

Sean Scully (Born 1945 -)

Untitled (11.17.90)

Watercolour on paper (a page from a large sketchbook).
Signed and dated Sean Scully 11.17.90 at the lower right.
275 x 300 mm (10 7/8 x 11 3/4 in.) [image]
306 x 403 mm. (12 x 15 7/8 in.) [sheet]

Over the course of his career, Sean Scully has created a significant body of works on paper – watercolours, pastels and prints - alongside his paintings on canvas. He has referred to his works on paper as 'complements and antidotes' to the paintings, and has further noted that 'the watercolors are very, very personal to me.' More recently, Scully elaborated on the importance of his watercolours to him: 'There's a big difference between them [paintings and watercolours], the difference between public and private. Because I do things all the time for the public, so there can be exhibitions and people and go and see the paintings. The watercolours are more private…But I don't think any of my work is private anymore. It's just a different degree, and it's something I can have and put in a drawer and get the sense at least for a while that I have made it entirely for myself. But of course it's only a question of time before that little watercolour has to come out of the drawer and go somewhere for an exhibition.'

The present sheet was executed in 1990, and is part of a group of paintings, watercolours, pastels and prints known collectively as the Wall of Light series. These works evolved following a trip Scully took to the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico in 1983, where he was captivated by the appearance of the stacked stone walls of Mayan ruins. He produced a number of watercolours during this trip that were his first attempts in the medium, and these served, several years later, as the basis for the Wall of Light series. Indeed, the artist refers to these irregular rectangles of colour in these works as 'bricks'; a conscious move away from the broad bands and stripes of colour of his earlier paintings.

Scully's watercolours often treat the same themes as his paintings, yet differ from them. On relationship of a watercolour to a painting of the same composition, the artist has commented that 'One could say it's a version of the same thing in a different medium, which produces an entirely distinct reality. Because the watercolour is really only staining the paper. You're working with the light within the watercolour, and you're trying to articulate that light.' He has further elaborated on this theme in a 1995 interview, in which he stated that 'the watercolors are about the extreme absence of physicality. They are really as close as a painter can get to pure light, an effortless, physically effortless vision. And that's what's really interesting about them to me...I think the idea of the lack of physicality in the watercolors is crucial to their nature, that the white paper is shining through the watercolor the whole time. And it's pure

pigment, it's pure pigment suspended in a small amount of gum Arabic and it's floated onto the paper.'

Of the Wall of Light watercolours, of which this is a particularly fine and fresh example, one scholar has noted that 'Graceful and seemingly effortless, these are works Scully says he pursues chiefly for himself as "private" entities. He makes them in a relaxed state of mind, focusing chiefly on the quality of light, and he renders them without vigorous physical action…Scully arrives at a remarkable elegance while working in a delicate, extremely temperamental medium…His Wall of Light watercolors are poetic studies of light, with a quiet undertone and a subtle, rhythmic quality alive with luminosity.'

Provenance:

Galerie Lelong, Paris
Acquired from them by a private collector.

Artist description:

Born in Dublin in 1945, Sean Scully settled as a young child in North London with his family. Rejected by eleven other art schools, he eventually enrolled in Croydon College in London in 1965, transferring to the University of Newcastle three years later. Scully was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1989 and 1993, and has exhibited widely in Europe and America. His work takes the form of abstract paintings based on regularly spaced geometrical elements, but with a concurrent sense of rhythm and imbued with an inherent spirituality. As the artist has described his approach to painting, 'it is metaphysical on some level. It's certainly religious and spiritual. I think it has a very strong spiritual dimension. And I pull in a lot of other threads to my work. Obviously there's simple geometry, simple drawing, all the way through it. And there's the rhythm, the kind of rhythm you find in weaving and folk arts all over the world – in Morocco and other parts of Africa, in Ireland, in Lapland.'

Scully works today in studios in Germany, in the Bavarian countryside about an hour from Munich, as well as in Barcelona and New York. Paintings and drawings by Scully are today in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the National Gallery of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Tate Gallery in London, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra and other private and public collections.