ARTFORUM

Josiah McElheny

09.25.13

Josiah McElheny, ***The Club for Modern Fashions*****, 2013,** performance view.

A new exhibition by Josiah McElheny sites The Club for Modern Fashions*, a mock glass house, in the public exhibition space of a members-only art club in downtown Chicago. Performers wearing vintage fashions, from the 1920s through the 1970s, occupy the Mies-style period room within the Arts Club of Chicago weekdays for one hour at 11:30 AM, when the club's members arrive for their luncheon. Also on view is McElheny's 2012 film* The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture*. The installation, performances, and film screening continue through December 14, 2013.*

THIS EXHIBITION is deeply connected to Chicago. Chicago is an important place for me: I've worked with Donald Young Gallery for almost twenty years, and my first major museum intervention project was here, in 1998, at the Art Institute of Chicago. Ian Wardropper, who was head of the department, encouraged me to de-install a large section of the Renaissance collection in the museum's hall of arms and armor, and to install my own project there instead. It was my first engagement with a public situation at that level, with thousands of people seeing it.

The construction of the glass pavilion for *The Club for Modern Fashions* was made in collaboration with the architect John Vinci, and it echoes important elements of Chicago architectural history. Vinci was a student of Mies van der Rohe. The Arts Club was inspired by Mies; the stairway was itself designed by Mies. My decision to paint the frame of the pavilion black echoes the literal and physical appearance of Mies's projects here in Chicago, many of which involve black or at least very dark steel. *The Club for Modern Fashions*'s heritage comes from Chicago and the architectural legacy here.

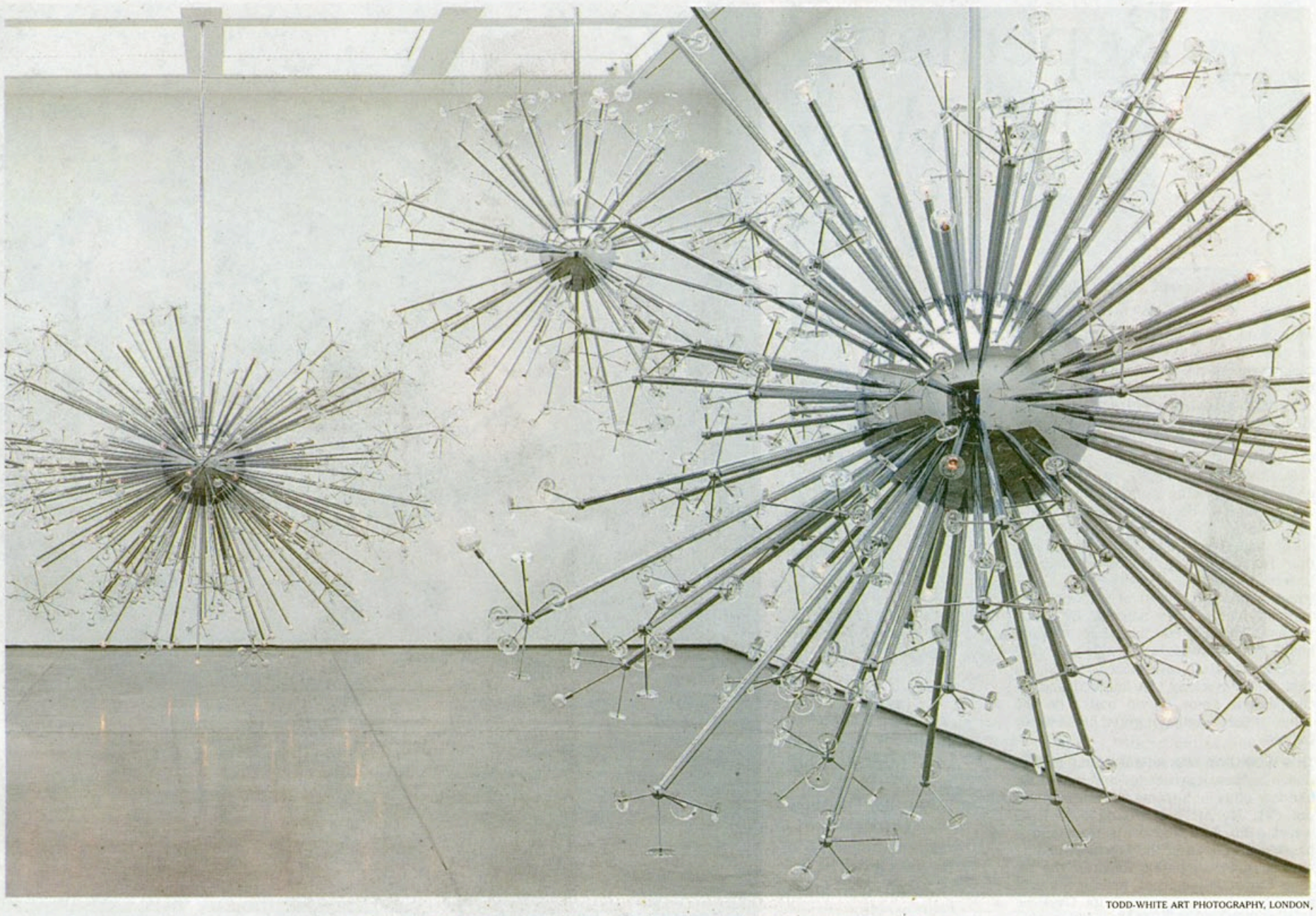
The performance was inspired by *Playtime*, the 1967 film by Jacques Tati, which is a pantomime critique of modernism, a very subtle but slapstick comedy. Tati built fake sets and buildings that are almost caricatures of Miesian modernism.

My idea was quite simple: Could people from six different eras inhabit the same moment? The clothes make the man, or the woman, so the clothes and makeup and hair should be a character. There isn't any narrative per se, except that each character is asked to act as if they can only see other characters from eras earlier than the one they are inhabiting, so the 1970s person can see all the other performers, but the 1920s woman can't see anybody else. It is as if she is alone, even when the other five characters are in the pavilion with her. If you watch very carefully you can see that. The piece only exists when it has an audience, I think.

There's the idea that people find modernism cold. Well, actually, they must find it reassuring as well, because they've been building it—and are still building it—left, right, and center. My question is, What does that mean? And why do we continue this way? As an artist, I want to understand how the world works by thinking about aesthetics. In terms of ideas of transparency and space, it seems clear that aesthetics are interconnected to the politics of any era. Also, the idea of transparency—of, for instance, dissolving the barriers around privacy on Facebook and other social media—cannot be entirely separated from the idea that a building should be transparent.

Other people's competing visions of modernism didn't win. Mies and his compatriots, and the type of architecture they believed in, won: It's being built everywhere in the world. In China, endless vistas of Miesian-style architecture are still being built. You certainly can't call it Frank Lloyd Wright–ian. Why did that become the aesthetic of the world? It's deeply political, ideological, and philosophical. It's about very specific beliefs about how society should be constructed.

— As told to Jason Foumberg

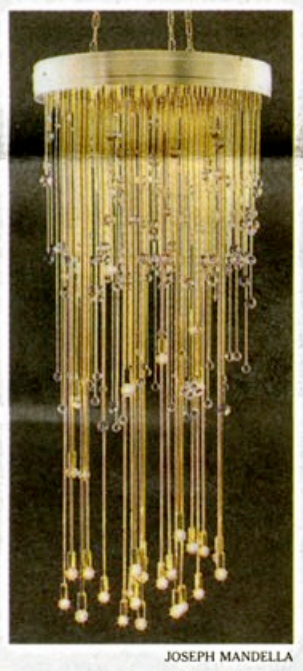


Works of Josiah McElheny that will appear at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston: "Island Universe," right, and a study for "The Center Is Everywhere," below left. Below right, Mr. McElheny working on a project at Grenfell Press in New York.

TODD-WHITE ART PHOTOGRAPHY, LONDON,

Glass Is Pretty But, He Hopes, Troubling, Too

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI



JOSEPH MANDELLA

JOSIAH McELHENY'S studio is strangely unremarkable. A narrow office furnished with a desk, a drawing table and library shelves packed with books, it betrays few signs of art making, just a couple of rows of neatly pinned photocopied images and black pencil drawings on one white wall.

It's not the work space one expects from this Brooklyn artist, known for dazzling glass works like "Endlessly Repeating Twentieth Century Modernism," a shimmering display of mirror-glass decanters that seem to go on infinitely, and "Island Universe," a suite of five room-size silvery sculptures that illuminate the Big Bang theory. Where's the flaming furnace? The globs of molten glass?

But a few hours spent with him there recently — during which he expounded on influences like Czech modernism, the 19th-century German writer Paul Scheerbart and various obscure historical incidents — demonstrated why this room, where he researches and draws, is more important to his work than his small glass foundry, also in Brooklyn. In a medium known for work many regard as lightweight and decorative, Mr. McElheny's creations strive to convey sophisticated, often dark ideas.

"McElheny brings historical narratives into his work, blending those in an incredibly rich and challenging way," said Edward Saywell, chairman of contemporary art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which made "Endlessly Repeating Twentieth Century Modernism" a centerpiece of the new contemporary art wing it opened last year. "He has boundless curiosity and ambition to connect across time periods, literature and history as a way of enriching his work" — making his work very different, Mr. Saywell noted, from the flamboyant spectacles created by Dale Chihuly, the best-known glass artist, to whom the museum devoted an exhibition last year. The result, as the MacArthur Foundation wrote when it gave Mr. McElheny a grant in 2006, is a "new, multifaceted form of contemporary art."

Over the next year Mr. McElheny will have his own big bang, a constellation of exhibitions that will reveal his work —in glass and other mediums — in more depth than ever. It started last month in New York, with a show of new work addressing fashion, abstraction and identity at Andrea Rosen Gallery, up through the end of June. In Boston on Friday, the Institute for Contemporary Art will open "Josiah McElheny: Some Pictures of the Infinite," a midcareer survey that will unveil a major piece about the cosmos, "The Center Is Everywhere." In London seven large sculptures, all involving mirrors that reflect abstract films, are on view at the Whitechapel Gallery through July 20.

BÉATRICE de GÉA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TOM VAN EYNDE

RON AMSTUTZ/ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

A detail, near right, and more, bottom, of Mr. McElheny's "Czech Modernism Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely" (2005); far right and below right, details of his models after earlier glass artists.

Other events will follow, including a gallery show in Chicago in September relating to the Swiss literary modernist Robert Walser, and the premiere in December, at the Vizcaya Museum in Miami, of a film reimagining Scheerbart's story "The Light Club of Batavia."And next year the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio will present a survey of his work, "Towards a Light Club," focused on modernism.

Oddly, given all this interest, Mr. McElheny said he is "still trying to figure out how art works." People see the wonder and beauty in his pieces, he said, but often miss, or dismiss, the meaning. What many deem his most successful work — that seductive mirrored decanters series — he calls a failure because so few viewers seemed to recognize its troubling aspects. "A bunch of things repeated endlessly?" he said. "That's a nightmare to me, an image of the horrible implications of modernism, that you never need to make another bottle design again. Isn't that the worst? What makes life interesting is change."

"There is a disconnect between what I do and what's perceived," he added. "I struggle with it all the time." At one point he wrote wall labels to accompany his works, but he is still smarting from a review in 2000 that reacted to these explanatory texts with the charge that he had created a "pointless Conceptual conceit."

A constant reader, he researches widely to develop his ideas. For an exhibition of four sculptures in 2007, he said, he and an assistant worked copiers at a public library for five days, eight hours a day, capturing images of decanters and other vessels. "I put them in notebooks and choose from them," he said. "They go into another notebook, and I make drawings from that."

The resulting work is often aimed at "correcting" history, as Mr. McElheny put it, sometimes addressing elements that have been left out — like the contributions of factory workers to design innovations or the roles of female partners of male artists in their work — through his titles or writings. Other times he retells narratives. For his film of Scheerbart's utopian fantasy about a spa where people bathe in light rather than water, he is using archival photographs showing the grand Vizcaya villa in its early days in the 1910s.

Mr. McElheny "has the ability to play with history and fantastic plausibility," said Flaminia Gennari Santori, the Vizcaya Museum's deputy director. The version of events in the work "hasn't quite happened, but it could have, and that gives him huge room for poetry and imagination, reflection and criticism, on history of the past."

Mr. McElheny's big new piece for the Institute of Contemporary Art show, "The Center Is Everywhere," came out of a suggestion by the cosmologist David Weinberg, his collaborator on the Big Bang series. It maps a dime-size patch of the sky onto a 32-inch metal disk that will be suspended from the institute's ceiling and from which 300 brass rods will descend, each ending in a crystal or light bulb whose shape and size correspond to those of a star, galaxy or quasar.

As part of the piece Mr. McElheny has printed letterpress books of the first complete English translation (which he commissioned and edited) of a prison novel by the 19th-century French socialist Auguste Blanqui, which suggests that the formation of the universe was anarchic and anti-authoritarian and might possibly provide a model for an egalitarian world. Two of these books will be displayed at the museum.

The Rosen gallery exhibition was a different matter. Mr. McElheny returned to a past subject, fashion, which is "one foil for him," Ms. Rosen said. "It seems neutral but is completely charged with politics and history." But the process was not easy: Mr. McElheny worked for a year on the show before deciding to throw everything out and start again. Stuck, for the first time he invited other artists, friends in Brooklyn and the Lower East Side, for studio visits. "It helped a lot," he said.

The blown-glass works he ultimately came up with, inspired by artists like Lucio Fontana, Kazimir Malevich, Sonia Delaunay and Varvara Stepanova, make abstract reference to the human form and speak to the way people build their identities with clothing. He also made two "performative" mirrored glass sculptures that are worn in the gallery by actors, an allusion to Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," among other things, and four clear-glass wall hangings that refer to the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, whose costume designs turned the body into abstractions.

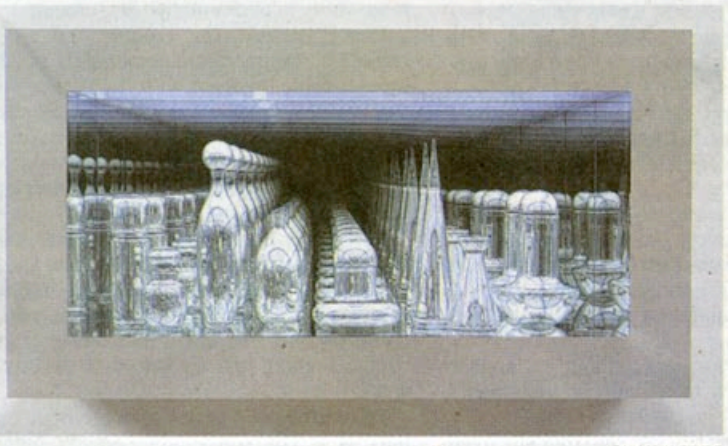
Will viewers get any of this? Mr. McElheny acknowledges that his choice of primary medium, which dates to his days as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1980s, doesn't help. "Yes," he said, "using glass is part of the problem."

Still, he added: "When I teach, I say you can't choose your ideas. You can't choose who you are. I use glass because of my own history, and glass comes with an inherent response."

But glass also presents an opportunity, Mr. McElheny suggested, noting that it's a universal tool for looking. In the end, he said, it's not the glass that's important, "it's what you see through it."

ONLINE: McELHENY

More images of the artist's work:
nytimes.com/design



TOM VAN EYNDE

The Boston Globe

Josiah McElheny's expanding universe

June 16, 2012 | James H. Burnett III

From Josiah McElhenys curiosity about cosmology came Island Universe (2008), a collection of glass and chrome starburst-like sculptures that some critics consider his most ambitious work. (TODD WHITE ART PHOTOGRAPHY, LONDON)

Josiah McElheny, a man with a passion for physics and cosmology, may have gone where no contemporary artist has gone before: deep into the origins of the universe.

McElheny, 45, a Boston-born, Brooklyn, N.Y.-based sculptor and 2006 MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" recipient, has built multiple artworks based on cosmology, including the big bang theory and ideas about the evolution and expansion of the universe.

On June 22, the Institute of Contemporary Art will present "Josiah McElheny: Some Pictures of the Infinite," his first US museum survey, on view through Oct. 14.

"Some Pictures of the Infinite" features 21 works, including sculpture, installation, film, photography, and performance, by an artist whose career appears to be expanding along with his vistas.

"I've been fortunate that I've always been busy," McElheny said with a wry chuckle during a recent phone

interview from New York.

The artist, who graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design, has had his work shown around the world in more than 50 group exhibitions and 32 solo shows. It's in the permanent collections of the ICA and Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Tate Modern in London. McElheny has a fashion-themed gallery show running through June 30 at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York.

McElheny is one of the most important artists of his generation because of the way he addresses difficult scientific questions, said Helen Molesworth, chief curator at the ICA.

"His work might be less impressive if, for example, he sought just to portray the end result of a scientific theory or a documented moment in history," Molesworth said. "But Josiah tackles the very difficult task of portraying questions in his work. It is an amazing feat that he is able to do so — in his industrial work, in his work that explores historical moments, and in his more recent scientific work — the frequent questions being where do we fit in this universe, how has its expansion affected us, and how have our actions affected it? And, of course, those all lead back to a very thoughtful exploration of time."

Indeed, "Some Pictures of the Infinite" showcases McElheny's in-depth explorations of time: historical time, archeological time, cosmic time.

"That interest in time is one of the primary reasons glass figures so prominently in my work," McElheny said. "Of all the common materials available to artists, glass may be the most malleable, the easiest to change, the most constant, at the molecular level constantly moving, and perhaps most important, the most durable. There are paintings and works of art made with canvas and wood that are just a couple hundred years old and faded or in poor condition due to aging. And there are works of glass that are 500 years old or 3,500 years old that are still intact and as powerful and beautiful as in their beginning."

McElheny's latest cosmology-based works would not have happened, he said, had he not entered the biggest collaboration of his life eight years ago.

"It's funny, because it wasn't a purely artistic collaboration," he said. "It wasn't a case where one artist approaches another and proposes a partnership that would bring their creative abilities together. In this case, I left my field altogether to ask for help from a man whose expertise was in the knowledge that I've tried for years to show through my art."

That man was David H. Weinberg, astronomy professor at Ohio State University, who says McElheny's approach both caught him off guard and warmed his heart.

"Josiah is an incredibly thoughtful person," Weinberg says. "I have worked with other creative people before. I've consulted on a film, as well. What makes Josiah unique — there are many things — is that he doesn't just have a passing interest in science, specifically in astronomy and cosmology. This wasn't just a lark for him. He gets it. And he wants the public to get it through his art. And impressive to me when we first met was how sincerely he wanted his work to be an accurate study of the cosmos and how this all got here, how it has changed, how it is changing."

The pair hit it off so well after their 2004 meeting that they have collaborated on four major projects, including "Island Universe," a collection of glass and chrome starburst-like sculptures suspended from the ceiling in what some critics say has been McElheny's most ambitious work.

The five pieces of “Island Universe” represent different models of the cosmos and other potential universes. Each structure features a central metal sphere, from which protrude metal rods that represent different lengths of time. Those in turn are tipped by clusters of handblown-glass globes and discs of different shapes and sizes, meant to represent clusters of galaxies. Light bulbs on each structure signify quasars.

Visitors who approach “Island Universe,” which is suspended just a few feet above the floor, will be able to see their own miniaturized reflections in the polished globes and discs.

“Given the size of the work, it inspires one to think about the vast size of the universe and our small place in it,” Molesworth said. “But it should be noted that while our physical presence in the universe is small, ‘Island Universe’ makes it clear through our reflections that we are at the core of our world, and a necessary component of it.”

The pieces resemble chandeliers, and in fact they were inspired by the old Lobmeyr chandeliers at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, but with Weinberg’s custom made-for-art algorithms as a blueprint.

“One of the things that made ‘Island Universe’ special for me was the manner in which David and I designed specific galactic clusters and arrangements through blown glass,” McElheny said. “I’m a big fan of accuracy, because I believe if you’re going to ask the public to look at a piece of art and think about what it means, there should be a measurable meaning to it. It’s sort of my nuts-and-bolts approach to the complexities of astronomy and cosmology.”

McElheny has long taken that nuts-and-bolts approach. Early in his career, he studied with a master glassblower in Sweden. “I toured old factories in Europe and studied at them and studied the manufacturing processes, the materials used, the items that were produced, and even the people who had worked in these places and how they fit in the process,” he said. “It was inspiring, and it has informed my work ever since.”

Indeed, in 1999 and 2000 he produced a series about Christian Dior that celebrated the innovation of fashion factory workers. The series also featured a performance-art piece called “The Metal Party” — an ode to a 1929 Bauhaus party — in which participants were asked to wear metallic costumes.

McElheny and Weinberg’s latest collaboration, “A Study for the Center Is Everywhere,” attempts to represent the Sloan Digital Sky Survey’s efforts to catalog the whole of the cosmos, one small portion at a time. The 7-foot-tall hanging sculpture features brass rods tipped with light bulbs that represent quasars and crystals that depict stars and galaxies.

If McElheny has a fear where his work is concerned, it is that both art lovers and the curious alike will read into it an obsession with a clichéd search for the answers to all of life’s questions.

“My obsession is with the science, with the art, where we fit,” McElheny said. “But my personal beliefs are such that I don’t believe in an answer. I don’t believe in even pursuing an answer, a single answer. I think if anyone claims to have the answer — to life, to where we’ve been and where we’re going — they sort of weaken our living incentive.

“In other words, the ongoing quest that we all have day to day, the quest we just engage in but don’t necessarily think hard about, is a quest for answers. And the hunt, the pursuit makes us better people. It would be terrible if we found one answer. We wouldn’t try so hard to improve ourselves, to be better to ourselves and to others.”

ARTFORUM

PUBLISHED ONLINE AUGUST 2012

“Josiah Mcelheny: Some Pictures of the Infinite”

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART
BOSTON

Through October 14
Curated by Helen Molesworth

With references from Paul Scheerbart to Josef Hoffmann, Mies van der Rohe to Yves Saint Laurent, Josiah McElheny has provided some of the most intriguing and important artistic contemplations of how the modernist legacy, high and low, survives within our post- postmodern era. Themed around the notion of the infinite, McElheny’s survey exhibition covers the past two decades of his career, gathering some twenty glassworks, sculptures, films, and a performance, many of which continue his reflections (both metaphoric and literal) on modernity. Highlights include Island Universe, 2008, wherein Lobmeyr chandelier–like structures model universes that may have been created moments after the Big Bang, and Study for The Center Is Everywhere, 2012, in which hand-cut crystals signify galaxies and lightbulbs stand in for quasars. The accompanying catalogue features contributions by Molesworth, Maria Gough, and Bill Horrigan, as well as by artists Doug Ashford, Gregg Bordowitz, Moyra Davey, Andrea Geyer, Zoe Leonard, and R. H. Quaytman.

— Branden W. Joseph

Josiah McElheny, *Study for The Center Is Everywhere* (detail), 2012, cut lead crystal, electric lighting, hand-bound book; chandelier 32 x 84 x 32”, book 7 x 10”.

ARTFORUM

Josiah McElheny

DONALD YOUNG GALLERY

"Crystalline Modernity" opened with two color drawings that McElheny had made on silver-gelatin photographs of Mies van der Rohe's 1922 plans for a Glass Skyscraper. Not to be confused with Mies's visionary Friedrichstraße project, these plans were part of a series of experiments made the following year, in the wake of Friedrichstraße's failed construction. Such source imagery provided an apt introduction to an exhibition that reimagined the legacy of modernism by reframing its historical forms. The show's centerpiece, *Crystalline Landscape After Hablik and Luckhardt* (all works 2010), a diorama of a modernist utopia, was populated not by concrete pillars or hard-edged cubes of steel and glass but by red, yellow, green, and blue crystalline glass structures encased in a cabinet of two-way mirrors. Instead of Mies's or Le Corbusier's stoicism, however, McElheny gave us a fun house, and he filled it with forms derived from drawings and watercolors by Wenzel Hablik and Wassili Luckhardt, two early-twentieth-century German Expressionists who explored spirituality through graphic fantasies. In McElheny's realization as they appeared ad infinitum in the mirrored surround, the designs became strangely inhabitable, opening virtually endless pathways for the ambulatory eye.

Josiah McElheny, *Blue Italian Modernism and Yellow Czech Modernism*, 2010, handblown glass with flashed color, extruded colored glass filters, LED electric lighting, painted wood display structure, 21 x 65 x 18¾".

Despite the apparently precise repetition of McElheny's glass forms, closer inspection revealed variation. Three blue *tempiettos* arched with slightly different curves, and the interiors of four yellow needle pyramids were each hollowed out by distinctly different volumes. Perhaps this was merely a residue of McElheny's construction process, in which the glass is molded in fabricated metal casts, the incidental deviation this method produces betraying the impossibility of mechanical perfection. And as Hablik's and Luckhardt's forms proliferated endlessly in the mirrored glass landscape, so too did their differences, demonstrating that modernism's legacy of standardization and uniformity cannot be sustained.

While *Crystalline Landscape* modeled a varied and hypertrophic urban plan, the three double vitrines mounted on the surrounding walls offered comparative studies of historical difference. Each paired display case was backlit so that the glass objects within—facsimiles of twentieth-century designs—appeared to radiate in hues of modernism's prismatic trinity: blue, red, and yellow. Their titles—for example, *Red Finnish Modernism and Yellow Czech Modernism*—were straightforward and plainly described the small sets McElheny had grouped according to national origin. Bathed in a phosphorescent glow and organized in uniformly staggered rows, these three wall pieces read like clinical displays containing not sculptures but perhaps lab-ready modernist specimens.

Notably, McElheny's selection of nations—Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Italy—directed attention away from modernism's paradigmatic geographical center (and indeed, clear temporal coordinates). But this was hardly sculpture about the periphery. Instead, correspondences staged between the vessels (each mirroring the others in number, height, and often form) suggested a central theme. In *Blue Italian Modernism and Red Finnish Modernism*, for example, a bulbous Italian vessel with a ballooning spherical top and short narrow neck opposed a squat cylindrical Finnish piece featuring a mushroom cap protruding from its rim. Though their proportions were inverted, the objects mimed one another in their distended shapes and downward thrust. In effect, they were bound both by an ambient colored glow to the other objects of shared national origin, and by formal links to pieces similarly positioned across the diptych's divide.

This proclivity for variation across the show reproduced a tendency already evident in the opening images sourced from Mies's Glass Skyscraper project, images that constitute but two of the architect's countless versions. As though celebrating the lesson learned by Mies after the failure of Friedrichstraße, McElheny's exhibition articulated a vocabulary of modernism that, rather than tending toward homogeneity, produces a language for difference—one that he insists history already offers.

—Maggie Taft

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

‘Crystalline Architecture’

Untitled, 1964, metal and plastic, by Robert Smithson. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

By KAREN ROSENBERG
Published: August 6, 2010

Andrea Rosen Gallery

525 West 24th Street

Chelsea

Through Aug. 20

Most galleries in Chelsea have small back rooms that serve as project spaces or repositories of unsold odds and ends. The one at Andrea Rosen, known as Gallery 2, is being put to more inspired use. In previous seasons it’s hosted mini-shows of Walker Evans and Félix González-Torres; more recently it’s become a place for artists to play curator.

Last month the gig went to the painter Nigel Cooke, whose punningly titled “She Awoke With a Jerk” conveyed a self-loathing mood in figuration. This month’s show, organized by the sculptor Josiah McElheny, is all about the “Crystalline” aesthetic — meaning “fractures, reflections and natural, imperfect geometry,” in Mr. McElheny’s words.

It’s a major theme in his own art, which makes abundant use of mirrored and transparent glass. Here he traces the Crystalline back to the Weimar era: gathering watercolors, prints and drawings by members of the expressionist-influenced “Crystal Chain” group and the early Bauhaus. Bruno Taut and Walther Klemm envisioned mountainous landscapes of

monolithic crystals; Walter Gropius designed a jagged monument to workers who died defending the Weimar Republic against a coup attempt in 1920.

The Crystalline faded from view during the political shifts of the early 1920s. But it reappeared in the 1960s, this time with more hippieish ideology. And it's had a second resurgence, in very contemporary art. From the '60s Mr. McElheny has chosen Robert Smithson's untitled metal-and-plastic wall sculpture with facetlike triangles. It's echoed by a handful of works made this year: a sculpture by Katja Strunz, a photograph of angled mirrors by Eileen Quinlan, and Mr. McElheny's own "Crystal Mirror 2," with its irregular pentagonal frame.

Just as fascinating as the art is Smithson's essay "The Crystal Land," on view in its original context — the May 1966 issue of Harper's Bazaar. It details a day spent wandering around New Jersey quarries with Donald Judd. Smithson seemed to glimpse the entire state through a prism: "From the shiny chrome diners to glass windows of shopping centers, a sense of the crystalline prevails."

These shows are a great idea: the artists get to flex their intellectual muscles, the gallery broadens its horizons, and we're treated to a highly idiosyncratic mix along the lines of the Museum of Modern Art's "Artist's Choice." Everyone wins.
KAREN ROSENBERG

A version of this review appeared in print on August 6, 2010, on page C25 of the New York edition.

THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWARTSKÜNSTLERN

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Editions for Parkett

John Baldessari Carol Bove Josiah McElheny Philippe Parreno

Shadow Play

TOM McDONOUGH

In June 1927 Isamu Noguchi was a young sculptor in Paris, serving as an assistant to Constantin Brancusi. He would regularly visit the annual salon where the latter's polished bronze LEDA (1926) was on display, in order to buff its surface to the smoothness of a looking glass. LEDA's reflective shell dissolved the absolute geometries of its solid form in an inexact, unstable gleam, the certain shape of the sculpture giving way to accidental, distorted patterns of light and dark reflected from the space of the room in which it was exhibited. In optics the shiny polished metal favored by Brancusi would be called a specular surface, one that tends toward a perfect, mirror-like reflection of light. Noguchi could not help but notice the absence of shadows in his daily inspection of the work, or rather, the fact that shadows were no longer projected from within the work, as the kinds of pockets of darkness normally produced across the planes of a sculpture, but instead could only be cast onto the work as reflections from the outside. And that casting was somehow cinematic, with Noguchi's movements—his transitory, mobile reflection—"recorded" upon LEDA's immaculate, polished surfaces.[1)]

When Noguchi returned to New York in 1929, the implications of Brancusi's polished bronze sculpture were radicalized upon meeting Buckminster Fuller in a bohemian Greenwich Village tavern whose walls had been covered with shiny aluminum paint by the utopian visionary. Noguchi would soon repeat the gesture in his own small studio, "so that one was almost blinded," he later recalled, "by the lack of shadows."[2)] It was there that he made his famous portrait bust, R. BUCKMINSTER FULLER (1929), plating its bronze—upon Fuller's suggestion—in the relatively inexpensive chrome that Henry Ford had begun using on the radiator grilles of his Model A cars. As Fuller explained, "sculptors, through the ages, had relied exclusively upon negative light"—that is, shadows—as a tool in the perception of three-

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JOSIAH McELHENY, EXTENDED LANDSCAPE MODEL FOR TOTAL REFLECTIVE ABSTRACTION, 2004, hand-blown mirrored glass objects, industrial mirror, wood, metal, 24 x 108 x 92" / ERWEITERTES LANDSCHAFTSMODELL FÜR EINE TOTAL REFLEXIVE ABSTRAKTION, mundgeblasene verspiegelte Glasobjekte, Industriespiegel, Holz, Metall, 61 x 274,3 x 233,7 cm.

dimensional form; Noguchi's turn to positive light reflections was a shift toward a "fundamental invisibility of the surface," a sculpture that communicated only via "a succession of live reflections of images surrounding it."[3] A dematerialized sculpture, then, or a cinematic (from the Greek, *kinein*, "to move") one, whose effects would rely not upon form but solely upon luster, the mobile highlights on the now invisible work that move as the spectator's position shifts. Illumination would be set free to become what art historian Michael Baxandall described as "light at large, enfranchised or footloose light."[4]

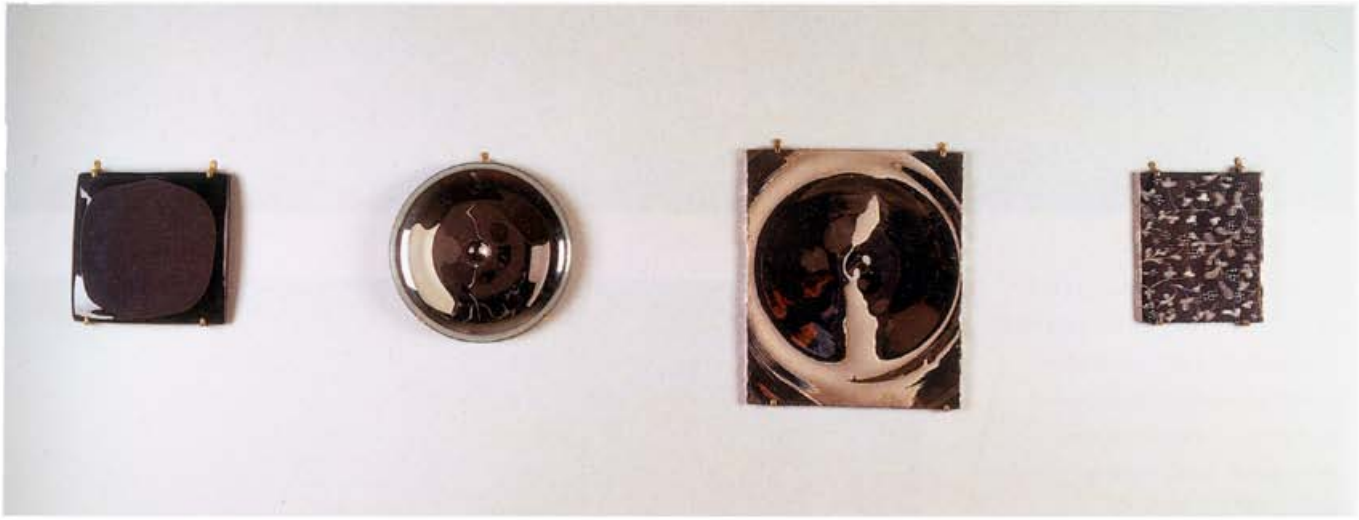
Needless to say, Noguchi and Fuller's plans for an invisible sculpture of generalized specular reflection—their idea of a reflective form in a reflective environment—went unrealized. The very idea lay dormant, barely acknowledged, until spring 2003, when Josiah McElheny first exhibited BUCKMINSTER FULLER'S PROPOSAL TO ISAMU NOGUCHI FOR THE NEW ABSTRACTION OF TOTAL REFLECTION (2003), an array of mirrored reflective glass objects

JOSIAH McELHENY, THE METAL PARTY: RECONSTRUCTING A PARTY HELD IN DESSAU ON FEBRUARY 9, 1929 (2001), mixed media installation, costumes, music, participatory performance, dimensions variable / DAS METALLISCHE FEST: REKONSTRUKTION EINES AM 9. FEBRUAR 1929 IN DESSAU STATTGEFUNDENEN FESTES, Installation, verschiedene Materialien, Kostüme, Musik, partizipatorische Performance, Masse variabel.

reminiscent of Noguchi's biomorphic forms placed atop a mirror display box. Each one presents a distorted reflection of the viewer, of the sheet of mirrored glass upon which it sits, and of the surrounding environment; meanwhile the objects themselves are doubled by reflections in the mirrored surface below them. The visual result is paradoxical: while shape seems to alter continually depending on the way light falls on the surface, the work resists optical penetration, rebuffing the gaze with its icy reflections. This late realization of the 1929 dreams of Noguchi and Fuller was instigated by curator Ingrid Schaffner, who had cited the exchange between artist and engineer in an essay commissioned by the artist for the post-exhibition book on THE METAL PARTY (2001–02). McElheny's performance/ installation reprised an event at the Bauhaus (also held in the fateful year of 1929). In the wake of that project, the artist was already considering "the idea that metallic-ness and reflective surfaces are physical expressions of the modern."[5] Such a statement is deceptively simple: while it seems to conjure up the long appreciation of metal as a paradigmatically modern material—think of Walter Benjamin's or Sigfried Giedion's writings on construction in iron and steel, or of the metal books produced by the Italian futurist Tullio d'Albisola—McElheny emphasizes not its constructive, tectonic aspect but its surface gleam, not metal's solidity but the sparkle of "metallic-ness." For him, physically reflective surfaces rhyme with the mental act of self-examination, and indeed since THE HISTORY OF MIRRORS (1998) he has explored technologies of mirroring and the nature of images that are at once the same, and not the same, as us.

But the series of works inaugurated by THE METAL PARTY are fundamentally about something different. Indeed, what they imagined in playful form, echoing the early twentieth-century optimism of the Bauhaus itself, becomes at once seductive and nightmarish in BUCKMINSTER FULLER'S PROPOSAL TO ISAMU NOGUCHI and the related EXTENDED LANDSCAPE MODEL FOR TOTAL REFLECTIVE ABSTRACTION (2004).We might characterize these works as environments wholly given over to the invisibility of objects, objects whose immaculate surfaces seem to deny any human point of origin. "A reflective object," McElheny has observed, "one without shadow, and a liquid, fugitive surface could represent capitalism's false promise that all evidence of human labor could be erased."[6] There is an evident irony here, for the artist, who spent a year in his foundry making this and related works, puts the perfection of his skills as an artisan in the service of mimicking the precision of the industrial object.

JOSIAH McELHENY, THE HISTORY OF MIRRORS, 1998, hand-blown, mirrored, polished, and engraved glass, hardware, dimensions variable / DIE GESCHICHTE DER SPIEGEL, mundgeblasenes verspiegeltes Glas, poliert und graviert, Halterungen, Masse variabel.



Indeed, in their well-nigh fetishistic flawlessness, these works appear to approach the realm of industrial branding and commodity design. Nowhere is that irony more evident than in MODERNITY, MIRRORED AND REFLECTED INFINITELY (2003), a wall-mounted display case whose eight mirrored, blown-glass decanters are echoed ad infinitum inside their mirrored surround. Here, reflection becomes the endless repetition of the same, in an adaptation of an aesthetic pioneered two decades earlier by Jeff Koons or Haim Steinbach. But whereas those artists had frequently played with the most demotic of commodity forms, McElheny looks instead to the pinnacles of mid-twentieth-century good taste—Italian or Swedish art glass—that he now renders as unlovely, mirrored objects. This self-contained world of luxury is accentuated by McElheny's use of a two-way mirrored front for the vitrine, which refuses our reflection on these vessels; they exist in an airless world all their own. The glass decanters perform in a miniature theater, a cinema of infinite space in which modernism's image of the good life becomes an alien realm of chilling, frozen perfection.

If one line of development from BUCKMINSTER FULLER'S PROPOSAL TO ISAMU NOGUCHI points toward the display cases of MODERNITY, MIRRORED AND REFLECTED INFINITELY, MODERNITY CIRCA 1952, MIRRORED AND REFLECTED INFINITELY (2004), or ENDLESSLY REPEATING TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNISM (2007), another line leads us to those works inspired by his fascination with science and cosmology, most notably the spectacular installation AN END TO MODERNITY (2005), THE LAST SCATTERING SURFACE (2006), and ISLAND UNIVERSE (2008). Much has been written on his modeling of the expansion of the universe from a primordial hot, dense state, which McElheny developed in collaboration with an astronomer at Ohio State University.[7] Yet what has been less remarked upon are the features it shares with the works of reflective abstraction—not merely a commonality of mirrored materials, but an underlying conceptual continuity. For all these works partake of an identical concern with homogeneity and isotropy as fundamental assumptions of modernity. We find them manifest in the infinite reflections of his vitrines, but they are also subtly encoded within the structure

JOSIAH McELHENY, ENDLESSLY REPEATING TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNISM, 2007, hand-blown mirrored glass objects, transparent and low-iron industrial mirror, chrome metal, wood, lighting, 94 1/2 x 92 3/4 x 92 3/4" / ENDLOS WIEDERHOLTER MODERNISMUS DES ZWANZIGSTEN JAHRHUNDERTS, mundgeblasene verspiegelte Glasobjekte, transparenter und eisenarmer Industriespiegel, Chrom, Holz, Licht, 240 x 235,5 x 235,5 cm.

of AN END TO MODERNITY, as precisely the simplifications that allowed the model of the Big Bang to be formulated in the first place. At mid-century, when the phrase "Big Bang" was itself coined, both modernist design and science shared a kind of inhuman elegance that is the very basis on which the techno-scientific and the aesthetic meet. It is this, rather than the technicalities of astrophysics, which the artist has been exploring these past five years.

The Bauhaus marked one instance of such a conjunction and the meeting of Fuller and Noguchi another. The Sputnik-like chandeliers of New York's Metropolitan Opera House (designed by Hans Harald Rath of J. & L. Lobmeyr for the building's 1966 opening), McElheny's inspiration for his recent work, are of course a third. Each, we might say, promised a world of light and order, a world of transcendence and invisibility, through the aestheticized echo of advanced technology, but those promises of modernity went unfulfilled and in fact what was delivered was an increasingly closed system of cultural administration. McElheny

JOSIAH McELHENY, ENDLESSLY REPEATING TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNISM, 2007, details / ENDLOS WIEDERHOLTER MODERNISMUS DES ZWANZIGSTEN JAHRHUNDERTS, Details.
(Image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

has spent recent years exploring this realm through his specular surfaces, imitating in miniature the techno-scientific utopias of the last century. His works remind us that modernity's beliefs in the power of illumination and the promise of seeing as a transcendental experience (as embodied in glass, "pure, clear and invisible, empty of symbols") were subtended by the dispelling of shadow as imperfection, unevenness, as a "hole in light."[8] Noguchi's intuition before Brancusi's polished bronze, amplified to an environmental scale by Fuller, was precisely of a world of the complete and utter provision of light. But what is lost through the absence of shadows? We experience shadow as uncanny, as ghost, secret, threat, but it is—or rather could be—a source of enlightenment itself. McElheny's reflective work returns us to this other of modernity and asks us, to quote Baxandall, "to think about how shadow could bear us knowledge."[9]

1) This discussion of Brancusi is indebted to the work of Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), pp. 85–87, 99; and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Eight Gray: Between Vorschein and Glanz" in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray*, eds. Meghan Dailey, Elizabeth Franzen, and Stephen Hoban (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, 2002), p. 20.
2) Isamu Noguchi, quoted in *Buckminster Fuller: An Autobiographical Monologue/Scenario*, ed. Robert Snyder (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 62.
3) R. Buckminster Fuller, "Foreword" in *Noguchi, A Sculptor's World* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 8.
4) Michael Baxandall, *Shadows and Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 131.
5) "Q&A with Josiah McElheny" in *Josiah McElheny: The Metal Party*, ed. Apollonia Morrill (New York: Public Art Fund and San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2002), p. 59.
6) McElheny, "Projects 84: Josiah McElheny: Artists and Models," lecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 12 March 2007.
7) See David Weinberg, "The Glass Universe: Where Astronomy Meets Art," *New Scientist* no. 2685 (December 7, 2008), pp. 46–47.
8) McElheny quoted in McElheny and Louise Neri, "The Glass Bead Game" in *Josiah McElheny*, ed. Maria do Céu Baptista and McElheny (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea and Xunta de Galicia, 2002), p. 79.
9) See note 4, p. 145.

A Conversation

JOSIAH McELHENY & LYNNE COOKE

LYNNE COOKE: I'd like to start this discussion by asking about a phrase I've often heard you use: "quixotic confluences"—which, I think, means things that, having come together in totally unforeseen ways, continue to resonate. You once told me that sometimes you begin a work by responding to a story or an event and that during the course of this pursuit, something else frequently comes up which overlays the piece. This was the case when your multi-part sculpture ISLAND UNIVERSE (2008) was installed in the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid. Siting the work in this historic building introduced a set of references to architectural traditions involving glass and its ideologies that had not been envisioned at the beginning of the project.

JOSIAH McELHENY: This takes me back to my piece FROM AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION (2000), which began with a simple discovery I made while walking through an exhibition. Reading a museum label for a 1950s or 1960s vase, I was surprised that it said the form was based on a design by the workers, who were inspired by the dresses worn by the factory owner's wife. That was so striking and I set out to make something more out of the story—something that, in a nod to realism, would remain faithful to the factory's design aesthetics as well as to the fashions (in general) of that era. But it became immediately apparent that I would have to choose among many strains of mid-century fashion. While researching the period I kept coming across the phrase, the "New Look," which originally comes from the American editor of *Vogue*. In a phone call (or cable) from Paris in the spring of 1947 to her Manhattan office, she said about Christian Dior's first collection: "It's the New Look." I then found out that Dior's fashion, this "New Look," resulted in actual protests throughout the United States against Dior and then, paradoxically, widespread acceptance! Finally the term became a kind of catch-all for the return to optimism after the war. This seems to me a rare historical moment when fashion had found itself at the center of the cultural dialogue. So I thought I should attempt to meld, ad hoc, all of these unrelated, somewhat accidental and circumstantial notions, with my observation about an ostensibly minor event, building these associations into something larger.

LC: Did it ever occur to you that the wall label might be false or that it might be a disingenuous fabrication? Would it have mattered if someone had been playing games with the truth?

JM: Well, actually, you caught me because what the label *really* said—I told the story in "my" way—is that the vase was designed by the owner's wife.

LC: Oh.

JM: A friend who had worked in the factory in the fifties told me that the label was not true. I pressed

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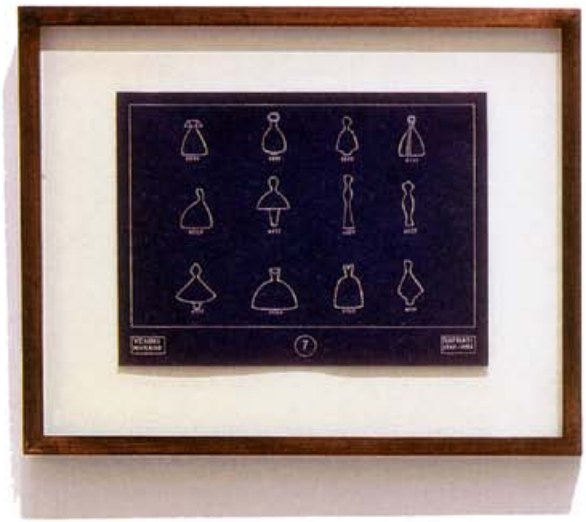
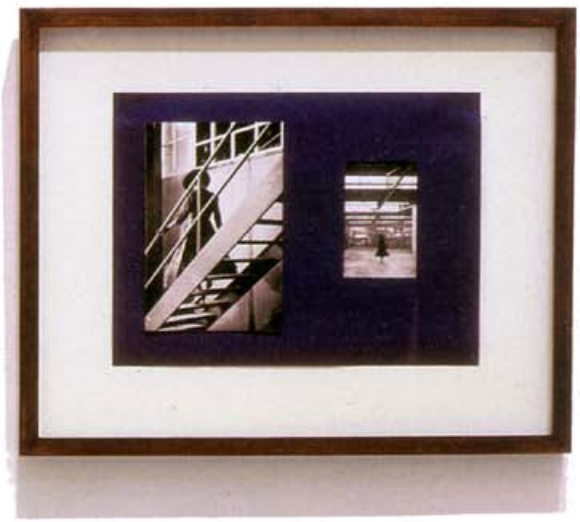
about Overlapping Cultural Histories of Production in Art, Design and Fashion





JOSIAH McELHENY, AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION, 1999, detail, hand-blown glass objects, display case, drawing, photographs, text, dimensions variable / EINE HISTORISCHE ANEKDOTE ÜBER DIE MODE, Ausschnitt, mundgeblasene Glasobjekte, Vitrine, Zeichnungen, Photographien, Masse variabel.

him on it, and he told me the name of the worker who had actually designed and made the vase. It all boils down to very strict class distinctions, to the idea that it was impossible for any factory worker to design anything. So the owner's wife had to take credit for the design, for recognizing it as something good enough for the factory to produce. Even more surprisingly though, he told me that this sort of thing happened all the time; workers would go and see the latest couture in shop windows—he mentioned that he was particularly interested in Courrèges—and then go right back to the factory and make something inspired by that at lunchtime. So you're right; it doesn't matter whether the label is true or not. What's important is that it's completely unpredictable how ideas will move through culture and end up being expressed, how ideas will twist and sometimes eventually become something else altogether.

LC: The protests against the "New Look" in both the United States and France had to do with the vast amount of cloth it took to make Dior's particular version of a ballooning skirt. This happened shortly after the war when rationing had only recently ended. In addition, the French government had continued to offer economic support for the couture industry (because of the jobs and manufacturing it stimulated) whereas the British and American governments did not support their fashion industries financially. So the French had an advantage in the marketplace. There was thought to be an ethical basis to the protests on both these counts. Looking at these vases, which are extraordinary luxury objects, and thinking about the factory owner's wife's dresses, remind us that today Dior's look has ironically become the hallmark of the early post-war era. It was a look designed exclusively for the upper classes—though of course, there were replicas and knock-offs—and in that, essentially, it was about excess. Does your installation of refined glass vases pertain to this same luxury culture? Or is there a degree of ironic self-reflexivity? As we consider not only the vases but the way that you have chosen to display them, it's hard to ignore the status of their prototypes.

JM: I think it is relevant that they are self-reflexive and perhaps ironic. I found out later that the owner's wife's daughter believed I had missed the central point, which was that the factory workers hated their employer's wife. I had depicted them as lusting after her, but they were Communists and she was the owner. And so these ironies, too, become part of the piece.

JOSIAH McELHENY, FROM AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION, 2000, detail, hand-blown glass objects, display case, 5 framed digital prints, dimensions variable, display case, 72 x 120 x 27", digital prints 18 x 25 1/2" each / AUS EINER HISTORISCHEN ANEKDOTE ÜBER DIE MODE, Ausschnitt, mundgeblasene Glasobjekte, Vitrine, 5 gerahmte digitale Prints, Masse variabel, Vitrine, 183 x 305 x 68,5 cm, digitale Drucke, je 45,7 x 64,7 cm.

Josiah McElheny

JOSIAH McELHENY, CHARLOTTE PERRIAND, CARLOS SCARPA, OTHERS (WHITE), 2000, hand-blown glass objects, painted wood and metal shelf, 89 1/2 x 93 1/2 x 15" / mundgeblasene Glasobjekte, bemaltes Holz und Metallregal, 227,3 x 237,5 x 38 cm.

This little history says something about the amorality of ideas. Once absorbed into other fields, even ideas with an ethical basis can become disconnected from their original morality, and thereby hopefully more generative. The notion that all ideas should retain their original moral structure is, on some level, dangerous.

LC: We have been reviewing this artwork in terms of luxury artifacts that belong to a particular history of design. What happens when we flip our perspective and start to think of it as sculpture? Should we now talk about the vases as non-functional objects? Thinking of them in sculptural terms introduces notions that don't connect with the sorts of epithets we relate to luxury goods and their display. This is due to the relationship between the categories of design and fine art, and the conventional hierarchies that subtend those categories.

JM: In the past fifty years, there's been a huge increase in the number of people visiting art museums. But feeling connected to fine art is still confined to a relatively narrow band of society, whereas design—as a set of aesthetics that gets copied and repeated—influences all kinds of activities throughout society. Since the twentieth century, luxury goods are no longer the province of just the wealthy. They may be invented with the financial backing of the wealthy, but they inevitably get dispersed within society till they reflect the broad spectrum of all that is happening at that time.

LC: Within modernist design history, some of the best known early works came from the Bauhaus and similar groups who advocated a socially utopian role for design: they intended, or at least hoped, to better living standards by making works that would be available to a wide range of people. Venini glass belongs to a different history. Perhaps it depends on what kind of history one is writing, but I would not be inclined to place Venini in the same history as the Bauhaus, Charles and Ray Eames, and like-minded designers.

JM: It's not unlike the field of art in the sense that there are so many trajectories and circles of art practice.

LC: In the histories of modernist art we prioritize radicality and innovation—whereas in design, the value of an object generally relates not only to its aesthetic but to its potential to be inexpensively mass-produced. This underlies, for example, the way we look at Bauhaus objects, like Wagenfeld's glass designs. By contrast, when we look at Venini, we are confronted with an extraordinary level of craftsmanship and a realm of tremendous privilege, almost an haute couture of objects. Don't we ultimately look at these artifacts in somewhat different terms?

JM: I would argue that our apprehension of these objects is almost always factually wrong—the truth is often the flip side of what we think. Aside from Breuer's tubular metal furniture, most of what was designed at the Bauhaus was only produced in small

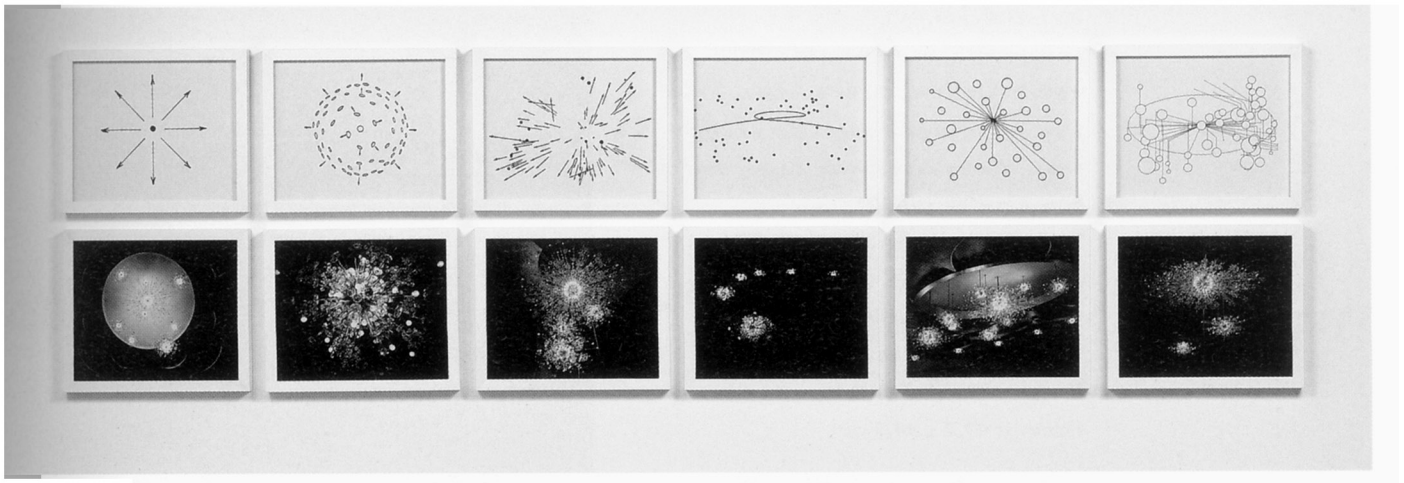
quantities and never achieved any kind of broad influence until much later with Herman Miller or Knoll, or maybe now, with something like Ikea. Take Josef Hoffmann, for instance, whose work was made in small workshops that were located in the same building where he was designing them. Or Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé, who also produced their own designs in very small numbers. I would be curious to know how many of Le Corbusier's furniture pieces were really made when they were initially designed. In Venini's case where the production was definitely in relatively small numbers, it nonetheless involved a factory with multiple teams of five to eight people working in shifts. While there is an intense collaboration among skilled workers and a very high level of workmanship, the process still takes place inside a factory. Our typical assumptions and perceptions about these issues are quite mixed up and do not necessarily line up with the truth of how things are made, the truth of the circumstances of an object's production.

LC: Would you agree that, at the current moment, there is a greater distance than usual between artists who have access to extraordinary resources for the production of objects (not only film and video or related technology-based works employing special effects) and more modest forms of production? Is there a wider spectrum now than there was, say, in the sixties? Compare the fabrication of Judd's works in the sixties, which required a skilled set of people to produce, with an artist like Richard Tuttle, who was using the equivalent of cast-offs. And then consider the spectrum today. There seems to be an even wider division between, say, Matthew Barney and Olafur Eliasson, whose production costs are very high, and others like Francis Alÿs and Joëlle Tuerlinckx who, perhaps partly for ideological reasons, deliberately choose to limit the resources they utilize in any particular piece.

JM: We are now seeing a wider spread because society has a wider division of wealth between the working class and the upper class. But, on the other hand, it may not be so different: there were always artists who ended up gravitating towards highly sophisticated production. As Judd, for example, started to have more involved relationships with the people making and installing his work, it appears that the work became closer to how he really intended it to be. This is partly because he began making decisions in direct collaboration with specific people who were extremely knowledgeable about craft. But in order to do this he had to essentially take over a small metal working company. Similarly, Jeff Koons claims that his work has evolved to be more the way he wants it to be, but this has required immense monetary resources. So perhaps the scale has changed, but the idea of utilizing expensive skilled fabrication techniques has not changed so much. From the opposite point of view I would argue that Matthew Barney—even though there is so much money necessary for his films—is deeply involved with his own studio in the making of his hybrid sculptural objects, both props and sculptures, and has an intensive relationship to them. The significant difference now results from true outsourcing—of artists claiming not to care how the work looks. "Here is a drawing. Come back with the finished version; however it turns out is fine." This is a different development from the idea of building a support structure that allows one to get closer to the utopian goal of making an artwork look exactly the way it does in the imagination.

LC: Where does this situation leave painting? Whether a Susan Rothenberg or a Caravaggio, doesn't it still comprise, more or less, a piece of cloth with some colored dirt applied to it? Not only are the materials similar, but so is what it takes to acquire those materials and to work on them. Painting therefore seems to be in a totally different place from other art forms in today's spectrum.

JM: The system of painting has not changed much since the Renaissance, but at that time it was actually incredibly difficult to produce a painting—to get the pigments, the labor, the commission to, let's say, do a fresco or to pay for all the assistants it took to create a large history painting. But we have so much more wealth now and, at least in the West, we can leverage so much more labor than they could in the days of Rubens. You can get so much more "productivity" now for the same amount of money. There is an infinitely greater amount of material abundance now—paint and canvas (and time) are so much cheaper for us in Western society than they were back then. Paint-



JOSIAH McELHENY, DRAWINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS FOR A CHANDELIER, 1965 (2004), edition of 10, each consisting of 12 digital C-prints, 10 x 12" each / ZEICHNUNGEN UND PHOTOGRAPHIEN FÜR EINEN LEUCHTER, 12 digitale C-Prints, je 25,4 x 30,5 cm.

ing sits in an economic situation that has a different relationship to history. In that sense the question of how it relates to production is a very old one.

LC: If you consider a shorter time span, a modernist history, does this situation change? Beginning with Manet, or, better, with the Impressionists, painting has remained relatively unchanged in terms of scale of production: Picasso and Amy Sillman need more or less the same resources and amounts of stuff to make their works. With sculpture it may be similar. Given the fact that Rodin didn't actually carve or cast his bronzes—his stone carvings were done by specialized craftsmen, as were his bronze casts—the scale and composition of his workshop and studio were not so different from some of those we see today, whether that of Koons or your own somewhat different situation.

JM: I would return to the idea that the economic and labor issues are not always what they appear to be. I believe that these are important questions because so much of the information about production that is visible within the artwork ends up becoming part of its content. We make a lot of assumptions from that information. Take, for instance, a Luc Tuymans painting. Part of our response to it involves a consideration of its modesty—even if we are mistaken about the work's actual economic, labor, or production values.

LC: Does that mean that a certain pathos surrounds painting today?

JM: Well, yes, because a lot of these questions have to do with the idea of what we as individuals can do. Compared to other times in history, we don't do very much. We have become so specialized that, as a result, we are severely limited in terms of what any of us can do. Painting, however, still represents something that we intuitively feel can be done by the individual. And in terms of sculpture, this constant question of what can be made by an individual or small group remains paramount even as production in the twenty-first century evolves further away? from people. A hundred years ago, in this very spot where we're sitting in Brooklyn, virtually every single everyday item would have been made within a two- or three-hundred mile radius, if not down the street. And that would have been true, more or less, in any other urban environment, but it's absolutely not true now.

LC: This seems compounded by the fact that, in many instances today, most of us can't tell how something has been made. Nor can we precisely identify its materials, nor can we understand the processes by which—especially with electronic goods—it functions. Perhaps that's partly why we often savor things made by hand—painting included.

BRANDEN W. JOSEPH

PLAY and DISPLAY

Josiah McElheny's MODEL FOR A FILM SET (THE LIGHT SPA AT THE BOTTOM OF A MINE) (2008) consists of an irregular curtain wall of clear hexagonal glass bricks, forming a backdrop against which stacks of colored glass cubes and hexagons rise in a vaguely architectural scene. Like all of McElheny's work, MODEL's apparent simplicity opens onto complex interactions of abstraction and representation, art and design, objecthood and fiction. The "light spa" it ostensibly models is that of "The Light Club of Batavia," a "ladies' novelette" by visionary architect and writer Paul Scheerbart, which recounts a secret pact to transform an abandoned mine shaft into a fantastic setting of Tiffany glass.[1] McElheny's reference to Scheerbart, also invoked in THE ALPINE CATHEDRAL AND THE CITY-CROWN (2007), augments his sculpture's dialectical resonances. For although Scheerbart's ideas informed the glass and steel of International Style Modernism—inspiring the likes of Bruno Taut and Mies van der Rohe—they also envisioned an unrealized alternative of brightly-hued glass, enamel, porcelain, majolica, and ornamented concrete. "I should like to resist most vehemently the undecorated 'functional style,'" declared Scheerbart in no uncertain terms, "for it is inartistic."[2]

MODEL features in the movie LIGHT CLUB (2008), a collaboration between McElheny and Jeff Preiss, wherein a continuous panning and rotating shot renders its curtain wall a vitreous waterfall as well as an analogue for the filmstrip running through the projector. In its brightness, simplicity, tactility, and miniaturization, however, McElheny's sculpture calls to mind less a movie set than a set of children's blocks, arranged into an imaginary landscape for a model train. The resemblance only enhances McElheny's Scheerbartian reference. For according to Walter Benjamin, the oddly-formed beings who populate Scheerbart's science fiction—from the Vestians of "Malvu the Helmsman" to the Pallasians of Lesábendio—represent nothing other than the children of our posthuman future, "new, lovable, and interesting

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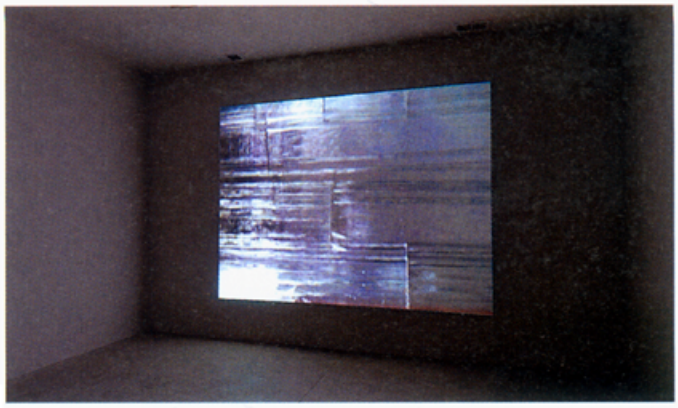
JOSIAH McELHENY, MODEL FOR A FILM SET (THE LIGHT SPA AT THE BOTTOM OF A MINE), 2008, Hand-blown colored glass modules, cement, wood, 37 x 37 1/2 x 68" / MODELL FÜR EIN FILMSETTING (DAS LICHTBAD IN EINEM MINENSCHACHT), mundgeblasene Glasmodule, Zement, Holz, 94 x 95,3 x 172,7 cm.

creatures" for whom "humanlikeness—a principle of humanism—is something they reject."[3]

McElheny has conjured stark and stunning visions of futuristic environments in his LANDSCAPE MODEL FOR TOTAL REFLECTIVE ABSTRACTION I-V (2004) and the SCALE MODEL FOR A TOTALLY REFLECTIVE LANDSCAPE (2007) series, dazzling topographies made entirely of mirrored glass. In their scale, horizontality, and formal vocabulary, they quote Isamu Noguchi's playground and furniture designs. For McElheny, these lesser-valued facets of Noguchi's work imply utilitarian and ludic interactions with quotidian objects. What he calls the "Useful Noguchi" "raises questions about the possible interactions between a work of art and the person encountering it, and... asks how that experience might end up influencing the way we relate to the ordinarily nonabstract, everyday world... [W]e are an integral part of the picture, welcome to explore, interact, and play around."[4]

McElheny's mirrored glass references Noguchi's 1929 chrome-plated bust of Buckminster Fuller, made following the latter's suggestion that a highly reflective object in a completely reflective space would eliminate shadows. In Fuller's vision of a "modernist utopia," all "dark space" would be eradicated, and the individual—endlessly reflected and refracted across various surfaces—would be shown in a state of constant transformation. "Wherever you look," notes McElheny of his sculptural realizations, "you are reflected hundreds of times—conventional mirrored reflections, but also distorted, abstracted, ever-changing reflections of yourself."[5]

The dialectics of Modernism played themselves out most insistently about the transformation of the human subject. To be modern was to contemplate



JOSIAH McELHENY and JEFF PREISS, LIGHT CLUB, 2008. 16 mm film transferred to video, 72 min. / LICHTCLUB, 16-mm-Film transferiert auf Video.

the birth of a "new man"—childlike in the ability to experience the environment wrought by twentieth century technologies of speed, communication, and reproducibility free from prejudice and tradition—whereas modernism was pedagogy, intended to instill a "new vision," the capacity to perceive one's surroundings from novel perspectives and in the "objectivity" of pure abstraction. Capitalism, with which modernism is inextricable, shared the goal of a subject without the drag (or ballast) of history, in a state of constant transformation, albeit yoked to the arbitrary (and profitable) alterations of fashion. Scheerbart pointedly allegorized the modern condition in "Malvu the Helmsman," where inhabitants of the asteroid Vesta not only transform continually (losing and regrowing limbs), but must be forever on the move across islands that are themselves constantly transported along swirling "electrified" seas.[6] As for any modern urban dweller, such perpetual movement induces stress. Scheerbart's main character, Malvu, helps the Vestians transcend constant activity for a life contemplating history, philosophy, and religion within the glass "lighthouses" that tower above the ocean's surface. Out of the incessant shocks of *Erlebnis*—the "lived throughness" that Benjamin saw as characteristic of modernity—the Vestians forge a new *Erfahrung*, the holistic, organic "experience" that, in its traditional form, modernity had destroyed.

In the literature thus far devoted to McElheny, much is made of his apprenticeship to master glassblowers, whose craft is handed down orally in a tradition reaching back to the Middle Ages, a form of knowledge impossible to transmit save for years of practice. Some have been quick to laud his work as a return to tradition, mastery, craft, and beauty for their own sakes, coupling their discussions with blanket dismissals of "postmodern" irony and relativism. McElheny's relationship to the postmodern legacy, however, proves more nuanced. His immense, hanging aluminum and glass sculptures, AN END TO MODERNITY (2005), THE LAST SCATTERING SURFACE (2006), THE END OF THE DARK AGES (2008), and ISLAND UNIVERSE (2008), model the Big Bang with scientific accuracy but derive their form from the chandeliers J. & L. Lobmeyr made in 1965 for the New York Metropolitan Opera. Like many artists of his generation, McElheny relates to such objects of mid-century design as what Benjamin called "dream images," dialectical objects that harbor the visionary futures of past eras but that also reveal the collapse and commingling of the supposedly autonomous realms of art and industrial design.[7] In addition to figuring the interpenetration of high and low (a signature postmodern insight), McElheny's works allegorize the breakdown of Modernism's linear notion of history (the advance of one avant-garde "-ism" after another) to create visual analogues of its fragmentation. "[T]he project was really about a change in the way of looking at the world," he explains:

In 1965, while Lobmeyr was trying to grapple with the confirmation of Big Bang theory, other fields of inquiry were also laying waste to the modernist view of history as a single line of progressive development. Intellectual thought in the West was beginning to splinter in a way that echoed cosmology's concept of a decentered, non-hierarchical universe. The political ramifications of these ideologies turned into the centre of my thinking about this project.[8]

That McElheny has endorsed the more inclusive political viewpoint that such realizations entail—"an infinite number of unique, true histories of the world"—should suffice to demonstrate his distance from his more reactionary supporters.[9]

If part of McElheny's project derives from art's passage through postmodernity, it is nonetheless true

that experience—signaled by, but not limited to, the integrally lived material knowledge of glassworking—remains one of McElheny's foremost artistic concerns. To see this as nostalgia for pre-industrial modes of production, however, is misleading. McElheny is interested in labor—human labor and the knowledge embedded in it—which persists within but is often forgotten by prevailing discussions of art after Pop and Minimalism. As McElheny has written about the context of Donald Judd's minimal sculpture, often described as exemplary of mechanical production:

Most industry... consists of a complicated collaboration between machinery, automated or not, and people with accumulated knowledge and experience... An incredible amount of labor and care was taken to create Judd's works, from handling materials as they came into the shop to assembly, polishing, and shipping. If his works had truly been machine-made on an assembly line, they would actually be much more rustic, cheap, or tricky in how they would have had to hide the problems and flaws of production itself.[10]

By describing Judd's work as the product of fully industrialized manufacture, art historians inadvertently collaborate in the alienation they otherwise abhor, "capitalism's false promise that all evidence of human labor can be erased."[11] Seen from this perspective, McElheny's combination of handcraft and Conceptualism provokes a more complex understanding of the manner in which past and future, residual and emergent, archaisms and neoformations, coexist within the contemporary socio-economic realm.

It is here that the potential affinity between McElheny's MODEL and children's toys proves more than an occasional observation. For according to Benjamin, toys instantiate an important aspect of the contemporary socio-economic dialectic.[12] As made by adults for children, whether intended for progressive or regressive ends, toys impose upon their recipients a preformed imaginative content, thereby materializing ideology's reproductive force. As refunctioned by the child's imagination, however, either because of an inherent ambiguity or *détournement* through use, toys form the basis of collective mastery over the conditions of the contemporary, industrialized world: a locus, in other words, of renewed experience. Children's interactions with toys thus prefigure the adult's relation to those technologies Benjamin presciently foresaw "culminat[ing] in... the remote-controlled aircraft which needs no human crew" and that we now recognize in the cybernetics and computerization of control societies: "The origin of the second technology lies at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play."[13]

More recently, Italian philosopher Paolo Virno has emphasized the importance of Benjamin's insights into childhood.[14] According to Virno, contemporary life can be understood as a struggle between, on the one hand, the enforced puerility of corporate and governmental infantilization (think only of the incredulity with which the press has greeted Barack Obama's propensity to speak to the public like adults) and, on the other, a renewed ludic experimentation he describes as "critical" childhood. The latter becomes particularly important in the aftermath of postmodernity, which saw the realm of communication so thoroughly saturated by commodification as to have eliminated any meaningful subjective distance from it.[15] Like Scheerbart's Vestians, we find our "bodies and individual limbs" tightly wrapped in a "complicated pictographic script."[16]

For Virno, child's play promises to dislocate preformed and manipulated environments, not merely to extract difference from repetition (for the child, the same bedtime story is forever new), but to create out of this difference an alternate "world." To seek to oppose the "objectivized codes and materialized grammars that... are enveloping us without residues, like an amniotic fluid," writes Virno, "means to reactivate childhood. Which is to say, to dissolve the viscous appearance of a 'linguistic environment,' rediscovering in language what dislocates and makes the 'world.' ... [C]hildhood lives on in the hypothetical language in which possibilities other than the present state of things come to the surface."[17]

Following from his interest in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, McElheny has long understood the type of dislocating power that language shares with mirrors to produce alternative worlds (see, for instance, FOUR MIRRORS AFTER A POEM BY JORGE LUIS BORGES [2000]). Indeed, much of his earli-

est work—as revealed in such pieces as VERZELINI'S ACTS OF FAITH (GLASS FROM PAINTINGS OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST) (1996) and AN HISTORICAL ANECDOTE ABOUT FASHION (1999), in which he shrouded his glass objects with fictional but nonetheless plausible histories—is predicated upon precisely this linguistic effect. Yet McElheny's fictions do not reside solely in the textual supplements to his glassware; they also inhere integrally within their physical design. For McElheny, design cannot be regarded solely as the capitalization of the lived environment. Rather, design objects, particularly in their manner of display, embody both ideology and experience.[18] Indeed, it is for that reason that a completely designed environment, one in which all experience is predetermined, is most nefariously dystopian.[19] Yet for McElheny, design and display are also the realms in which imaginative refashionings of the environment (whether democratic or despotic) meet quotidian resistance and reworking. From the simple vessels of HISTORY MODERNIZED (1998)—subtly altered to act as both mnemonic repositories of our actual past and figurations of virtual histories—to the complex cosmologies of ISLAND UNIVERSE—models of five possible cosmoses that may have appeared in the wake of the Big Bang—the significance of McElheny's work derives from the manner in which he mines history to reawaken the quest to imagine alternate futures and to contemplate other means of lived experience.

McElheny's ambition to revive and interrogate the promise of alternatives—in both utopian and dystopian guises, from individual interactions to the vastness of the cosmos—forms the most profound impulse behind his artistic practice, what he has characterized as "to describe in as clear and as extreme a way as possible how a changed world might look."[20] As such, McElheny finds himself once again allied with Scheerbart, of whose work his just-quoted words could not be a more concise or accurate description. Thus it is that we might wonder: in which glass galaxy of which of McElheny's ISLAND UNIVERSE sculptures is Malvu's Vesta to be found?

1) Paul Scheerbart, "The Light Club of Batavia: A Ladies' Novelette" in Josiah McElheny, *The Light Club of Batavia: A Project* (self-published, 2008), pp. 13–19.
2) Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture*, ed. Dennis Sharp, trans. James Palmes (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 45.
3) Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 733. Benjamin likens Scheerbart's characters to the children born in Russia after the Revolution.
4) McElheny, "Useful Noguchi," *Artforum* 43, no. 3 (November 2004), p. 179.
5) McElheny, lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 12 March 2007. On the notion of "dark space," see Anthony Vidler, "Dark Space" in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 167–175.
6) Scheerbart, "Malvu the Helmsman: A Story of Vesta" in *The Black Mirror and Other Stories: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Germany and Austria*, ed. Franz Rottensteiner (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), pp. 70–76.
7) See my "Future Anterior: History and Speculation in the Work of Angela Bulloch" in *Angela Bulloch: Prime Numbers* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2006), pp. 31–84.
8) McElheny, in David Weinberg and McElheny, "The Development and Origins of Island Universe" in *A Space for Island Universe* (Madrid: MNCARS and Turner, 2009), p. 29.
9) Ibid., p. 25.
10) McElheny, "Invisible Hand," *Artforum* 42, no. 10 (summer 2004), p. 209. Liam Gillick makes a similar point about his own work: "Much of the critique of certain work is rooted in misunderstandings about the 'industrial' nature of its production. Most of my work is hand-made in a small workshop in Berlin by a small group of people. There is a difference between using precise forms with particular finishes and the notion of industrial production in the modern or contemporary sense" (e-mail between Gillick and McElheny, June 26, 2009).
11) McElheny, see note 5.
12) Benjamin's writings on toys include: "Old Toys" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, pp. 98–102; "The Cultural History of Toys" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 113–116; and "Toys and Play" in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 117–121.
13) Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" (1936), trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, p. 107.
14) Paolo Virno, "Childhood and Critical Thought," *Grey Room* 21 (Fall 2005), pp. 7–12.
15) Ibid., p. 11.
16) Scheerbart, see note 6, p. 70.
17) Virno, see note 14, pp. 11–12.
18) McElheny, see note 10, p. 210.
19) Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002).
20) McElheny, see note 5.

JOSIAH McELHENY. THE ALPINE CATHEDRAL AND THE CITY-CROWN. 2008. hand-blown glass, metal, painted wood, Plexiglas, colored lighting. 14 x 8 x 9 3/4" / DIE ALPINE KATHEDRALE UND DIE STADTKRONE, mundgeblasenes Glas, bemaltes Holz, Plexiglas, farbiges Licht. 426,3 x 243,8 x 297,2 cm.

ARTnews
June 2010

Paul Scheerbart's short story "The Light Club of Batavia" is the inspiration for Josiah McElheny's *Model for a Film Set* (The Light Spa at the Bottom of a Mine), 2008.

Mirror Mirror

With their shimmering light
and color and reflective surfaces, Josiah McElheny's works can make viewers feel as if they've entered a hall of mirrors. In his book The Light Club: On Paul Scheerbart's "The Light Club of Batavia," out in May from the University of Chicago Press, McElheny performs a similar sleight of hand–this time applying it to a short, obscure tale.

It started with an English translation of a little-known German novel, Paul Scheerbart's 1914 The Gray Cloth. The book tells the story of an architect so obsessed with the appearance of his glass construc tions that he makes his wife dress only in gray and white so as not to clash with them.

While reading the novel, McElheny found a reference in a footnote to another, untranslated Scheerbart work that piqued his interest: the seven-page-long "novelle" from 1912, "The Light Club of Batavia." (A "novelle" is a short story whose plot is "described in a brief, schematic manner," according to McElheny.)

Scheerbart's tale features Mrs. Hortense Pline, an "engineeress" who suffers from an addiction to light. An architect friend suggests she satisfy that addiction by turning a mine shaft into an artificially illuminated light spa. She follows up on the suggestion–and spends her entire fortune in the process.

In his introduction to the book, McElheny writes that he aimed to create "a series of varying frames" through which to view the story, in which he found "layers and layers of problems." Included in the book is the novelle's first English translation, commissioned by McElheny, as well as essays, a poem, and a play–all of which expand on the story's themes. McElheny's own short story, "The Light Spa in the Mine," recasts "The Light Club of Batavia" as a sort of shaggy-dog story being told in a present-day bar. ("I've already been in many bars telling this story," he adds.) Illustrating the book are stills from Light Club (2008), a film McElheny made in collaboration with Jeff Preiss.

The book is the latest in a series of projects that McElheny has based on "The Light Club of Batavia." At Orchard, a former exhibition space on the Lower East Side, he staged a performance modeled on Scheerbart's story. In the sculpture Model for a Film Set (The Light Spa at the Bottom of a Mine), 2008, multicolored stacks of glass cubes are surrounded by high walls of clear glass blocks. McElheny says the abstract work is "supposed to be a model of the soundstage on which you would film the final scene of the story."

The artist is also subjecting his own career to the same treatment The Light Club gives to Scheerbart's story. Josiah McElheny: A Prism, which he edited with Louise Neri, was published by Rizzoli in May. Alongside images of McElheny's work are interviews, critical commentary, and such texts as Adolf Loos's 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime" (a tirade against what Loos calls the "epidemic of ornament") and the 1964 Jorge Luis Borges poem "Mirrors" (which reflects upon the "horror of mirrors").

McElheny has organized "Crystalline Architectures," a show of works by artists like Robert Smithson and Modernist architect Bruno Taut. The show will go up in late June at Andrea Rosen Gallery, which represents him. And he has plans to make a second film based on "The Light Club of Batavia," to be shot at Miami's Vizcaya Museum and Gardens later this year.

-Steve Barnes

ARTFORUM

Josiah McElheny

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Think of contemporary glassmakers and the first name to come to mind might be Dale Chihuly and his Murano-like anemones (so to speak). Josiah McElheny, hardly a popular purveyor of pseudo-Venetian glass, is firmly on the far side of the old Craft versus Art divide. He could produce such gimcracks with one arm tied behind his back-on the condition that the historicizing programs he favors call for such glass forms in the first place.

Spurred by the recondite history of glass (not to say art history or political theory), McElheny, on the occasion of this exhibition, has invented (or reinvented) a rivalry between two prophetic German modernists: Mies van der Rohe and Bruno Taut, the latter perhaps best known for his Glass Pavilion at the Cologne Werkbund Exhibition of 1914. Temperamentally differentiated from the stylish Mies by Soviet sympathies that put him at odds with the Nazis once they were in power, Taut went into Turkish exile during the Hitlerzeit and died in 1938.

Buoyed by post-World War I utopianism in Germany and the Soviet Union, architecture in the 1920s became the signal communal art, one further enlivened by the new technical possibilities that allowed structures to be built of glass, or seemingly of pure light itself. McElheny'S eight-foot -high architectural tower reprises Mies's elegantly classical, earliest model of a glass-clad skyscraper (it was never built) based on the architect's famous 1922 photographs. Bruno Taut's Monument to Socialist Spirituality (After Mies van der Rohe), 2009, as McElheny calls this mutant maquette, rises above a wooden ruff of Caligaresque rowhouses that evoke the type shortly to be deemed echt Deutsch by the National Socialists to whose values Mies would transiently surrender, for example when he briefly assumed the direction of an Aryanized Bauhaus after its founder, Walter Gropius, was driven abroad.

McElheny's model subverts the crisp and sleek architectureassociated with Mies by bombarding it with bits and pieces conjured from Taut's far less suave, rather plodding signifiers of class consciousnesshisblunt use of painterly primaries, for instance. And McElheny's supplanting of the Miesian curved wall with Tautian hexagonal units makes you think that this new skyscraper dedicated to the socialist spirit is no more than a glasshive for worker bees, perfect proletarian drones busy at work within a framework of historical inevitability that would, in time, end the class struggle with the inauguration of a classless utopia, the ultimate socialist delusion. Pure Taut, that: He died after the Moscow show trials had begun but prior to the Hitler-Stalin pact or world knowledge of the Gulag.

View of "Josiah McElheny," 2009. From left: *Lilly Reich (and Wilhelm Wagenfeld), Blue,* 2009; *Bruno Taut's Monument to Socialist Spirituality (After Mies van der Rohe),* 2009; *Charlotte Perriand (and Carlo Scarpa), Red,* 2009.

The more engaging, nostalgic associations of this exhibition are McElheny's reconstructions of designs for shelving- each assigned a primary color-that celebrate underknown (when not simply forgotten) female designers who are imagined to have collaborated with more famous men: Lilly Reich (and Wilhelm Wagenfeld), Blue; Aino Aalto (and Tapio Wirkkala), Yellow; and Charlotte Perriand (and Carlo Scarpa), Red (all works 2009). Blue reimagines Wagenfeld's Bauhaus-inspired, beakerlike transparent glassware as a set of pale blue vials that are placed in a Lilly Reich cabinet (of a type she might have designed for Mies, as one of his principal collaborators). Yellow combines Aalto's birch overlappings with Wirkka la's glass forms in an exquisite yellow. And Red echoes shelving that couldhave been made in the Jean Prouve workshops after a version of the well-known Perri and design, which is filled with '40s- ish glass caprices on themes of Carlo Scarpa that recall the twentieth century's highest achievements in Venetian glass-think Venini.

In verbal description all this is a bit daunting- overstated didactics, really. While it is easier to relate to the lighter, feminist patch of the exhibition rather than to an abstruse rivalry between Mies and Taut, the actual experience of McElheny's brainiac work is astonishing
when one realizes how much is achieved through glass blowing alone. As in the past, the virtuosity of McElheny's glass blowing shields it from facile popularization and signaturization. But to insist on this argument alone presses McElheny back into the ghetto of contemporary crafts while, in fact, his world is far wider and deeper than those overtrod precincts.

-Robert Pincus-Witten

Josiah McElheny

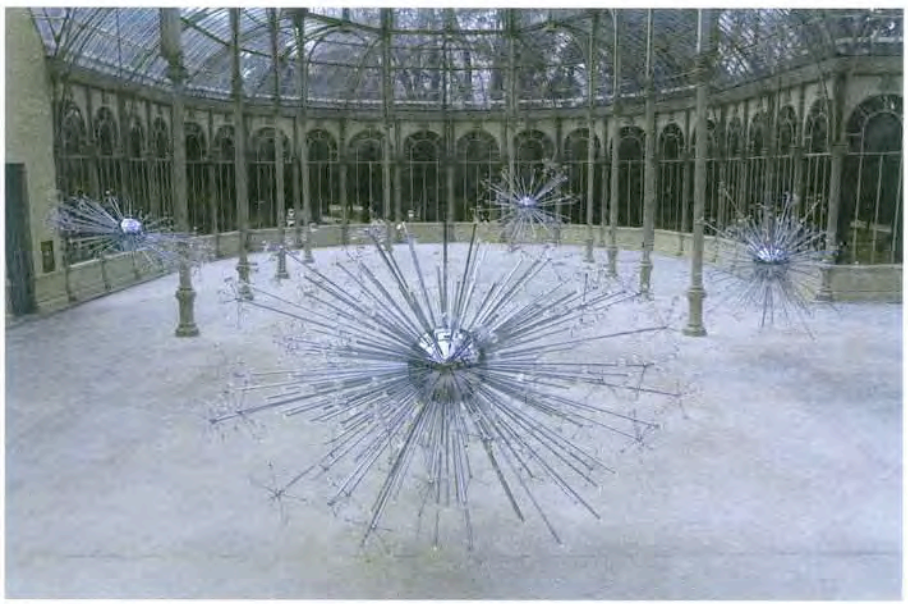
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid
28 January – 30 March

In the stirring conclusion to his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant writes of the awe that never fails to fill his mind before the starry heavens above – an experience which, Kant remarks, requires no more than the act of looking at something that is simply and already there. But Kant did more than tilt his head and gaze upward – he also conjectured as to the nature of those nebulous streaks in the night sky, coining the term 'island universe' to refer to his then-radical theory of a multiplicity of galaxies parallel to our own, a theory not only later validated but which provides a model for current cosmological speculation on a potentially infinite number of parallel universes, all spawned by the original Big Bang.

Seeking in such theory a metaphor for our own splintering sense that history – whether cosmic, social, political or artistic – is no longer something linear but, in its multiplicity of 'islands', something archipelagic – Josiah McElheny draws on Kant's terminology for the titles of his two-part exhibition at the Reina Sofía. *Island Universe* (2005–8) consists of five hanging glass-and-chrome sculptures installed in the museum's Crystal Palace, a nineteenth-century glass-and-steel building in Madrid's Retiro Park. The craftsmanship is extraordinary – each piece composed of hundreds of handblown glass discs and spheres mounted on metal rods of varying lengths protruding from a central orb. But the craftsmanship is also conjoined to science – hard science at that – drawing its overarching design concept from current cosmological theory and its design specifics. The lengths of the rods, the scale of the central orbs, the placement of the discs and spheres, are derived from astronomical data worked out by David Weinberg, a cosmologist at Ohio State University.

Linked conceptually, but aesthetically distinct, *A Space for an Island Universe* (2008) – a 19-minute colour film projected onto an enormous screen in a cavernous black box in the museum's main building – offers a fluid, nearly abstract visual study of the chandeliers in New York's Metropolitan Opera House. According to McElheny's historical reconstruction, the mid-1960s design of the chandeliers deliberately borrowed from popular scientific images widely circulated at the time, illustrating the Big Bang theory – which in the mid-1960s had just received its first empirical confirmation. In response, *A Space* deliberately borrows its period aesthetic from 1960s experimental film, with the camera zooming and receding, focusing and unfocusing, swooping and gliding, and with a delicate soundtrack of electronic music composed by Paul Schütze (including low, floor-shaking rumbles intended to indicate the birth of the universe).

The film, in its stunning choreography of image and music, is lush and even a bit flashy. It's appropriate: those New York opera house chandeliers verge dangerously on the outright gaudy. The sculptures, however, occupy a very different aesthetic position: despite the complexity of both their genesis and execution, and despite all the shiny chrome and delicate glass, the nearly monochrome result is curiously restrained and subdued, falling somewhere between scientific and artistic model – although, given the felicitous combination of the works' reflective surfaces and building's entirely diaphanous structure, they managed to refer, without the aid of science or philosophy, yet again to the heavens above, simply and already there. *George Stolz*



Island Universe, 2008
Installation view. Photo: Iván Case. © the artist

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NOWHERE, EVERYWHERE, SOMEWHERE

JOSIAH MCELHENY

Photographs and drawings for the very first glass-clad skyscrapers were originally published in the summer of 1922 in the last issue of Bruno Taut's short-lived journal Fruhticht.They depicted two designs by Mies van der Rohe: his unsuccessful 1921 competition entry for a site on Berlin's Friedrichstrasse, and the Glass Skyscraper Project of the following year. For the latter, he built a model with glass panels for use in his ongoing studio experiments with illumination and refraction.

Architectural models typically include contextualizing elements: a city plan often presents us with abstracted, minimal representations of buildings that already exist on the site or imaginary buildings that might be built later. The lack of delineation is intentional. in order to not distract from the grandeur of the new design. Mies's Glass Skyscraper Project was different. He created a series of photographs where the skyscraper model was situated amid two rows of detailed-if stylized-imaginary historical buildings. Some images even depict the skyscraper outdoors, set among real trees and sky.

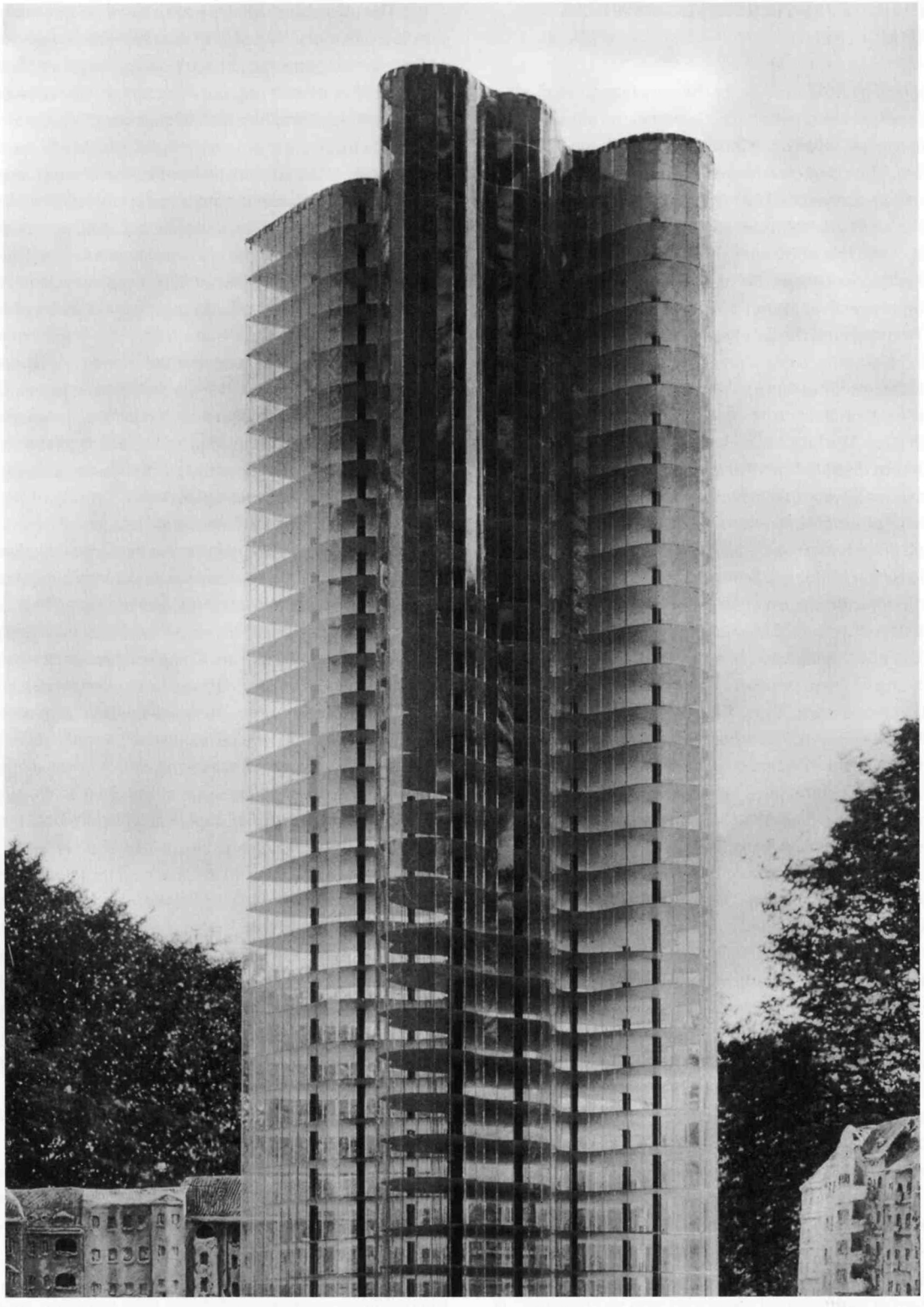
In the Museum of Modern Art catalogue accompanying the 2001 exhibition "Mies in Berlin ," a hand-tinted print of one of these photographs is accompanied by a caption that states. "Glass Skyscraper Project-no intended site known.'? Current research strongly suggests that Mies did not intend for the photographs to be understood as portraying a particular place; the model was intended as a proposal for a new theory of light in architecture.' Yet Mies took the unusual step of placing his design in what appears to be a real site, replete both with history and evocations of nature. The caption that the catalogue gives the project seems to imply that it is for no place. This impression is paradoxical. The thirty story building clearly stands in a somewhere, and yet that somewhere is considered a nowhere.

The tower inhabits some kind of square, and the structures around it-made in the form of one-sided plaster facades by the Expressionist artist Oswald Herzog-are obviously intended to depict what would have been considered old buildings, even in 1922. It is a choice that creates an undeniable sense of place. To some, these scale buildings appear to be specific houses in a specific city or town; there have been repeated efforts to identify them. The oral histories related by Mies's collaborators suggest that the buildings are an amalgam of architectural memories, and so create an undeniable sense of the familiar. A Hapsburg-era square? A nineteenth-eentury northern European street?

The purpose of Mies's gesture has generated a fair amount of scholarship of late, but also makes a simple statement: it seems he, at least briefly, imagined his new modernist vision existing not in a completely remade world, but in a world in which both the architectural past and nature were acknowledged. Most famous skyscraper cities, like New York, have become what they are by progressively replacing their historic architecture with ever-taller buildings. With very few exceptions, truces between the new and the old rarely seem to last . Here in Mies's images we see what such a truce might have looked like. Here is a modernism that is not everywhere, only somewhere.

Everywhere soon became the paradigm.The year 1922 also witnessed Le Corbusier's "Contemporary City," and by 1925 he had introduced Plan Voisin, his proposal to raze entire neighborhoods and replace them with endless rectilinear housing blocks. While never built, this became a model for housing worldwide, much of which was a social disaster and ultimately a failure. But this new everywhere always seemed to require-or at least hoped for-a complete erasure in order to begin. Mies joined in with the program and before long we had a modernism that, in tandem with Taylorism and Fordism, could be implemented from China to Chicago. Moscow to Berlin-a modernism that was both everywhere and nowhere because it erased any somewhere that was already there. In the rare cases where people successfully objected, a solution was soon found: conquer the farmland and forest at the edge of the cities to create the concrete suburb. In either case from the cites of France to Cabrini Green in Chicago, social disaster ensued.

Mies is remembered to have said that the historical buildings surrounding his model were meant to be "hideous" housing: and the current trend among scholars is to describe them as decaying, caricaturist. "medieval" structures and connect them to architectural depictions in contemporaneous Expressionist films about horror and decrepitude. such as Robert Wiene's 1919 Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Paul Wegener's 1920 Golem, and F.W. Murnau's 1922 Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror. This comparison is in perfect concordance with Mies's own notion at that time: that the existing buildings in Berlin were a debased form of architecture.The critical interpretation reflects Mies's own stated prejudices and perceptions, but do they also reflect our own? Looking at the sculptural models in the photographs without actively trying to imagine them as a horror movie set, the buildings seem more childlike than terrifying, more playful than neglected. In these visual experiments, as much as the skyscraper dominates the other buildings or



A photograph of the experimental model of 1922 made for Mies van der Roh's Glass Skyscraper Project

trees and sky-as was perhaps Mies's conscious intention- it is also humanized by their presence, offering us a familiar pre-modern anthropomorphic scale.' Perhaps this disjunction between stated intention and result is indicative of a repressed impulse within Mies's vision. Today it is more important to look for instances, however weakly expressed, where reconciliation with the environment might have been possible, rather than reinforce Mies's declarations of disgust towards the existing historic world around him. In analyzing the past in light of our belated realization that resources are inherently finite, we need architecture to resurrect the modernist hope for new ways of living, but outside the confines of the economic ideology of "creative destruction".

The unusual nature of these photographic studies suggests "revisionist" questions:What if Mies were actually calling for the integration of new structures with the old? What if he were pointing to a modernism that acknowledged the architecture of the past as being compatible with-perhaps even enriching-the new modernism of technology, capital, and political "efficiency"? What if he were proposing an alternative to the erasure of the past, the clearing of the obsolete, the violent starting anew that modernism proposed and enacted? What if instead of a post-modernism that simply borrowed forms from buildings often long ago demolished or discredited, there had been all along an accommodation between the modernism of the new and the architectures of the past? What if they had been viewed as compatible, instead of fundamentally opposed?

When Mies created these photographs, it was not yet clear what would soon happen, how perfectly the modernist project would suit the needs of the developing economic and political situation, and how this alliance would decimate the old.The Glass Skyscraper Project is a proposal that-despite Mies's efforts to demonstrate domination-provides a slender hope for accommodation, It presents a literal juxtaposition of the new and the old, a model for coexistence with history. The political implications of this idea that perhaps the modernist project could have developed in a situation of a *somewhere,* while perhaps fanciful, might also be far reaching. People's identity is always formed by place. Perhaps these little experiments of Mies's can function as a reminder of how plans for a new world almost always seem to forget that everywhere and nowhere do not exist, cannot exist. Everything and everyone resides in a somwhere.

1 Because of its baroque and at the time unrealizable nature the Glass Skyscraper Project repr esent s the only mom ent when Mias can be connected with the more spiritual and romantic leanings of Taut and his colleagues . Taut's group . the Crystal Chain had in the previous few years developed a ma nife sto for a new fantastical architecture that promised a politicized but quasi-spiritual experience for the common worker. Mies's rejection from the 1919 Au stellung for unbekannte Architekten (Exhibition of Unknown Architects)- sometimes seen as a precursor for the Crystal Chain- and his subsequent decision to submit the proposal to Taut's journal are significant in this light. For more on this see Iain Boyd Whyte. Bruno Taut and the Architecture of Activism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1980) and Mert ins. op . ci t.

2 Terence Ailey & Barr y Bergdoll. eds *Mies in Berlin* (New York : Mu seum of Modern Ar t. 200 1). pp . 186 -187.

3 See Spyros Papapetr os. "Malicious Houses: Animation. Animism. Animosity in Germa n Architecture and Film-From Mies to Mumau.' in GreyRoom. no. 20. Summer 2005. pp . 6-37. and Detl ef Mertins. "Archi tectures of Becoming: Mies van der Aohe and the Avent -Garde." in Mies in Berlin . op . clt .. pp . 106 - 13 3. There has been speculation that the facades depicted in the photographs were modeled after contemporaneous buildings on Friedrichstrasse, the site of Mies's earlier project, but comparison with period photograph s of the avenue does not bear this out. In fact according to Werner Graef, Mies's former assistant. Herzog recounted that Mies instructed him: "Make me a piece of Friedrich strasse as it once was; it does not have to be exact, only in principle: (papapetros. op . ci t. . pp . 19 and 24) .

4 According to Mertins. there is no general agreement on a source model for these buildings (email correspondence with the author). Beyond literal identification, scholars have interpreted the classification of the surrounding buildings variously; some, like Michael Hays (in email correspondence with the author). have suggested that they might be Bied ermier. while others like Graef. have compared them to buildings by Mies's former teacher. Peter Behren s. See Graef's comment in Papapetros. op. ctt. p. 26 .

5 Papapetros. op . ci t., p. 19.

6 Even when the model was first exhibited these surrounding buildings we redescribed as "poor: See Papapetros. op. cit.. p. 19. The fact that the sculptural models were built as facades not unlike movie sets suggests another reason for this contemporary reading.

7 In the historic downtowns of Europe—either surviving or reconstructed—tall buildings were typically banned and so this vision of the International Style in the midst of a historic town is in congruous and surprising today.

The New York Times Magazine

‘Is the world this way because it must be, or is it just random?’

JOSIAH McELHENY

Photographed by Jason Schmidt in New York City

The same week that scientists at the CERN laboratory outside Geneva were getting ready to fire up the Large Hadron Collider, the artist Josiah McElheny was conducting a test of his own ideas on the Big Bang theory at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York City. Inspired by the Lobmeyr chandeliers at the Metropolitan Opera House and informed by logarithmic equations devised by the cosmologist David H. Weinberg, McElheny’s chrome, glass and electric-light sculpture “The End of the Dark Ages” is part of a four-year investigation into the origins of the universe. What began with “The End to Modernity,” a sculpture commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, will culminate next month in a massive installation titled “Island Universe” at White Cube in London. “I had this quixotic idea to do modernized versions of the Lobmeyr chandeliers as sculpture with secret information behind it,” says McElheny, who upon first encountering these “gilded age/space age” objects immediately thought they looked like pop renditions of the Big Bang.

According to McElheny, physicists continue to struggle with the question “is the world this way because it must be, or is it just random?” In 1965, the year that the Lobmeyr chandeliers were designed, it was suddenly evident that our world is not in fact the center of the universe. This idea that there could be an infinite number of possible narratives was becoming popular not just in science but also in literature and art — so why not in interior design, too? As it turns out, Wallace K. Harrison, the architect for the Met, having rejected the original design for the chandeliers, gave Hans Harald Rath of Lobmeyr, the Vienna-based glassmaker, a book about galaxies and sent him back to the drawing board.

“The End of the Dark Ages” is a scientifically accurate model: the shortest rod represents 100 million years, the longest about 1.3 billion; the clusters of glass stand for galaxy formations, the lights for quasars. Still, McElheny is less concerned with the conceits of exact science than the limits of reason and knowledge. (The White Cube show proposes a “multiverse” and “speaks to what Kant describes so well as an endless world made of imperfection, complication and specificity.”) “Politically, I’m against finding the single answer,” McElheny insists. “I’m more interested in what these questions mean to our sense of who we are.

ALIX BROWNE

ARTFORUM
SUMMER 2008 INTERNATIONAL

STOCKHOLM

Josiah McElheny

MODERNA MUSEET

The crafts should perhaps be thought of as the work of "citizen artisans" who manipulate clay, metal, thread, or glass with consummate skill to create exceptional objects out of common materials. The hardworn distinction between fine-art elitism and craft's populism is still taken for granted, but these terms are becoming confounded as crafts edge toward fine arts either out of strategy or desire. While artists pluck techniques from the crafts as necessary, craft practitioners have begun to interleave content from outside their normal purview, sometimes with beguiling results, as in the work of Josiah McElheny.

Education in the crafts frequently consists of mastering bedrock techniques through an apprenticeship in which a practitioner rises from deferential tyro to creative master. McElheny, trained at the Rhode Island School of Design, apprenticed from 1989 to 1997 with master glassblowers Ronald Wilkins, Lino Tagliapietra, Jan-Erik Ritzman, and Sven-Ake Carlsson. He merged the decorative with fine arts in Verzelini's Acts of Faith, 1996, a collection of thirty-six pieces of glassware based on those glimpsed in various Renaissance paintings of the Life of Christ, from Tintoretto to Joos van Cleve, demonstrating that the means, glassblowing, was relevant to the end, appropriation strategy. A decade on, he has produced The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown, 2007, where the sync between means and ends does not simply serve the content but is the content. In The Apine Cathedral, McElheny interprets the utopian imagineering of German Modernist architect Bruno Taut (1880-1938) and poet Paul Scheerbart (1863-1915), visionaries who believed that kaleidoscopic light, produced through the materiality of glass, radiated spiritual powers of an order that would restore humanity-stimulation never more needed than on the eve of the Great War. In their dreams, glass cathedrals would supplant mountaintops as supernatural pinnacles, while modular glass towers with refracting colored light would quicken the cities of a reborn world. Commissioned by New York's Museum of Modern Art, McElheny's installation comprises two glass architectural models- one alpine cathedral and one city-crown-on a shared base with lighting that approximates effects described by Scheerbart, who wrote of adorning the earth with a paradise of "sparkling jewels and enamels." Taut and Scheerbart were not fabulists so much as pacifists seeking to cure humankind's barbarity-soon to be exhibited by the first mechanized war- through techniques to convert the physical materiality of glass into light persuasive enough to affect the soul. They believed in the "soft power" of glass to convince others that their political goals were legitimate and desirable. They were citizens and, we might say, the artisans of ideas calculated to use the mastery of craft to induce change.

View of "Josiah McElheny", 2008. Left: Vladimir Tatlin, *Model for Monument for the 3rd International*, 1919-20. Right: Josiah McElheny, *The Alpine Cathedral and the City-Crown*, 2007

Should we suppose that The Alpine Cathedral is the work of an "artist" who just happens to use glass? Hardly; McElheny is a craftsman devoted to materiality, charged by masterly technique, in the cause of change for the better. His craft installation (there, I said it) expresses a categorical belief in the relevance of things handmade and in the sacredness of materiality in a world with contrary values. McElheny is hardly the first to hold this belief; the artists he and Moderna curator Iris Müller-Westermann chose to exhibit alongside The Alpine Cathedral could only agree: Hilma af Klint, Kasimir Malevich, and Vladimir Tatlin were pioneers of a "soft power" with the potential to trigger reform. It's not nostalgia you feel when you comprehend McElheny's project, but conviction through the mastery of craft.

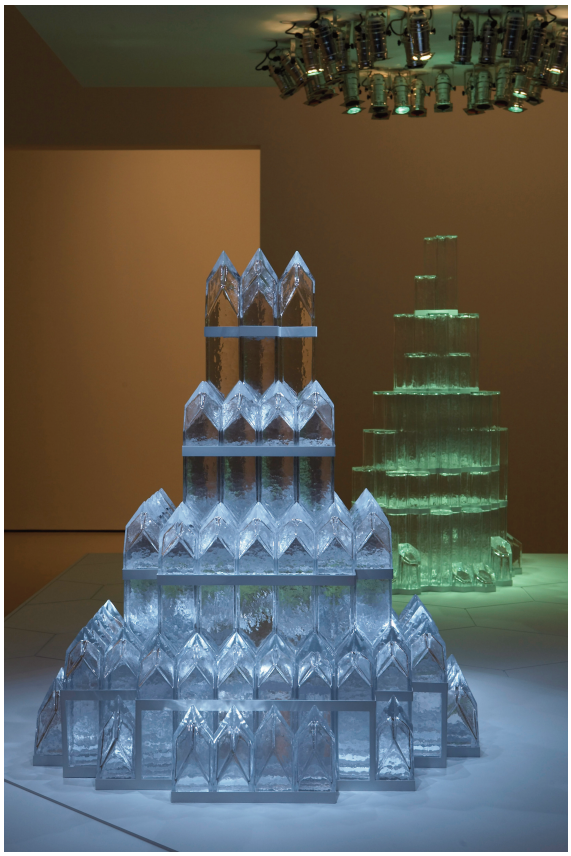
-Ronald Jones

NEW YORK

February 26, 2007

Projects 84: Josiah McElheny

The Museum of Modern Art
11 W. 53rd St., New York, NY 10019
nr. Sixth Ave.
212-708-9400



Profile

Steps away from Rachel Whiteread's Untitled (Paperbacks) is a new pair of installations by Josiah McElheny that addresses the utopian dreams of the early twentieth century. Alpine Cathedral and City-Crown are two models of glistening glass buildings illuminated by changing colored lights. In provocative and subtle ways, McElheny's piece renders the place of utopian thought in our culture. He has a certain detachment: Utopian thought is not, today, viscerally at hand. (His models date back to the work of the early-twentieth-century utopians Paul Scheerbart and Bruno Taut.) He compares and contrasts—utopians long for either the mountaintop or the city—and conveys the ineffable nature of dreams. The models melt and shift in the eye. What's not there? When I first heard about McElheny's glass piece, I had imagined a visionary installation. An enveloping work of art. I was naïve: That future belongs to the past. For good reasons, among them the disasters that visionaries have recently visited upon the world, utopian convictions today rarely claim strong Western minds. McElheny's work is instead finely, thoughtfully, filtered. It's about, not of, Utopia. A meditation, not a passion. But it left me with a desire for the true Platonic fire—for what was missing. And so, upstairs at MoMA, I visited the great Russian visionary Kazimir Malevich, whose airy pictures appear so roughhewn and evanescently there. — Mark Stevens

Ornament Decriminalized

Decoration, once fallen from grace, returns in the guise of text, perforations, fractals, and bling.

By Steven Skov Holt and Mara Holt Skov

previous page An End to Modernity (2005) by New York-based artist Josiah McElheny

WHEN MISS BLANCHE BY SHIRO KURAMATA debuted in 1988 at the Tokyo Designer's Week exhibition, it raised the stakes for art-furniture makers worldwide. Made from four clear acrylic panels embedded with blood-red artificial rose petals, the chair caused a sensation. Its petals resembled velvet confetti suspended in space. Light reflected off the glossy acrylic and passed through it, creating mysterious shadows.

Miss Blanche was paradoxical in many ways: delicate yet durable; ornamental yet spare; inspired by nature yet built from artificial materials. And this quintessentially contempo¬rary object was prescient: It foretold ornament's reemergence after nearly a century of banishment. Let's step back for a moment. Why did ornament end up stuffed into the back of designers' metaphorical closets?

A vastly simplified answer would begin with the rabblerousing architect Adolf Loos. In the early 1900s, his influential treatise "Ornament and Crime" railed against so-called decadent dec¬orative traditions. He argued that ornament stymied humanity's intellectual, aesthetic, and social evolution. Ornament, he wrote, represented "wasted manpower. .. health ... material... and capitaL"

Fast-forward to the mid-20th century, when Mies van der Rohe distilled Loos' philosophy into a soundbite-"Less is More"-and from his pulpit at the Illinois Institute of Tech¬nology, preached it to the next generation of designers. We've heard it ever since, in one form or another, from design elders such as Kenneth Grange, Dieter Rams, Masayuki Kurakawa, and Massimo and LelIa Vignelli. No ornament is allowed, or needed, in "serious" design. It's the province of decorators, lowest common denominator stylism, and surface fussiness.

Yet ornament has managed to reassert itself in the past decade-even as a new generation of minimalists (Naoto Fu¬kasawa, Sam Hecht, Kim Colin, jasper Morrison) emerged¬with Dutch designers Marcel Wanders, Hella jongerius, and Tord Boontje leading the way. Ornament still delights, but it's no longer ornamentaL It's not applied like moldings or sten¬cils, or attached like finials or tassels, or tacked on at the end of problem-solving processes. Ornament has become integral to the conception and experience of products and buildings, and reflects the latest technologies and aesthetic sensibilities.

It has become one with a variety of exoskeletons, com¬pound curved surfaces, and carbon-fiber and other mono¬coque shells. It has become complexified: infinitely repeated or reflected, sampled like hip-hop beats, randomized, splashed across digitally activated surfaces. It's achieved greater depth of experience, allowing designers to expand their works' expressive possibilities. Objects can tell richer

I.D.

THE ORNAMENT ISSUE

March/April 2007

and more complex stories than ever before.
Although ornament's revival could be considered a nor¬mal swing of the pendulum of taste-an inevitable reaction to the era of the white box and the curvaceous blobject-we see ornament as too powerful and too personally meaningful to be tied to taste alone. It serves deep emotional needs.

Fine artists, who so often foresee changes imminent in daily life, are already astutely commenting on ornament's re¬appearance. New York-based sculptor Josiah McElheny fills bookshelves and chrome vitrines with monochrome or mirrored blown-glass vessels, inspired by design icons such as Charlotte Perriand, Carlo Scarpa, R. Buckminster Fuller, and Isamu Noguchi. He even took the dogmatic Loos to task in a 2002 chrome vitrine crowded with opaque white vessels and titled Adolf Laos' Ornament and Crime.

But a 2005 McElheny work is the capper: a meticulously crafted, 16-foot-wide explosion of chrome-plated aluminum rods each concluding with hand-blown glass ornaments and lights. He derived the form from the Metropolitan Opera's chandelier Hans Harald Rath made in 1965, the same year physicists introduced the Big Bang Theory. Blurring the lines between conceptual design, science, and art, McElheny has ti¬tled itAn End to Modernity. Perhaps the end to "Less is More" is best represented by a starburst, the supernova-like end of one universe and the fertile beginnings of another …

Steven Holt and Mara Holt based in San Francisco, are the authors ofBlobjects and Beyond: The New Fluidity in Design (Chronicle, 2005). They are curating a Fall 2008 exhibition on craft at the Portland Contemporary Crafts Museum.

In the past decade, More has become More: more enabling technologies, more techniques, more materials, more iterations, more solutions. Ornament has been reborn, and its newest variants can be classified into seven key types:

Fragments and Particles

Shards and fractals are being farmed for their expressive possibilities. Inspiration is coming from as far away as the Hubble Telescope's im¬ages of expanding galaxies and as close in as electron-microscopic glimpses of crystalline structures.

this page The perforations of Arik Levy's Galactica fruit bowl evoke stars. opposite page, top The Bouroullec brothers' North Tile system showcases Kvadrat textiles. opposite page, bottom KINPRO's Love Forest wallpaper, commissioned by Barcelona's Maxalot Gallery

Time Out New York

Josiah McElheney

An End to Modernity

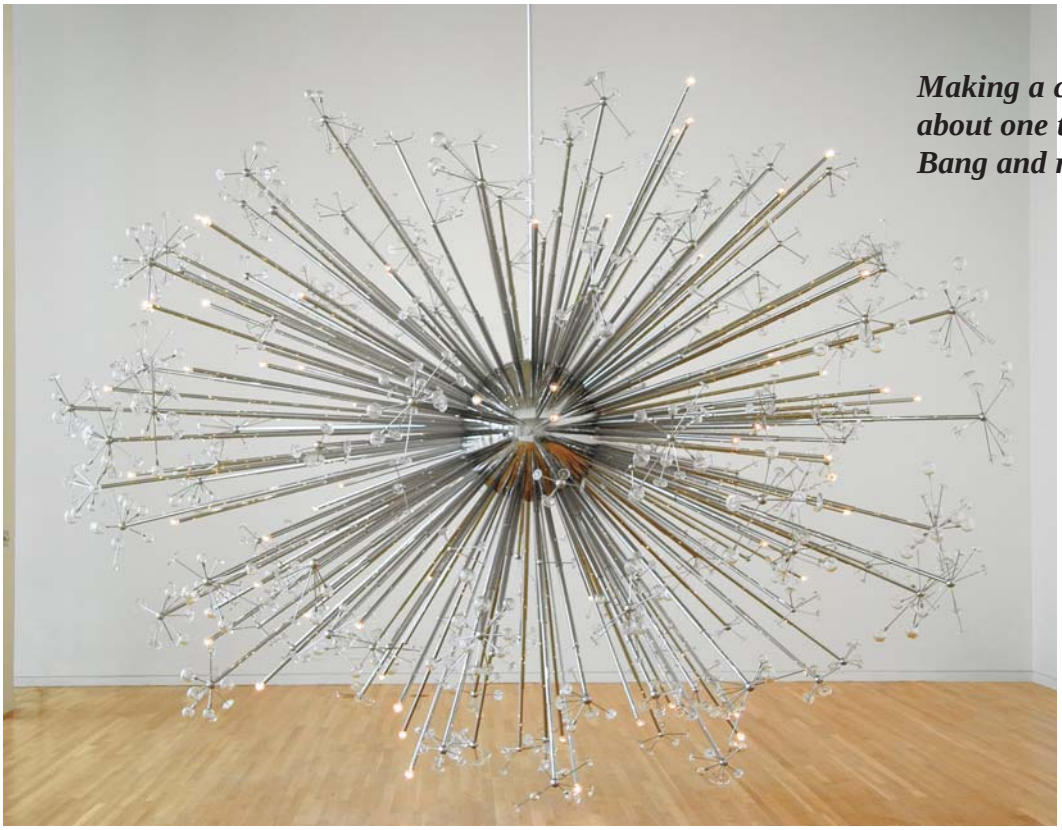
"**Modernity 1929-1965**," Andrea Rosen Gallery, through Sat 3 (see Chelsea)

Josiah McElheny can't be accused of stunted ambition. The centerpiece of his latest show, a huge, chandelierlike chrome-and-light sculpture titled *An End to Modernity*, is accompanied by a text (written by an astronomy professor at Ohio State) that explains how the object illustrates "not just the big bang [theory] but the entire history of the expanding Universe."

While the titles--*Twentieth Century Modernism, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely* is also on view and supporting documents are rife with bombast, the works themselves are captivating. The vitrines filled with handblown, mirrored glass vessels and light fixtures inAnEnd to Modernity capture the glossy industrial aesthetic of the echt modern tradition, while making smart reference to that era's optimistic, can-do faith in science, art and design-and the subsequent demise of those values.

McElheny might be accused of being reactionary instead, as many of his peers head in the opposite direction, making shoddy craftbased objects that often seem like visual shrugs in the face of posterity. ("Why bother making work that will last forever with the apocalypse practically upon us?" they seem to say.) McElheny is keenly aware of the history of modernism, but rather than critique the concept as outmoded, he commemorates it.
--Martha Schwendener

ART



Making a chandelier is hard. How about one that depicts the Big Bang and riffs on modernism?

The Entire Universe On a Dimmer Switch

By DOROTHY SPEARS

WHEN the artist Josiah McElheny said he wanted to build a sculpture that evoked both the modernist chandeliers at the Metropolitan Opera House and the Big Bang theory, Dr. David Weinberg, a professor of astronomy at Ohio State University, whom he had approached for advice, said, "My very first thought was 'Good luck!'"

"I think he was skeptical," agreed Mr. McElheny, 39, recalling their first meeting in September 2004. "Conceptually, it's already a problem to create a model of the history of the universe. Then, there I was — this artist — wanting to make a scientifically accurate model based on a 1960's design object."

Mr. McElheny was in the early phases of an artist's residency at Ohio State at the Wexner Center for the Arts, which had commissioned the piece. At his first meeting with Dr. Weinberg, Mr. McElheny said, "Two things happened. One: David saw that I was serious. And two: he understood that I was prepared to go the full distance, that this was not a perfunctory gesture."

What began as a crash course in the history of cosmology eventually led to "The End of Modernity" (2005), a 10-by-15-foot sculpture that demonstrates visual and historical parallels between the Big Bang theory and the Met chandeliers. Combining 1,000 blown-glass globes and cast-glass discs with roughly 5,000 individual metal parts, "The End of Modernity" hangs at eye level, with the bottom of the work hovering six inches above the floor.

It is one of four large glass sculptures included in Mr. McElheny's new show, "Modernity 1929-1965," at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in Chelsea. "The End of Modernity" traces a historical convergence in 1965, when the Big Bang theory was headline news and the Met chandeliers were being made by J. & L. Lobmeyr in Vienna.

Presenting the history of the cosmos through the lens of modernist chandeliers, in a material as delicate and unwieldy as blown glass, requires an odd combination of hubris and masochism. "A lot of times I'm working at 125 percent of my capacity," Mr. McElheny said in a telephone interview from his new studio in Brooklyn. "I'm trying to do something that's hard for me. I never make the same thing twice, ever. And it has to be exactly right."

"The way 'The End of Modernity' works conceptually," Dr. Weinberg said by phone from Columbus, "is that, as you move outward from the sculpture's center, you're moving forward in time." Roughly half a million years after the Big Bang, he explained, as the matter in the universe got more diffuse, it shifted from opaque to transparent. The central aluminum sphere of the sculpture represents "the opaque surface beyond which we can't see," he said. Moving outward, the glass pieces represent clusters of stars held together by their own gravity: the galaxies. But the sculpture owes as much to modernist design lore as to science. "In a way," Mr. McElheny said, "it's about how many complex ideas can be embedded in objects."

After the Met rejected the first set of drawings for the chandeliers, Mr. McElheny said, Wallace K. Harrison, the architect of the opera house, gave Hans Harald Rath, the designer from Lobmeyr, a book about astronomy and galaxies. Mr. McElheny believes that the book would have included what was then a cutting-edge theory: the Big Bang. To illustrate further what he wanted, Mr. Harrison produced a potato, with toothpicks sticking out in all directions.

Those toothpicks may come to mind when you encounter the sculpture. "It's a little bit of a showstopper," said Helen Molesworth, a curator

at the Wexner Center, where the piece was first exhibited, late last year. "It's extraordinarily reflective, and it has this central orb that feels really heavy. At the same time, the clusters coming out of it are glass, so they're incredibly airy and spindly."

The central orb and rods — most are chromed aluminum — were manufactured in California, while all the glass was made by Mr. McElheny at a glass foundry in Long Island City, Queens. "I blew all the small spheres," he said. "The discs were cast in a small mold by hand."

When it was first installed at the Wexner, Ms. Molesworth said, "All the metal cluster balls had to be uniquely drilled to connect to the glass. Then there was the added problem that the universe is asymmetrical." While this is very interesting philosophically and scientifically, it becomes problematic when you need to hang the object from the ceiling. "There were a lot of crossed fingers," she recalled.

Mr. McElheny is not the first glass blower to make scientifically accurate models. In 1936 Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, father and son partners from Dresden, Germany, completed a collection of 4,400 glass plants and flowers for the Botanical Museum at Harvard University that took a half-century to make. Their studio also made models of marine invertebrates that were sold to museums around the world. At the American Museum of Natural History, there is a series of single-celled protozoa completed in 1943 by Herman O. Mueller, a former museum staff member who came from a family of German glass-blowers.

Still, Mr. McElheny's fascination is more with stories than with science. A second sculpture in the Rosen show, for example, is part of a continuing series based on a conversation that supposedly took place in 1929 between the Modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi and the utopian architect and visionary Buckminster Fuller. Their exchange is believed to have posited that the only way to create an object that wouldn't cast a shadow was to make it totally reflective and place it in a totally reflective environment.

So for two of the works, Mr. McElheny built a wall-mounted landscape model in which abstract reflective forms are arranged on a mirrored plane. "It's really a horrible proposal," he said. "You couldn't live in this world. You couldn't escape your own reflection."

Mr. McElheny, who was born in Boston, became involved with glass in 1984, as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design. "I heard this story," he said, "that glass blowing came out of an oral tradition, and that this tradition was passed down from generation to generation. There was an aura of romance and secrecy about it. I wasn't interested in making glass so much as I was interested in this story."

In pursuit of what he felt was "exclusive knowledge, impossible to learn from a book," Mr. McElheny secured an apprenticeship with Ronald Wilkinson, then the head of the White Friars Factory in Britain. "It was a unique opportunity at a historical moment," he said, explaining that many of Europe's family-owned firms were soon to close.

Mr. McElheny returned to Europe in 1989 after receiving his B.F.A. to study with Jan-Erik Ritzman and Sven-Ake Carlsson in Arnescurv, Sweden. His final apprenticeship was with the noted Venetian master Lino Tagliapietra.

But despite his love of the craft, he says he sees himself first as an artist.

"I think he's trying to make up for the fact that there's a lot of fetishization of technique," said Andrew Page, the editor of Glass Magazine. "Josiah worked very hard to get to the same level as the historic Venetians. He blows all the glass himself. It's an important part of his work."

Geoff Isles, a board member of Urban Glass, a Brooklyn glass studio where Mr. McElheny has produced and exhibited work, admires his skill. "People think that what distinguishes a skilled glass blower is a strong set of lungs," he said. "It's really manual dexterity. Looking at people like Josiah is like looking at high-end concert pianists. You watch their fingers. They do everything so effortlessly."

Mr. McElheny recently opened what he calls "a little experimental glass foundry" in Brooklyn with 10 pieces of equipment. "It's most fun, perhaps, when you're trying something and it works," he said. "A lot of things have to go right. When too many things go wrong, you have to start over."

Art in America October 2006

An Infinity of Objects

In his latest works, one of them on an atypically grand scale, Josiah McElheny plays upon modernist designs to undermine the certitues of modernity

BY GREGORY VOLK

Josiah McElheny is a decidedly unusual figure in that he has chosen to work primarily in handblown glass at a time when few glass artists enjoy significant attention from the art world at large. His background includes an undergraduate degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, where he first became interested in glassmaking, and apprenticeships with master glassblowers Lino Tagliapietra in Italy, and Jan-Erik Ritzman and Sven-Ake Carlsson in Sweden. McElheny is a masterful craftsman who still prefers making objects himself to enlisting technically brilliant assistants, and he possesses a familiarity with methods that date back centuries. Oftentimes working with seemingly utilitarian objects-vessels, goblets, bottles and plates-McElheny scrambles historical eras, willfully fuses fiction and fact, and imbues his objects with a dense array of conceptual, historical, social and political concerns that typically vault far beyond issues of craft and technical prowess. "Josiah McElheny: Modernity 1929-1965", his recent exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery, was fascinating for it's combination of bedazzling virtuosity and churning ideas that involve modernism's utopian promise, disarray and ultimate failure. The centerpiece was the elaborate and enormously ambitious *An End to Modernity* (2005), a 12-foot-high sculpture 1 feet in diameter consisting of a central sphere with numerous radiating elements with glass and metal, suspended from the ceiling to just a bit above the floor. This work, commissioned by the Wexner Center Residency Award program and first exhibited at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, Columbus, resulted from an odd inspiration. While attending the Metropolitan Opera in New York, McElheny was enthralled by -------*continued....*

A hands-on glassmaker at heart, devoted to hot shops and blow pipes, the cerebral McElheny seems bent on creating objects of wonder.

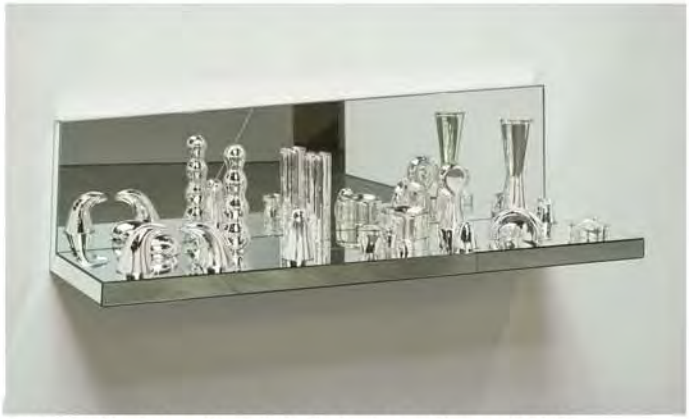
Conceptual Drawings for a Chandelier, 1965, ***2005, super 16mm color film and digital animation with soundtrack (Beth Coleman and Howard Goldkrand) transferred to digital video, approx. 5 minutes.***

the Met's crystal chandeliers, designed in 1965 by Hans Harald Rath of the famous Viennese firm J. & L. Lobmeyr. The Met's architect, Wallace K. Harrison, rejected Rath's initial designs, preferring instead something more space-age. The revised design resulted in glittering and intricate chandeliers that have a note of distant galaxies and futuristic space stations, but that also evoke ornate mansions and the gilded opera halls of the past. A landmark of modern design thus reaches widely through history, culture and issues of class—and that's prime territory for McElheny.

While the Met's chandeliers were probably not made with this in mind, 1965 was also the year in which the first experimental data supporting the Big Bang theory were published. It's possible, though, that the chandeliers were influenced by a climate of ideas concerning the adventure of space travel, as well as a search for the origins of the universe. These are the connections McElheny picked up on. Working closely with Ohio State professor of astronomy David Weinberg, McElheny devised a chandelier-like sculpture that convincingly doubles as a model for the birth and history of the universe. Dozens of chrome-plated aluminum rods, small glass parts and tiny electric lights protrude in every direction from the center, like radiating energy zooming through space, while the large sphere at the core reflects both viewer and gallery (including, at Rosen, other works by McElheny). As a viewer, you're at the center of the universe, so to speak—or at least your reflection is. Clusters of glass disks and spheres attached to the rods represent galaxies, while shining lightbulbs stand for quasars.

Unlike the Met's overhead chandeliers (the largest of which is 17 feet in diameter, close to the sculpture's dimensions), McElheny's piece is right in front of you, which intensifies its peculiar mix of meticulous design and explosive force. The whole work seems at once bristling, fragile and spectacular, and it invites close inspection, changing with your every step. Your perspective is challenged, scrambled and pulled in multiple directions; even something as simple as peering through one of the numerous small, transparent globes yields distortions and strange angles. While the sculpture alludes to the Big Bang, it also refers to the detonation of the unified visions, forms and authoritative statements of modernism, giving way to fragmentation, multiplicity and diversity. Moreover, it has hilarious connotations that have nothing to do with theoretical purities or cosmic events. It could be the most elaborate and outlandish disco ball ever, a stage prop for a glam rock band or a gigantic rendition of a comic-book explosion.

Still—and this is one of McElheny's real strengths—no matter how much this work involves complex ideas about modernity, history and science, it is visually enthralling, a real treat for the eyes. Transparency, reflection, illumination, plentitude, emptiness: jutting metal rods and aerial glass elements come together in a way that's uniquely dynamic. Remaining a hands-on glassmaker at heart, a devotee of hot shops and blow pipes, the cerebral McElheny seems bent on plumbing the medium for all it's worth in order to make an object of wonder. At the exhibition, a short film by the artist, in which multiple views of the Met's chandeliers are interspersed with cosmological diagrams, added yet another dimension. (McElheny collaborated with cinematographer Adolfo Doring, and the film is set to a captivating soundtrack by Beth Coleman and Howard Goldkrand.)



Architectural Model for a Totally Reflective Landscape (Playground), ***2006, hand-blown mirrored glass, industrial mirror and wood, approx. 19½ by 64⅜ by 21½ inches. Opposite page, detail.***

Architectural Model for a Totally Reflective Landscape (Park), ***2006, hand-blown mirrored glass, industrial mirror and wood, approx. 19½ by 64⅜ by 21⅜ inches.***

Also included in the show were three of McElheny's mirrored wall-mounted sculptures, two of them based on a 1929 conversation that took place between Isamu Noguchi and Buckminster Fuller at Romany Marie's, a Greenwich Village bar. There they met to talk shop—but their shoptalk was unusual, a discussion about forms without shadow, something that could only be achieved (they surmised) if reflective forms were installed in a reflective environment. With *Architectural Model for a Totally Reflective Landscape (Park)* and *Architectural Model for a Totally Reflective Landscape (Playground)*, both 2006, McElheny imagines what this barroom idea might actually look like if realized. Basing his design on Noguchi's sculptures and proposals for modernist landscapes, McElheny created a selection of largely abstract forms in mirrored glass. Spheres, half-spheres, hourglass shapes, a Brancusiesque column and other components are installed on two mirrored shelves. While there is something pure, transcendent and utopian about these forms, there is something rigid, controlling, mechanized and ultimately inhospitable to them, as well. You probably wouldn't feel all too relaxed in that park, with its harsh glare and domineering monuments, and your kids probably wouldn't make a beeline for that playground, either. The prospect of seeing yourself freakishly and incessantly reflected could also be unnerving.

Twentieth Century Modernism, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely (2006), features 28 mirrored glass vessels in an illuminated, horizontal mirrored case divided into four adjacent compartments. Augmenting numerous historical references, this case may allude to sculptor Larry Bell's reflective glass cubes, begun in the 1960s, and even more to many works by Donald Judd, about whom McElheny has written astutely. McElheny based the vessels, which he made himself, on modernist designs from Austria, the Czech Republic, Italy and Scandinavia, which are renowned for glassmaking. Willfully ambiguous, these spare yet elegant objects suggest fancy liqueur bottles, extra-large perfume vials and bowls for mints, underscoring again how a modernist esthetic has long been conscripted into commercial purposes, product design and elegant lifestyles.

Everything here holds out the promise of being useful. McElheny is well aware that the history of glass is largely a history of utilitarian domestic objects, but in these pieces it is impossible to discern exactly what that use is. Each vessel reflects the others on parts of its surface, and each is also reflected in the back panel of the support, forming rows of endless replicas. Trailing off into deep, mysterious recesses, the objects also look like identical luxury goods arrayed on the shelves of expensive boutiques—all that high-end splendor we covet and rarely attain, all that repetition and sameness spreading through the world with an air of invincibility. Once again, however, McElheny's work is full of surprises. These recent versions of 20th-century designs also seem devotional, almost sacred, as if one were looking at a shrine. More implicitly, they tap into central human questions of who we are and where we come from; of what, if anything, is original about us; of our own aspirations and contradictions in a confusing world chock-full of fractious ideologies and competing influences.

Josiah McElheny is an exquisite practitioner of "craft secrets," to borrow the high-modernist term that Clement Greenberg applied to avant-garde art, as opposed to glass or any other craft. What McElheny accomplishes in these and other works is to make glass as relevant, as charged with intellectual and esthetic inquiry, as any other medium. When glass is being made, it's in a fluid and malleable state. With its conceptual intricacies, investigative bent and layers of possible meaning, McElheny's finished glasswork retains this state of flux and adventure. □

"Josiah McElheny: Modernity 1929-1965" was seen at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York [May 6-June 3, 2006]. McElheny's "Cosmology, Design and Landscape, Part 1" is presently on view at Donald Young Gallery, Chicago [Sept. 29-Oct. 28]; the gallery will show the second installment of that exhibition beginning in June 2007. "Projects 84: Josiah McElheny" opens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Feb. 12, 2007.

Author: *Gregory Volk is a New York-based art critic and curator. He is also associate professor at the School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond.*

tema celeste

josiah mcelheny

Andrea Rosen Gallery
New York

Josiah McElheny's first solo show at this gallery contains a dazzling array of objects that further his ongoing ambivalent dialogue with modernism. He is a master at using glass and mirrors to emphasize the literal and symbolic meaning of "reflection." *Architectural Model for a Totally Reflective Landscape (Park)* represents the continuation of a series of supposed conversations between Buckminster Fuller and Isamu Noguchi; they speculate that the only way to create things without shadow is to make totally reflective forms within a totally reflective environment. McElheny's "models," using Noguchi's mostly unrealized proposals, create a fetishistic environment from a failed modernist dream. *An End to Modernity* is based on a chandelier commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1965 that reflected the creation of "The Big Bang Theory." Here the big bang is much more about the explosive demise of modernism than the creation of the universe. McElheny's biggest work to date, it hangs six inches off the ground and further confounds its supposed function. It seems to reflect back in order to foretell the decadence of the '70s with its discos and strobe globes.
Twentieth Century Modernism, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely, part of a continuing series of endlessly repeated reflected objects, is a further comment on pop and modernism's optimism regarding replicated form and product. As with all of McElheny's sculptures, this piece has a beautiful decadence to it that reflects with sadness the unrealized hope of a modernist world that aspired to an utopian ideal. For McElheny, in the present, looking back on the failed dreams of the previous era is to ponder the beginning of the demise of the American Empire. If only we could look into the mirror and reflect upon what we truly see.

Josiah McElheny *An End to Modernity*, 2005, chrome-plated aluminum, electric lighting, hand-blown glass, steel cable and rigging / alluminio cromato, illuminazione elettrica, vetro soffiato a mano, cavo d'acciaio e apparecchiatura di sollevamento. ©Josiah McElheny. Photo by / Foto di Tom Powell Imaging.

La prima mostra di Josiah McElheny presso questa galleria presenta una vertiginosa parata di oggetti che approfondiscono il suo ambivalente dialogo *in fieri* con il modernismo. L'artista è un maestro nell'utilizzare vetro e specchi per enfatizzare il significato letterale e simbolico del termine "riflessione". *Architectural Model for a Totally Reflective Landscape (Park)* rappresenta la continuazione di una serie di ipotetiche conversazioni tra Buckminster Fuller e Isamu Noguchi; in questo caso, i due argomentano che l'unico modo per dar vita a soluzioni prive di ombre sia creare forme interamente riflettenti all'interno di un ambiente a sua volta del tutto riflettente. I "modelli" di McElheny, partendo da proposte di Noguchi prevalentemente irrealizzate, danno vita a un ambiente-feticcio scaturito da un sogno modernista fallito.
An End to Modernity trae spunto da un lampadario che, commissionato dalla New York Metropolitan Opera nel 1965, rifletteva la creazione della "teoria del Big Bang". In questo lavoro il big bang riguarda più l'esplosiva sconfitta del modernismo che la creazione dell'universo. Ad oggi l'opera più imponente realizzata da McElheny, questa scultura è sospesa a circa 15 cm da terra, creando ulteriore confusione in merito alla sua presunta funzione. Essa, piuttosto, sembra una riflessione a posteriori volta a prevedere la decadenza degli anni Settanta con le loro discoteche e le luci stroboscopiche.
Twentieth Century Modernism, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely — parte di una serie *in fieri* di oggetti riflessi ripetuti all'infinito — rappresenta un ulteriore commento sul pop e sull'ottimismo modernista riguardo alle forme e ai prodotti creati in serie. Come tutte le sculture di McElheny, anch'essa possiede una bellissima decadenza che rispecchia con tristezza la speranza irrealizzata di un mondo modernista che aspirava a un ideale utopico. Per l'artista, oggi, guardare ai sogni falliti del passato significa meditare sull'inizio del crollo dell'"impero americano". Se solo potessimo guardare nello specchio e riflettere su quello che davvero vediamo.

Douglas F. Maxwell

ARTFORUM NOVEMBER2005

It's easy to love a Castiglione lamp. Harder, perhaps, to embrace without irony the more tricked-out artifacts of modernism's schizophrenic dotage. Such *Jetsons*-era concoctions could scarcely be called "timeless," but for artist Josiah McElheny that's precisely their allure. McElheny has repeatedly gravitated toward a class of objects that show both their age and their Age, embodying as they do the often unresolved or inassimilable aesthetic aspirations of their historical milieu. He has taken as his subject not the Bauhaus's iconic Wagenfeld lamp but that design school's madcap Metal Party, not the hushed refinement of Mies or Brancusi, but the earnest delirium of Fuller and Noguchi, not Castiglione's elegant Arco lamp, but Lobmeyr's 1965 Sputnik-glam chandeliers for the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

This latest project, McElheny's most ambitious ever, is now on view in "Part Object Part Sculpture," the inaugural exhibition at the refurbished Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, which commissioned the work as part of its artist-in-residency program. His reimagining of the 1960s' big-bucks, big-bang aesthetic comprises two interrelated parts: a monumental fallen chandelier in glass and chrome (titled *An End to Modernity*) and a film merging animations of schematic drawings of the origin of the universe with footage of the Met's famed fixture (*Conceptual Drawings for a Chandelier, 1965*). Cosmology and interior design may make an improbable dyad, but McElheny has a beguiling knack for unbraiding and retying the threads of historical narratives, making us see our cultural production as the fusion—and, in his words, "confusion"—of the most unlikely of forces.—SCOTT ROTHKOPF

JOSIAH MCELHENY

Talks About *An End to Modernity* and *Conceptual Drawings for a Chandelier, 1965*, both 2005

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I started going to the Metropolitan Opera with friends and I was struck by the decor. It's an odd building in that it combines precepts of modern architecture with remnants of the nineteenth century, like lots of red velvet and gold leaf. I was particularly fascinated with the chandeliers, in part because I knew that they were perhaps the last great achievement of J. & L. Lobmeyr, the first glass company to work with modernist architects and designers like Adolf Loos. They're kind of Gilded Age/space-age objects, and they immediately looked to me like a galaxy or an explosion—a Pop image of the big bang. And just like the theater itself, they seem to have come from this weird transitional moment where modernism became infected with other influences. The spherical crystals feel of their time, for example, but they're also faceted and prismatic, which lends them a nineteenth-century opulence.

My initial thought was that it would be amazing to remake this object as a sculpture that had literally fallen from its normal space so that you could look at it up close, but also to modernize it by toning down its highly sparkling quality. In a way it would be like modernizing the end of modernism—but also creating an image of its explosive demise. Since the original chandelier already suggested the idea of the big bang, it led me to ask, "What if I remade the chandelier so that instead of it being a gloss on the theory, all of the decisions were determined by the actual science of the origin of the universe?"

About five years ago I began to discuss this idea with people at MIT, but the project really moved forward when I met the cosmologist David Weinberg. We ultimately realized that the sculpture could make a correlation between two important things. One is that the history of the big bang is just that, a history, and although it's impossible to really draw a picture of the universe at any given moment, it is possible to ask what kinds of basic structures were being formed two, or seven, or ten billion years ago. So the first decision we made was that the length of each rod would represent a certain amount of time, and at the end of each one the arrangement of the glass pieces would show what kinds of galaxy formations were happening at the corresponding moment.

The second thing that the sculpture depicts in terms of science is the beautiful idea of the isotropic nature of the universe, which essentially means that any one place in the universe is just as likely to be as interesting or boring as any other. That's why it became important that the rods not come out in some kind of pattern but in a random way. A computer would randomly pick a point on the sphere, a length of rod, and then a rule-based version of the galactic cluster formations that would have appeared at that time. So the sculpture is like a 1960s manufactured object with its high-finish chrome surface, but it has a different level of complication and asymmetry—a specificity in terms of the lack of patterning—that's part of the atmosphere of the piece. The idea is not that the science would be legible to the viewer, but that injecting so much information would create more vectors for the audience to use and result in an altogether new kind of hybrid object.

To execute the sculpture, I fabricated around one thousand glass pieces by hand and collaborated with a company in California that figured out a way to create the roughly five thousand metal parts. I also went to Vienna and the Czech Republic to research Lobmeyr. As it turns out, Hans Harald Rath, the owner of the company, came to New York in 1965 to present a set of designs for the chandeliers to Wallace K. Harrison, the Met's architect. Harrison rejected them all and handed him a book about galaxies and said, "I want something connected to this." And so Rath went back to his hotel and over the weekend came up with the basic design. There's even a picture in the Lobmeyr archive of a potato with toothpicks sticking out of it hanging in Harrison's model of the lobby. I didn't know any of this at the time I began my project, but one of the things that my work is most involved with is the way that ideas end up influencing all areas of cultural production, consciously or not. And it just so happens that 1965 was also the year of the discovery of cosmic background radiation, the first physical evidence of the big bang, which made front-page news.

The related film, *Conceptual Drawings for a Chandelier, 1965*, was shot in Super 16 at the Met and then the footage was combined with a series of animated drawings based on scientific attempts to diagram the big bang. What's interesting is that the drawings from these sources look almost like conceptualizations of the chandelier, so there's kind of a story arc to the film and you end up seeing the same idea from two sides. You can take the design milieu, and the more abstractly you look at it, the more complicated and full of content it becomes. On the other hand, you can also see that very sophisticated scientific notions result in visual abstractions with independent content of their own. Basically, the whole project exists at the intersection of specific concepts and abstract ones, of intentional and unintentional cultural products. And, finally, it's about how they all become interconnected and confused. □

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Flash Art

CHICAGO

JOSIAH MCELHENY

DONALD YOUNG

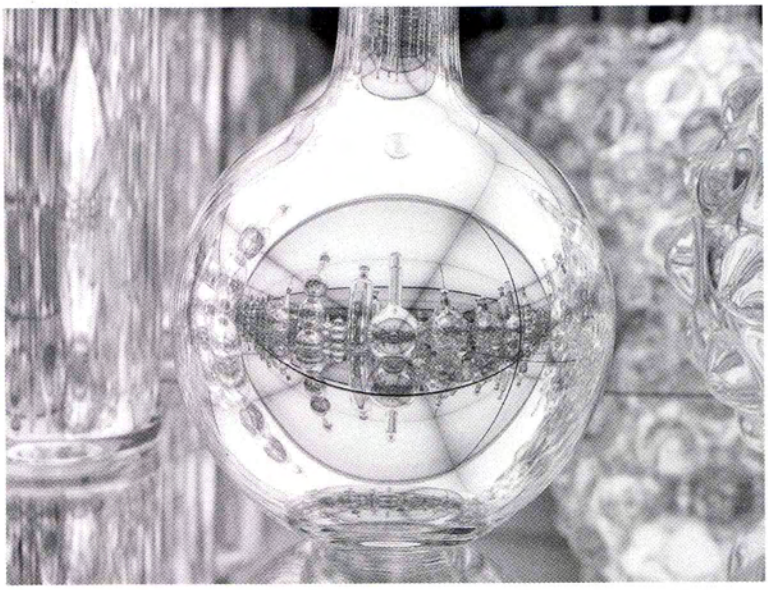
McElheny's newest works of industrial mirror and silvered-glass stretch to embody perceptual phenomena in the strings of light fixtures, wooden ceiling beams, and white walls intrinsic to viewing them. Not sufficiently contained by their environment, they wend from one shape to another on mirrored tabletops. Rooted in historical dialogues that include Jorge Luis Borges' determination of mirroring as any act of reflection and a 1920s conversation between Buckminster Fuller and Isamu Noguchi, the works in "Total Reflective Abstraction" attempt in part to realize a reflective environment absent of any object's shadow, an idea McElheny attempts to materialize through situating viewers to reflect on his reflective objects.

It's a near-impossible task. Glass forms permeate and resonate through visually prismatic surfaces, reconfiguring and delimiting their constituent objects to create a never fully-realizable aggregate of perspective.

This abstract equanimity has its fullest realization in *Modernity circa 1952* and *Modernity circa 1962*. These two wall-mounted display cases, lit from within, contain objects resembling reliquaries or similar vessels from the last century. Each of the objects reflects back into the rear panel of the case, forming an infinite regress disappearing over a darkened horizon. As if gazing through one-way glass, these reflected objects also refuse to shift in relation to the viewer's position, nor does any outside presence mar the act of reflection, here cast with all the illusion of a fixed state of consecration.

In the third and final of McElheny's projects, a room of ten mirror drawings distort and modify the viewer's reflected image. Scrawled and intricately scratched surfaces problematize and interpolate the reflectively constructed self as an unseeable whole, using the personal affinities of drawing to deliver a reflection on the abstract images in which the entire species has been made.

Michael Workman



JOSIAH McELHENY, Modernity circa 1962, Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely (detail), 2004. Hand-blown silvered glass objects, chrome display, glass, mirror, 77 x 144 x 47 cm. Courtesy of Donald Young Gallery, Chicago. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.

Josiah McElheny BY KATHRYN HIXSON

Donald Young Gallery, Chicago IL February 6 · March 27, 2004

In 1927 in Greenwich Village, Isamu Noguchi listens to Buckminster Fuller arguing for the aesthetic potential of a new purity of abstraction that could only be achieved through the complete eradication of shadows, in a totally reflective environment. Noguchi is fresh from a stint in France with Brancusi, and among his duties there was to polish the esteemed sculptor's bronze works to a shine beyond the ability of human perception to apprehend it. Seizing the younger artist's stimulated imagination, Bucky Fuller, with his talk of geodesic domes and sci-fi futurism, stirs up enough utopian fervor that Noguchi goes back to his apartment building and tries out the experiment: he paints his laundry room silver. We can only project our own disappointments onto the ensuing scene, in which the messy particularities of the laundry refuse to give up their stalwart physicality, even in the face of the determined forces of the modernist imagination.

It is just this scenic projection that Josiah McElheny gives us in his series of five low-lying mirrored tables holding dozens of blown glass objects, each also mirrored. Playing loose with historical facts and influences, the artist replicates Noguchi's signature biomorphic shapes in his objects, and lays them out as if they were models for giant landscaping projects. The glistening arrangements become a Japanese rock garden re-fitted with beautiful silvery smooth surfaces to satisfy the fantastic schema of Buckminster Fuller's proposed "New Abstraction of Total Reflection," a title McElheny copped for this piece. In contrast to Noguchi's laundry room, McElheny's version is perhaps more dutiful to its utopian urge: the gleaming curved surfaces endlessly reflect the planes on which they sit, their neighboring objects, the gallery's raftered ceiling and the curious gallery viewer in endlessly varying array, and one is hard pressed to find any shadows. Indeed, it is not the play of light and shade that defines the shapes; it is the shape of the reflections that allows one to ascertain the physical outlines of the glass volumes.

But the installation never vaporizes into pure imaginative abstraction, which is precisely McElheny's point. As in previous projects and events, the artist has combined his knowledge and skill in glassmaking with an ongoing examination of material culture to zero in on specific psychically loaded moments in the history of aesthetic production. In his "Total Reflective Abstraction," McElheny tweaks that twentieth-century modernist notion that man can finally transcend physicality through abstract thinking. True to form, if you will, the lusciously crafted objects remain steadfastly objects, either as ornery phenomenological perceptions or as so many Tiffany vases on the classy Noguchi glass coffee tables.

Reflectivity itself becomes a potent metaphor for the twentieth-century propensity for philosophical navel-gazing. In a couple of wall-mounted pieces in the next room, informally dubbed "Infinity Boxes," McElheny sets more mirrored blown glass bottles (designs from the 1950s and 1960s) in mirrored Minimalist shelves. The viewer's visage is absented because the faces of the cabinets are two-way mirrors—like the police in *CSI* interrogation rooms, we can look in at the criminals but they can't see us—and the bottles' reflections reach into infinity. In a third series called "Mirror Drawings," McElheny gives us the opposite effect. All we can see in these bathroom-size and -shape mirrors is ourselves, though overlaid with delicate white or black "drawings." These filigree lines of grids and curves of spun glass embedded in the planes of the mirrors subtly embellish our reflections, while standing in for the expressive hand of the artist.

Each and every reflection, though, is a distortion of reality: curved, amplified, reversed, turned upside down, condensed, strung out, and toppled. It is perhaps in this distortion that McElheny projects the location of meaning, in the ever-changing encounter between the object, the vestiges of the maker in the object, and the perception of the subject, caught not in a narcissistic iteration, but in a sparkly, spiraling infinity loop, bouncing between subject and object forever.

ARTFORUM
MARCH 1998

Josiah McElheny, *Verzelini's Acts of Faith* (detail), 1996, mixed media, 78½ x 72½ x 14¾".

JOSIAH MCELHENY

AC PROJECT ROOM

In "Non-Decorative Beautiful Objects," his first solo show in New York, Josiah McElheny carefully placed his astonishingly elegant blown-glass pieces into the rickety frame of art-historical discourse. All too aware of the relegation of his métier to the status of mere craft, McElheny confronts some of the philosophical and historical sources of aesthetic distinction, and, in his modest fashion, blows them away.

The show comprised five mini-installations or projects, each of which elaborated on a real or invented scenario laid out in an accompanying text. In *Verzelini's Acts of Faith*, 1996, for example, McElheny put thirty-seven delicately blown-glass objects into the kind of wall-mounted display case one might find in a historical society or antique store. The text inside the case attributes the works to a certain Giacomo Verzelini, "a Venetian glassblower who worked in Venice, Antwerp, and London." Each piece is "Verzelini's" re-creation of chalices and other items depicted in actual medieval and Renaissance paintings of the life of Christ, and the group of pieces, the text continues, "was made not as an exploration of form but as an act of devotion." The objects allow the viewer to catch myriad art-historical references—to Tintoretto's *Marriage at Cana*, for example, depicting the biblical story of Christ turning water into wine, or to Joos van Cleve's version of the Last Supper. It is as if McElheny, through his venerable alter ego, wanted to trace the history of the relationship of his art to the more elevated art of painting and discern when, precisely, beautiful objects became degraded as "decoration."

McElheny is more than adept at engaging both sides of the art/text junction. He recognizes language to be as supple and fragile as blown glass (and as potentially dangerous). His prose is witty, astute, and at times deeply felt. When we learn that Verzelini/McElheny's project is an "act of devotion," for example, it would be a mistake to dismiss this claim as entirely facetious: there is too much tangible, exhibited evidence to the contrary.

In the project *The Search for Infinity*, 1997, McElheny examines Renaissance concerns with one-point perspective, addressing the concept of infinity with an engaging earnestness and self-effacement. In this work—a series of glass plates on which he has inscribed elaborate patterns—McElheny uses Renaissance painting techniques to create his own image of what timelessness and endlessness might mean. The resultant pieces are philosophically weighty but as subtle and delicate as a Twombly squiggle. *A Tribute to Female Beauty*, 1997, explores gender through form; its text informs us that female figurines had traditionally been made almost exclusively by male glass blowers "of great physical bravado" (in whose party McElheny would almost certainly not count himself), and that their works had something of a "lascivious quality" about them—unlike McElheny's glass piece for *A Tribute*, an exquisite vase in the form of a Brancusi-like torso. This project deftly raises significant questions about the literal "construction" of gender in the history of artworks, and in so doing, McElheny grapples with the legacy of his medium.

McElheny's graceful, deeply intelligent work considers where it has come from, and where there is left for it to go. Some artists working in more thoroughly pondered mediums seem to find this process of consideration debilitating; for McElheny, it is a challenge that inspires.

—*Nico Israel*

Artforum Mar. 1998: 100–1.

Time Out New York

Oct 30–Nov 6, 1997
Issue 110

Art

Josiah McElheny, "Non-Decorative Beautiful Objects"
Ac Project Room, through Nov 15 (see Soho).

You might call Josiah McElheny's particular style of conceptualism "sweet": His works in glass draw on craft, fantasy and history. He fashions simple plates, cups and bowls, labeling them with strange texts that seem fictional at times. The result reminded me of faux museum displays.

The centerpiece here is a large case filled with dozens of the artist's lovingly handmade vessels. According to the somewhat lengthy label affixed to this cabinet of wonders, each vessel derives its shape from a specific painting depicting the life of Christ: There are decanters and bowls taken from various renditions of *The Last Supper* and glassware from Caravaggio's amazing *The Supper at Emmaus*. McElheny's objects are, in effect, acts of devotion—testaments to mystical events. Taking art history as his starting point, McElheny breathes new life into his craft while gently nudging it from its traditionally decorative role.

Additional pieces tell the tale of the miraculous survival of a fallen vase and illustrate Renaissance perspective through a series of plates—each etched with an elegant pattern of bubbles. It would be nice, however, if McElheny relied less on text and more on form to convey his message.

McElheny's ambitions are not grand; in fact, there's something self-effacing about his work. Glassmakers will probably scoff at his conceptual concerns. But not being an expert on glass myself, I can appreciate his restrained touch and quiet approach to developing his own specialized—if marginal—niche.—*Jerry Saltz*

Josiah McElheny, *Verzelini's Acts of Faith (Glass from paintings of the life of Christ), 1996.*

Time Out New York 30 Oct. 1997: 42.