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## A Mezzanine Done Over in Bricks, Evocative and Immediate

By GRACE GLUECK

Sean Scully started painting his “Wall of Light” series in 1998, and he has never stopped. On and on it goes, its individual works ranging from enormous oils on canvas that wow the viewer with their scale, intensity of color and sheer dominance of space to tiny independent watercolors that Mr. Scully sees as “complements and antidotes” to the big ones.

All have this in common: They are richly painted, nuanced surfaces of close-laid vertical and horizontal bars (he calls them bricks) whose arrangement suggests constructed walls of stone. Paint disports in the tiny crevices between the bars to give an effect of luminosity. “I’m trying to turn stone into light,” Mr. Scully has said.

The results of his crusade are mesmerizingly set out in the spacious — and light-filled — mezzanine galleries of the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), in an imposing show mounted there by Anne L. Strauss, associate curator of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art. The Met has been acquiring Mr. Scully’s work since 1985; the show was organized by the Phillips Collection in Washington, also an early acquirer of Mr. Scully’s work.

At first glance there seems to be a certain sameness to these totally abstract canvases, with their allover arrangements of bars that superficially vary only in color, size and juxtaposition. But Mr. Scully’s frame of reference is wide, and the canvases convincingly refer to many inspirations: from architectural structures like Stonehenge and paintings by other artists (say, Rothko, [van Gogh](#), de Kooning and Morandi) to specific landscapes, people, memories and events. The big “Niels” (2001), for instance, was painted for a dying friend, and its warm yellows and animated whites, each a different shade, hold their own vividly against more somber blacks and browns, while vibrant touches of red between the bricks convey, perhaps, the resilience of life.

The much larger “Wall of Light April” (2000) is meant to evoke a season, with grays and blacks punctuated by silvery whites and pale yellows that suggest the fickleness of early spring weather. “Wall of Light Beach” (2001), a smaller canvas filled with sunny yellows balanced by grays and blacks, reflects not only the sense of a spring day warmed by the sun, but Mr. Scully’s ruminations on a 1905 portrait of the artist Maurice de Vlaminck by André Derain, in which the subject’s soft pink face is topped by a black bowler hat.

Though “Raphael” (2004) is named for the old master, its colors salute those in the work of Morandi, the classically influenced 20th-century Italian painter, with austere grays, whites, dark blues and blacks inflected by pale pinks. “Green Pale Light” (2002) is an out-and-out landscape: a single bar of moonlight white holds its own among more earthy colors — pine green, earth brown and mist gray — that reflect the Alpine surroundings of Mr. Scully’s studio in Mooseurach, Germany.

The Irish-born (1945), London-raised artist, well schooled in figurative drawing, turned to geometric painting after a visit to Morocco, where he saw striped and banded patterns. He came to the United States, where Minimalism reigned, on a [Harvard](#) fellowship in 1972. The genesis of the “Wall of Light”

series — which now numbers more than 200 paintings, of which the Met is showing 30 oils and 30 works on paper — was actually in 1983 when, sunning on a beach in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, Mr. Scully did a small watercolor of stripes and bars in oranges, blues and green, vertically and horizontally arranged. It was inspired, he has said, by the Mexican ruins, the stacking of the stones and the light hitting their facades. But at that time he put it aside for other concerns.

Years later, reminded of the more organic, less formulaic approach of the early watercolor by another painting he was doing, he began to broaden his palette and soften the edges of his brush strokes. Unlike the impersonal work of the Minimalists, his own is unabashedly emotional, and the handmade quality of his paintings is deliberately emphasized, their size also revealing the physical activity involved in doing them. His color is not programmatic but intuitively chosen, and laid on in highly visible strokes made by a house painter's brush. Worked over and over, the colors deliberately reveal their underpainting and have an immediacy that appeals to the tactile sense as well as the emotions.

His smaller watercolors, prints and pastels are different in approach, focusing mainly on qualities of light. In doing the watercolors, he forgoes the more ambitious searchings of his big canvases to “collaborate with sunlight,” as he has put it. Like his larger works, they often speak of the places where he paints them: besides his main studio in TriBeCa, the one in Mooseurach and a third in Barcelona, Spain, where the watercolors are influenced by the haze-filtered light of the city.

What's more, the show illustrates how the watercolors have clearly influenced the large oils, notably by carryover of their thin, liquid paint into some recent canvases and the softer edges of their forms as they nudge one another, as in “Wall of Light Red Red” (2001), a gorgeously sensuous orchestration in Mr. Scully's signature colors of black, white and red.

To accommodate these generously scaled paintings, the Met is for the first time relocating part of the mezzanine galleries' permanent collection to another viewing space. The capacious, daylighted mezzanine galleries are the perfect setting for these bold and energizing paintings, surely among the most powerful contemporary works you'll see this season.

*“Sean Scully: Wall of Light” continues through Jan. 15 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, (212) 535-7710.*

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