the Indian festival of the Holi tradition. Filmed in Uttar Pradesh, everyone throws color pigment and water in the air and onto each other's bodies. It is atmospheric, Turner-esque. Another, *Grand Prix* (2006, 7 min., 30 sec.), was of brightly painted stock cars in a demolition derby, a found painterly expressionism.

In all his work, there is an anthropological engagement with color in relation to politics, class, the quotidian, and at root, most likely, the painting. Perhaps one cannot ultimately frame the present or engage fully in a dialogue with the past within the confines of the conventional stretched canvas, but one can bring in the world through framing found color-ness. On the site of Dean's *Crescendo*, he achieves an apotheosis, he attempts an ecumenical symbolism, placing a sculpture that touches on the contemporary cultural discords within France and its intertwined religious and royalist history, as it reaches across a millennium to commune with the sensibilities of workers in the precincts of colored light and community.