



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 roiling 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

version of seething, essential forces—biological imperatives reined in by civilized society. Thus food is represented by *The Perfect Table Setting* (44½ by 65 inches), depicting a banquet table before the guests are seated; *Mirror* (56 by 51 inches) denotes shelter, in the form of economical interior decoration, bric-a-brac and bad lighting; *Ballroom Dancing* (62 by 41 inches) ritualizes the sex drive, of course. Even nature itself finds a civilized form in *The Parc* (63 by 97 inches), a flashbulb-bleached rendering of soberly spaced tree trunks and manicured footing.

There are two portraits, both tightly cropped headshots of women with veiled grimaces. The role of organized religion in codifying and moderating human behavior and relations is suggested by *S. Croce* (26 by 20 inches), which depicts an attendant to the birth of the Virgin in a late Gothic altarpiece by Andrea Orcagna. In *The Secretary of State* (18 by 24 inches), Condoleezza Rice scowls into the sun and shows her teeth, perhaps contemplating how governments delegate aggression. The inclusion of her likeness, and the state seal of Texas in *Ballroom Dancing*, broadens the exhibition's frame of reference to include the tragically dissembling Bush White House, and the facade it erects to mask its ineptitude and corruption. Tuymans's familiar crabbed, tenuous touch and cramped, washed-out palette are wholly appropriate to these images dealing with controlled chaos, of which *Demolition* is indeed emblematic.

—Stephen Maine

Luc Tuymans: *The Perfect Table Setting*, 2005, oil on canvas, 44½ by 65 inches; at David Zwirner.

