

## Sean Scully at Galerie Lelong

Entering Sean Scully's first New York show since 2001 was like slipping into a warm bath, so sensuous and reassuringly familiar are the pleasures afforded by immersion in his work. Doggedly painting wet-into-wet with his matter-of-fact hand and broad, steady brushes, the artist would seem to have his viewers' best interests at heart. His brooding yet cautiously radiant palette and reductivist vocabulary of horizontal and vertical stripes qualify him as among the least transgressive, most deliberate painters around: the artist as designated driver.

*Raphael* (108 by 144 inches, 2004; all paintings oil on linen) was given pride of place on the gallery's daylight-washed rear wall. Framed by banded blocks of two or three stripes, a central pair of bifurcated squares summarizes the tonal and chromatic range of the painting. The syn-copated pattern is anchored by a continuous horizontal across the lower third and a vertical at the center where the two panels meet. In *Barcelona White Bar* (85 by 74 inches, 2004), the eye momentarily takes the dense gray rectangle, set amid brick reds, dulled ochers, and smoky greens, for white. *Near Night* (84 by 96 inches, 2005), in chilly grays and blackened blues, flaunts Venetian and cadmium red gaps between stacked slabs. The painting smolders.

*Red Black Robe and Paul's Robe* (both 90 by 72 inches, 2004), simple grids five units high by three across, are punctuated by six approximations of black. Improbably, in *Wall of Light Rose* (84 by 96 inches, 2003), a demure, dusty pink box—in the company of dour dirt-reds and taciturn blue-blacks, the life of the party—recedes rather than advances, glowing like a distant window at dusk and eliciting the juniper-green lurking within an abutting, gloomy gray.

Three limpid watercolors (all 30 by 22 inches, 2005) reveal their development through a few washes applied to a pencil or ink line drawing, providing more graphic than chromatic complexity. Two 2005 aquatints, *Wall of Light Crimson* and *Night*, bring negative shapes into play, as insistently expansive dark blocks vaporize neighboring grays. This is a mild surprise.

Scully's work can feel overdetermined by well-practiced



Sean Scully: *Barcelona White Bar*, 2004, oil on linen, 85 by 74 inches; at Galerie Lelong.

procedure; he does not seem to significantly challenge himself from painting to painting as, with mixed results, Howard Hodgkin does. Yet within their circumscribed parameters, most of these canvases are knockouts. [Scully's work is on view at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., until Jan. 8, 2006.]

—Stephen Maine

## Luc Tuymans at David Zwirner

Alone in the gallery's front room was a mid-size canvas bearing smudges of colored grease—oil paint—defying identification. This might be year-old cotton candy, or lint from a clothes dryer, or something from underfoot. At lower left, what looks like a broken cotton swab does nothing to establish scale until the viewer reads the title: *Demolition*. So the swab is a streetlight, the smudges are enormous clouds of dust and dirt engendered from an imploded building, and the viewer recalls just how tactile that rolling particulate matter is that has appeared in photographs of this type of thing.

This is Tuymans at his most clever and familiar—the jolt of recognition withheld, an enigmatic painting made comprehensible by its title. Was the prominent, isolated placement of *Demolition* (65 by 44 inches; all paintings oil on canvas, 2005) meant to impart iconic status to the work?

Does it signal the conclusion of a major phase, and the shifting from one type of pictorial puzzle to another? The nine other paintings are quite legible, and the question raised by each is not “what is this?” but “where is this?” or “why is this before us?”

*Timer* (59 by 36 inches) hung on the other side of the same wall as *Demolition*, back-to-back with it, and in this context might have been taken for a detonating device. The show was called “Proper.” The paintings are based on photographs, a long-standing source for the artist, and each depicts a sublimated

Luc Tuymans: *The Perfect Table Setting*, 2005, oil on canvas, 65 by 44 inches; at David Zwirner.

