

# MNUCHIN GALLERY



**SEAN SCULLY**  
**WALL OF LIGHT**  
Curated by Sukanya Rajaratnam

Mnuchin Gallery is proud to open the 2018 season with *Sean Scully: Wall of Light*. Including over twenty paintings, watercolors and pastels, the exhibition surveys one of Scully's most celebrated bodies of work, the Wall of Light series, which he began in 1984 and has continued to develop through today. The exhibition will mark the gallery's second collaboration with the artist, following *Sean Scully: The Eighties* in fall 2016. It also coincides with the ten-year anniversary of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's presentation of Scully's Wall of Light paintings, the artist's first major museum exhibition in New York. The exhibition will be on view from February 28 through April 14, with a public opening reception in the artist's honor on February 28 from 5:30 to 7:30pm. *Sean Scully: Wall of Light* will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue authored by art historian and former long-time chief curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Michael Auping.

The Wall of Light works span decades and locales, capturing the full spectrum of Scully's subjectivity through the metaphor of architecture. Applying a three-dimensional sensibility to painting has and continues to be a through line in Scully's oeuvre. As early as 1975, when he first moved to New York, he stripped the industrial wooden racks from his Tribeca studio—a former textile factory—to repurpose their boards as surfaces for his paintings. Anticipating his Wall of Light series, the multi-part constructions he

produced from these planks attest to the way in which Scully was already “building” his abstractions before they were walls.

While he would not begin titling his oil on canvas paintings *Wall of Light* until 1998, Scully credits a trip to Mexico in the early 1980s as the crucial moment of the series’ origin. Captivated by the Mayan ruins he visited, Scully put down several watercolors with a set spontaneously bought before the trip. The delicate translucency of the medium reflects the changing light of the sun on a building as it shifts its position throughout the day. The implications of these experimental watercolors would percolate for a decade before the artist’s luminous stripes metamorphosed into the bricks of his *Wall of Light* paintings.

In his *Wall of Light* canvases, Scully moves away from the regularity of his earlier stripes, adopting looser, softer segments of color; the painterly rectangles do not quite touch one another, and allow for glimpses of the pigment underneath, reminiscent of delicate cracks in a wall. It is as if light has penetrated his former stricter canvases and some of its shimmering, elastic nature has infused the oil paint. These shapes evoke the irregularity of the Mayan stones, each weathered by age and climate, their edges marking a unique individual history. Scully’s gestural brushstrokes are personal historical markers, too, and intimate the emotional content of these abstractions.

The tension in these paintings originates in part from their attempt to reconcile the solidity of a wall with the intangibility of light. Scully’s wet-on-wet application of oil paint creates a depth within each band of color that resonates as if lit from within. At the same time, the thick layers of color fortify his painting as if he were constructing a true wall. The paintings have an impressive sense of mass despite the glowing luminescence conjured by the hints of color the viewer detects below the surface.

Scully’s titles often give an indication of the metaphorical associations he hopes to impart to the viewer through his colors, as in *Wall of Light Desert Night*, 1999, on loan from the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. The deep velvety blues evoke a vast night sky, the sun-bleached sand recalls the desert floor, and the shimmering grays suggest desert flora silvered in cool moonlight. Each canvas has an internal rhythm, a call and response between the alternating bands of colors repeated in different areas of the painting. The large format allows for minute examination of the movements of the artist’s hand across the canvas, and the viewer becomes part of the painting’s creation in tracing these movements.

Scully employs the full power of his sensitive palette in the nuanced hues he conjures for each work. The tonal specificity of the paintings corresponds to the breadth of light and the spirit of the environments that surround his studios in New York City, Barcelona, Germany, and London; in *Small Barcelona Sand Wall*, 2004, for example, the deep sea blue and diffuse yellow-red communicate the atmosphere of a summer’s day in the Mediterranean city. Scully considers these paintings landscapes, and indeed they seem to embody the psychological architecture of his place-based memories.

Scully has said the purpose of abstract painting is “to be so humanistic, so expressive... I want my brushstrokes to be full of feeling; material feeling manifested in form and color.”<sup>1</sup> Scully’s Wall of Light paintings serve this urgent purpose, the surfaces teeming with the full complexity of human existence. Perhaps this is how we resolve the oxymoron of the title: colors only exist for us in their reflection through light. For Scully, without light there is simply no emotion, no color, no painting.

Image: Sean Scully, *Desire or Desired*, 2007, oil on linen, 84 x 96 inches (213.4 x 243.8 cm)

---

<sup>1</sup> Davis, R. Eric. “Interview with Sean Scully.” *Journal of Contemporary Art*: January 15, 1999. Accessed November 17, 2017. <http://www.jca-online.com/scully.html>.