

Sean Scully
April 6, 1987

In 1970, when I was an art student, I made a trip to Morocco. When I came back, I was making paintings with cutout strips of canvas, (*Morocco, 1969*) because what you see in Morocco is material in colored stripes, long flat bunches of it, made of thin strands of wool. They dye strips of material, then hang them over a bar to dry in the shaded heat. Then they are used to make rugs.

I'd been making calligraphic paintings; very soon I got into making the grids. The way it happened was, I made an all-over striped painting that was square. Then I just turned it and did it again, and I ended up with a grid. That was the structure I used for about five years. And it raises an interesting point: what has gradually happened over the years is that the band or bar or stripe has become the subject matter. It's the thing that I address. For me, it replaces the nude, or the bowl of fruit, the thing you paint. There is of course light and space in these paintings, but that's not the thing I set out to do; I don't set out to manufacture light and space. What I'm doing is painting the stripe as the subject.

The other thing I think is important is that the work I've been doing for the last six years really isn't serial work. The structure is addressed over and over again, and there's a certain repetitive quality, but this isn't serial art. I'm not necessarily going to make ten paintings that deal with this as a formal issue, I'll do the thing I feel like doing.

So that makes these paintings actually somewhat different from the monotypes, which deal with pure experimentation. There I'm just shifting things around, and I'm open-minded and unassuming about the results. With the paintings that tends not to be the case. The painting has a personality, or a point of view, that has to realize its fullest potential. It's an emotional space.

Empty Heart, 1987 is very symmetrical, but it's not a symmetrical painting. I wanted to make something harmonious and beautiful. The reason this painting is symmetrical is that I wanted to put something **<something: i.e., an inset panel? David, here Sean is discussing his use of the inset panel, he did not change any part of the text I gave him to edit, maybe you have an idea on how to make it clearly understood,**

though I think it is understandable with out any additions. I have attached an image of the painting as well> right in the middle that was different from what was around it in some interesting or provocative or poignant way. Since it's **(the inset panel)** is right in the middle, you have to look at it and everything around it at exactly the same time. In other words, the issue of symmetry, in and of itself, is not particularly interesting to me. It's only interesting to me in relation to the way that I can put one kind of painting in the middle of another kind of painting. You have two paintings making up one painting, or two things making up one thing: that's the relationship that's of interest to me, not the notion of things being the same.

I've made lots of paintings where I've pushed forward some part of the painting, so those works have a real physicality about them, they're quite sculptural. Recently I've been making flat paintings, which has had a wonderful effect. It's amazing how, when you close up one possibility but subject the activity to the same kind of pressure, or apply the same sort of energy, as you did before, something else opens up. Painting flat has put more emphasis on color than on the drawing. The reason I did that was that the drawing in the three-dimensional works was somewhat limited by the fact that they were three-dimensional. By not allowing myself that sculptural facet, I've made something more apparent to myself. I guess that's why the grid started to come back into the work, and why I started to paint the space. I should say, however, that painting space isn't very interesting to me. The issue of painting abstraction isn't space, it's subject matter, how that subject matter is addressed, and how that produces content.

Color is something real natural to me. I think about structure a great deal, but color is purely intuitive. I hadn't used green for a long time, and I got scared of it; so I made some green paintings, and I made friends with green again. That's very simple for me. What's interested me in painting ever since my trip to Morocco is the horizontal and the vertical. That, of course, goes back through Mondrian and other artists before him, but I feel that those two directions represent the two primary ways that we can see images. In all my paintings there's a horizontal and a vertical. Really what's happened with the paintings is that the grid in the early work has been pulled apart. If you put the horizontal and vertical sections back together, you reconstruct a grid.

Even though the paintings now are generally flat, I'm not saying they'll stay that way. There's something very moving to me about a surface that's extremely subjective and extremely real—something close to the sublime, something metaphysical in some way, yet extremely present. One of my big influences is Mark Rothko, whose space has enormous implications. But my paintings are more in the real world. The surfaces are more tactile and the seams between the different areas are very physical. So you have the opportunity to be in two worlds at the same time: you're looking at something concrete, something that has a body to it, but also has a spirit. I find that a complete experience. It's very true of Mondrian, whose paintings are resolutely flat yet have great aspirations.

The works **<I assume these must be monotypes? YES!>** on the wall now **< monotypes I made at the Garner Tullis workshop earlier this year>**, as I said earlier, were done with a kind of open-mindedness as to what they are, whereas I want a painting to be much more opinionated about what its identity is. In a sense, these go back to interesting formal traditions, and are trying to open things up a little. I'm not really interested in what happens when you put this element next to that, I'm much more interested in meaning or consequence, but in these works that preference was temporarily suspended. These works have an element of curiosity that isn't usually there when I make a painting; when I make a painting I'm usually more interested in what it is. What is that as a painting? When I've figured out what it is, I try to make it as much what it is as it can be. When I feel I can't make it more what it is, it's finished. With these works on the wall I was more forgiving than perhaps I am with some of the others. But I think that for me that's a healthy thing—because my work, obviously, has a certain manic quality about it.

You may have noticed that every area in my work is filled up. There are no flat, empty passages, there's no in-between. Everything in my paintings is a fully realized thing, which is on top of another thing, which is on top of another thing. So they're about compression, collision. They're crowded. I had a definite idea that the triptych **Black Ridge, 1984** would be about a figure compressed from each side, like a figure in a landscape—not in the landscape where we stand, since this is an abstract painting, but still like a figure in a landscape that is exerting pressure on it. I began to paint the painting, and for some reason I painted it timidly, for me, everything

being relative. And that became the subject matter of the painting: the way it was painted, the drawing, the color, the surface—everything was a little off. You know the way flowers sometimes grow out of a building? It was like that, and it was so beautiful that I left it. What was interesting was that the painting was made at a time when I'd made other paintings of this kind, so I was very sure in this area—yet I began to deal with the opposite **of certainty**. In another **trptych, *The Traveler, 1983*** which I did around the same time, one side of the painting is very sure of itself and the other side is not. When I make paintings like that, I'm completely beyond the point where I'm trying to make the painting work. That absolutely doesn't interest me. Of course I can make a painting work; I've painted for twenty years. Not making them work is the beauty of it.

The final thing to say about the stripe is that it's debased by everyday imagery. It's all over the place—in the subway, everywhere. It might have had a slight shock value when Barnett Newman was doing it (not that that was the first time that form had been used), but to my mind that gets in the way. Painting a stripe is like painting an apple: when Cézanne paints an apple, you look at the painting and say, "Oh, it's an apple," such an ordinary thing; but the way he paints it makes it so wonderful, so moving. Jazz can be moving that way too: successful jazz musicians may choose a very simple melody, but then they improvise. And it's the sense of what the melody should be, or usually is, that makes what they do so poignant.

This brings me back again to my point about not making things work. That's why I don't try to make the paintings resolved in a design sense: I just try to make them be as much as they can be.