

Josiah McElheny

WITH JARRETT EARNEST

Josiah McElheny is known for his conceptually layered and impeccably constructed artworks made of many materials, but these works almost always involve some use of glass—as a material reality, a symbolic substance, or political device. McElheny’s assemblages and installations emerge from his research into earlier moments of art or design history, finding strange figures and obscure artifacts to hold up to contemporary light, looking for the glimmer of other possible futures. In *Paintings* (September 10 – October 24 at Andrea Rosen Gallery), McElheny turns his attention for the first time to the problems of painting, specifically abstraction. He met with the *Rail’s* Jarrett Earnest to discuss these new works, the horrors of mirrors, and the hopefulness to be found in a philosophy of the prismatic.

JARRETT EARNEST (RAIL): The wall works in your current exhibition are described as “paintings,” which is new for your work. Let’s start by talking about them.

JOSIAH MCELHENY: The six still in process here in the studio are based on Kandinsky and Malevich through the lens of the work of Hilma af Klint—they are called “Crystalline Prism Paintings.” These consist of a field of black oil paint behind a piece of glass—the glass sheet is in fact the “surface” of the painting. Through the glass surface one can see the brushstrokes within the field of black, and embedded in the field are crystalline prismatic shapes of different colors. The idea is that from a distance the paintings, and the prisms within, will function as images—they look completely flat or two-dimensional—but as you get closer or move side-to-side they become three-dimensional and you understand that you are seeing through the surface and also into the depth of the prism shapes.

Over the past few years, I have been learning about the history of transparency. When the idea of transparency is applied to politics it is described as a solely positive trait, but it’s much more complicated than that and it’s often co-opted to create the worst of all possible worlds, as it were. If you think about a skyscraper: why are almost all corporate headquarters made of transparent—and reflective—materials? On some level it’s to convince



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. Photo: Zack Garlitos.

us that *they* are “transparent,” that the capital-flows of the world are not corrupt and these clear structures symbolically prove the moral rightness of their actions. In this sense, transparency is a state in and of itself; it’s not because you can really see what’s behind it, but it’s the *fact* of transparency that is important. But in my mind the most positive aspect of transparency is rather the ability to see beyond and not only through, and I’m trying to create that metaphor in these paintings. Painters like Gerhard Richter and Blinky Palermo experimented with there being *nothing* beyond the surface—the surface is the be-all and end-all, as both a sublime and horrible proposal. For example, *Six Gray Mirrors* (2003) by Richter are some of the most menacing works in the history of art, though certainly to some they might just be boring! I wanted to propose something diametrically opposed to that, to say that the surface is just the beginning, an invitation for the act of *seeing through*. That is what these works hope for.

RAIL: That is an extremely perverse thing to do! The Modernist narrative around painting is partly about killing any vestigial trace of the painting as illusionistic window. One of the important elements here is the glass as a constituted material. Of all materials, glass aggregates metaphors most easily because its so perversely polymorphic: it is a liquid and a solid; it’s opaque and transparent—sometimes it is *so* transparent that it’s opaque; the relationship between its inside and outside is visually continuous but seemingly inverted; and, because it is suffused with light, it often carries a spiritual dimension.

MCELHENY: The first essay that was written about my work that ended up really shifting my view of myself and of what I’m working on was an essay by Dave Hickey—

RAIL: —“Hearts of Glass” (1999)?

MCELHENY: Yes. When he was writing the essay he called me up and said, “I just have one question: why is there all this narrative in your work?” (At the time almost all my work involved an explicit written narrative that was encased within it.) He asked, “Is there anything in your past that would explain this?” I said that when I was twelve, I would memorize stories of Jorge Luis Borges and recite them into a cassette-tape recorder to help me practice; he just said, “Got it!” and hung up the phone. In the essay he explained how my work could be understood through this childhood experience with Borges. He then went on to convincingly describe what is more and more my sense of what glass actually is: a linguistic concept—that if we didn’t have glass then we’d have to invent something like it, because we need it for language. I think that that’s the reason why glass has such a



Josiah McElheny, *Crystalline Prism Painting I*, 2015. Oil paint, museum glass, hand formed, pressed and polished glass, wood, low-iron mirror, hardware, 22 x 22 x 6 1/2 in. Photo: Ron Amstutz.



Detail of *Crystalline Prism Painting II*, 2015. Photo: Ron Amstutz.
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

metaphoric malleability. One of the basic things about the history of glass, which seems strangely appropriate to this argument, is that it only stood for itself as a material two or three times in its history. Artificial glass was most likely originally “invented” by mistake in Egypt, in attempt to make faience, which itself was used to emulate jade and other precious stones. Then, in the ancient Greek era, glass was mostly used to imitate rock crystal; during Roman times it often echoed forms in silver. After the Renaissance it found another use, as imitation porcelain. In all these cases the glass version was the cheap version, in every sense of the word. They were lousy copies for the lower as opposed to the upper classes. Maybe the first time glass stands for itself is in the early Renaissance when they were making some forms that seem very modern, because they are following the clues of the material, but that is short-lived. Then again, in the 16th and 17th centuries, with the invention of large glass mirrors, there was a period when the mirror was one of the most valuable objects in the world. Finally, in the 20th century, glass comes into its own when it becomes the material of modern building.

The second of those moments in history aligns with glass as a material beginning to be used for political ends—in the case of the mirror, as a thing that represents power to power—starting with the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, where it represented Louis XIV to Louis XIV, proving the materiality of his power. That is echoed in smaller ways for a couple of hundred years when to be bourgeois you have to have these large “pier glass” mirrors in your house, to demonstrate your position in society. Then, in the 20th century—and reaching its apotheosis even today—you have huge pieces of transparent glass representing the power of global corporations. After 9/11 I saw a documentary about the architect who designed the twin towers. I didn’t realize until then that, if you were in a helicopter looking perpendicular to the surface, they were completely transparent—you could see all the way through the floors—which was one of the reasons why they fell down: there was no interior structure. It sounds horrible but perhaps one could say that their transparency melted. They were made to evidence the metaphoric transparency of the world of trade but, from the ground, from the angle that a normal person has access to, they appeared totally opaque. It is funny to describe reflectivity as opacity, but it is a kind of opacity as much as it is a mirror.

RAIL: I have a question about mirrors in contemporary art. There is a lot of new reflective art. I feel like mirrors are homeless objects—never really inhabiting any place they’re installed because their relationship to the world is one of displacement. Perhaps one of the reasons they are such a popular contemporary art material is precisely that homelessness—mimicking the

fluid movement of trans-national financial markets, of investments. Have you observed any of that, or do you think I’m on the wrong track?

MCELHENY: I totally agree with you. I wrote an essay called “Proposal for Total Reflective Abstraction” a little over ten years ago that was the beginning of my attempt to understand what you’re saying—I’m still trying to understand it. Returning to when Dave brought up Borges: I had forgotten Borges by then and hadn’t read him since I was twelve years old. I went back and got a book of his poetry, and I ended up reading four or five poems about mirrors that mainly discussed his fear of mirrors. After that I ended up making a whole series of artworks as (or about) mirrors because of my encounter with Dave’s question and revisiting Borges—I even made wooden mirrors. What I found fascinating about Borges’s description of his fear of mirrors was that he meant any reflective surface, in any material. He said that when he entered a room with a reflective surface, there was another Borges in the room: the self does not stay safely in the body or safely within one’s own interior view, but is replicated and multiplied. If we think of the way the internet functions today you can say that it functions as an elaborate mirroring device; for anyone who has a sense of compassion for themselves, the internet is a mirror in a rather horrible way, in its relentlessness. When I began to make the works about mirrors most of my investigations were really about the notion of the horror created by them, and the way they destabilize one’s self. I think one of our attractions to them is a biological-cultural union in which the testing of one’s own reality is both extremely attractive and utterly terrifying. The Narcissus myth is about that fact—you can’t stay in that tension too long.

I think that there are two main reasons why there is so much shiny, reflective art out there now. Firstly, it’s a way pointing to *value* without there being anything personal at stake: it means the artist can say, “I want to point out this relationship between the viewer and the object, emphasizing the viewer’s potential power in the creation of the work of art, because their own reflection will become part of it, except that I don’t want my own voice or image or inflection to be anywhere apparent in it.” It’s a very intellectually safe strategy. Secondly, in a larger sense, it is representative of our alienation overall. We live in the most reflective age—many more surfaces are reflective now than have ever been—and why would that be? I think, as you put it so well, that this may be “reflective” (ha!) of an age of alienation and powerlessness, of our disconnection from how the world and society are functioning.

RAIL: Lately I’ve been thinking of a different reflective myth as a way of engaging works of art, an answer to Narcissus, which is Perseus. With Perseus you are looking into a polished shield at the Gorgon behind you, making life or death decisions based on what you see reflected. That reflection is something beyond you, of something real that you cannot directly confront or you’ll be petrified. Art can be that: an indirect way of looking straight at the world, giving you a better vantage, a more nuanced emotional or psychological position, from which to live your life. Maybe it’s even a way of taking action when you cannot face what is in front of you. Watching in reverse, Perseus beheads Medusa. The problem with reducing a painting



Josiah McElheny, *Crystalline Prism Painting II*, 2015. Oil paint, museum glass, hand formed, pressed and polished glass, wood, low-iron mirror, hardware, 29 x 24 x 6 1/2 in. Photo: Ron Amstutz.



Josiah McElheny, *Window Painting I*, 2015. Hand-formed and polished grey tinted glass, low-iron mirror, cut and polished grey tinted architectural sheet glass, Sumi ink wood finish, oak and plywood, 50 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 7 3/8 in. Photo: Ron Amstutz.



Josiah McElheny, *Mirror drawing (III)*, 2004. Hand-blown silvered glass mirror, 23 x 19 in. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



Josiah McElheny, *Blue Prism Painting V*, 2015. Hand-formed and polished blue glass, low-iron mirror, cut and polished blue architectural sheet glass, Sumi ink wood finish, oak and plywood, 43 1/2 x 43 1/2 x 7 3/8 in. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

to the surface is that you are stopping at the shield as an object—you aren't looking at the reflection of the Gorgon, which is the whole point! What I see with the pools of faceted colors embedded in the planes of your new paintings seems to move in that direction—toward imagination, emotions, psychology, metaphor.

Considering your present interest in Hilma af Klint, and going back to works like *Verzelini's Acts of Faith (Glass from Paintings of the Life of Christ)* (1996)—where you re-fabricated cups from various Renaissance paintings as a fictionalized act of devotion—there has been a strong current of faith and belief. How do you describe that element of your work?

MCELHENY: My basic feeling about life is that things are not always as they seem. They are not always as they appear. Or even that things are not always *as they are*. And I think you can apply that to art, to people, to social structures, to an understanding of the world. From a personal standpoint, the thing that makes life livable is the idea there might be a small cadre of people with whom I have a sense of solidarity, a solidarity toward a hope for something larger than we add up to together. For me that began with music—I was very involved with music in the early '80s, and that sense of camaraderie still structures my feeling of how I would like to live my life. Now art has become my home for investigation and it's something that I have great faith in, and hope for. You can bemoan art today because there are many terrible trajectories evidencing themselves right now—art is in a tough spot because it's going down a lot of nihilistic paths, but I choose to see art as fantastic because it's only worse outside, and it does offer a place of investigation for people who want to learn from each others' different ways of seeing. To believe that is an act of faith. Not all art can be summed up as only supporting a horrible market system or a horrible academic structure—all those things are totally true, but it's not *only* that. Though I can't prove it, it's just my faith in other human beings that leaves me convinced that there are people who are using art to examine how to see the world in ways that have consequence. I love your description of the Gorgon myth and how by using something that's not reflecting yourself you can take action based by what you see beyond you, action that might have real effects—to me that's like the leap of faith towards art. Maybe art doesn't change things directly, but indirect change, indirect action might also be powerful. I'm not a religious person, yet I have a faith, and that is in art, and in the people who are and could be involved in art.

RAIL: At first when I heard you're making paintings it was surprising, because almost none of the discourse around your work has concerned painting. But I

realized that you've been making works that interact with painting for a long time—for instance *The Last Supper According to Leonardo da Vinci and The Last Supper According to Josiah McElheny* (1997), made up of two shelves displaying recreations of the twelve glasses from the famous painting, and twelve reproductions of colored cups that would have been in fact historically available during the period and region; or *The Controversy Surrounding the "Veronese" Vase (From the Office of Luigi Zecchin)* (1996), where you showcase a number of failed attempts to perfectly recreate a glass vase from Veronese's *Annunciation*, hanging in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. When you were doing works like the "Veronese" vase," what did you learn about the relationship between painting and sculpture?

MCELHENY: I only realized myself a couple days ago that the history of painting has been a continuous interest of mine. When I was making those works based on paintings twenty years ago I didn't end up thinking of them as sculpture. At the time people described me as a conceptual artist, which I never claimed as a term myself. Then, seven or eight years later, people started to call me a sculptor, which I did take on because sculpture can contain almost everything. I viewed those works in the mid '90s not as sculpture but as an encounter with images and ideas that weren't contained within a frame. My notion at that time was that language and perception are inextricably intertwined, so there is no perception without language and that when you encounter a work of art you are encountering a text as much as a physical thing; the text is your own, made of all the texts you've absorbed and that you find in your mind afterwards. I saw those works as being about that, as being almost literary. You come in and see this museum-like display, and it would evoke a world or atmosphere—it's this particular type of museum or period, but it's in a contemporary art gallery and that is confusing, so maybe you have to read a little more of the texts inside the work to figure it out. "See these objects, look at the text, see the objects again"—I saw it as a performance, a set of sequential acts that were required to perceive the overall artwork. So actually, in my mind, those artworks are quite "flat." I see the objects contained in them as being images of objects. One of the reasons I made them is that I saw those objects in the paintings and I wanted to see what they *really* looked like. But when I made them they didn't seem like real versions of the original, they just seemed like new imaginary objects. I would look at the Veronese vase, for example, and my Veroneses are insufficient to meet Veronese's description of



Josiah McElheny, *Mirror Drawing (VII)*, 2004. Hand-blown and mirrored glass, metal hardware, 23 x 19 in. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.



Josiah McElheny, *The Controversy Surrounding the "Veronese" Vase (From the Office of Luigi Zecchin)*, 1996. Blown glass, metal shelving, bulletin board, drawings and text, 84 x 35 1/2 x 12 inches (shelving), 37 1/2 x 25 1/4 inches (bulletin board). Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

that vase in his painting—it wasn't the same at all! In some ways, I don't think I learned anything about sculpture from doing that, but maybe something about image. Around 2000, when I stopped making those kinds of works, I lost some of my small audience and gained some new people who became interested in my work—some people were very disappointed by the lack of linguistic elements in my new work and others said that leaving the linguistic element behind made my work much more accessible. For myself the inclusion of language within the work was just another layer of information, information that wasn't necessarily true but rather offered a point of view to be doubted or at least contemplated. The question at the heart of my interest in art at that time, and which I referred to earlier, was: Are things what they appear to be? But when I started to think that maybe by including language I was actually preventing multiple readings, or at least making it more difficult, I tried another avenue.

RAIL: The argument for the "Crystalline Prism Paintings" actually being paintings—perhaps especially the "Blue Prism Paintings," the ones after Reinhardt; or *Window Painting I*, the one after Ellsworth Kelly—seem like they could be argued for as sculptures just as strongly. Do you see them as a hybrid between the two? Or, are they paintings because you're engaging with the "image" as an imaginary space?

MCELHENY: Most people talk about a thing called the "image," but I would propose that there isn't a thing called *the* "image," but that instead there is the object and the *images* that you create as a body. There is that classic joke that "sculpture is a thing you bump into when you back up to look at a painting"; what is interesting about that joke is it shows that there is no way of seeing the painting unless you move around. All of these prismatic works are intended to have no ideal viewing point, but instead to change as much as possible—perhaps that is a cheesy idea, like a lenticular image. I've played with lenticular-like effects in sculpture for a number of years, in essence to prove that if you shift from the left foot to the right foot it's not the same image, or

that when you move your eyes from the left to the right it's not the same object. That is an important point to me—that the image is not a solid thing—and in the case of my work the object is often a foil, a kind of tool for creating images that don't easily exist in the painting because they are created by the viewer's movement. In that sense I'm very curious as to how these new works will function, because when they are photographed from straight on, they will resolve into a flat image, which will function well graphically, but really the main point to me is the fact that they move back and forth and that they change one's sense their depth and flatness, that they are malleable in that way. Perhaps by that definition they are a hybrid of sculpture and painting. But, if you're looking at Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, because it is a glazed painting, it requires that you move to different positions to see it: there is no way to see *Las Meninas* by standing in a single spot, though there is an ideal view created by a photographer. We often discuss painting based on these "ideal photographs," images that don't actually exist in person. I would propose that all paintings are sculptural in that sense. If one were to say that this problem of seeing past the highlights reflected on a painting are really only a minor quality of painting, then yes, I would concede that these new works of mine are more like a hybrid sculpture than a painting—but, from a personal point of view, I think all paintings have this hybrid quality, and that it's inherent in painting itself; but maybe my works are "just paintings" because they are otherwise built around the frame and the image inside and beyond.

RAIL: The other essay Dave Hickey wrote about your work, "Exit Left into the Mirror" (2009), is also very insightful about this dynamic, as in when he talks about both modes from Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality* being at play in your work simultaneously—that you find yourself moving around in order to apprehend yourself in relationship to it, but that they also have a very powerful sense of self-enclosure. Hickey was describing *Twentieth Century Modernism, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely* (2006), but you could see that description also fitting



Josiah McElheny, *Verzolini's Acts of Faith (Glass from Paintings of the Life of Christ)* 1996. Blown glass, text, display case; Case dimensions: 78 1/2 x 72 1/2 x 14 3/4 in. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York. Photo: Claire Garoutte.



Josiah McElheny, *Four Mirrors after a Poem by Jorge Luis Borges*, 2000. Handblown and mirrored glass, French-polished ebony, polished brass, French-polished mahogany, and metal hardware; mirrored glass: 20 x 16 1/4 in.; ebony: 27 1/2 x 18 1/2 in.; brass: 18 1/4 x 12 inches; mahogany: 23 1/2 x 16 inches; running length as installed: 111 1/2 in. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.

the "Crystalline Prism Paintings," albeit in a more subtle way.

MCELHENY: I think you are right, although that earlier work had very different aims than I am hoping for today. The infinite-mirror pieces were intended as critical works, they were trying to make an image of the horror of endless self-examination and the terror of the replication of modernity as an endless, timeless, history-less act. These new works, I'm hoping speak instead to a sense of potential. Maybe this sense of potential is only pointed out in a subtle way by what I have done in these works but maybe this subtlety actually reinforces this potential—you can't hit people over the head with potential, you have to allow them to find potential, and see the potential themselves as opposed to telling them that it's there. In that way, I want to go back to Malevich, to the sense of both hope and fear that his work represented for him. I think his works were supposed to evoke a sense of awe, not at their skill, but at the grandeur of the reality they depicted, and the terror that involves. I'm hoping that my new works speak to the relationship that I find between Malevich and Hilma af Klint, of painting as extension, of pointing forward and through and not simply as pointing back. ☺

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