



Josiah McElheny: Works 1994-2000

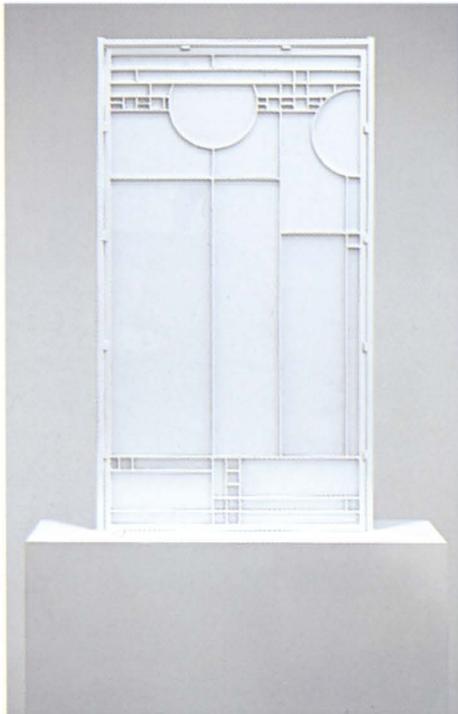
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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

## Believe You Me

If it can be said that museums are useful for the preservation of art, then art is also useful for the preservation of museums. Given the current spate of biennials and museum expansions, it would appear that the total amount of exhibition space in the world exceeds the amount of art available to fill it, creating a situation in which installation art reigns if for no other reason than it is the most efficient solution to the problem. Exhibition space creates a vacuum and art fills it, and the most far-flung, incomprehensible artists are made useful as soon as their work fills some beckoning room – not because artists or their audiences want it to be useful, of course, but because an architectural void requires it. Culture, too, abhors a vacuum.

Fortunately, whenever the institutional demand for art threatens to outstrip the motivation for making it, as was the case in the French Academy of the 1860s or in the university galleries of the 1970s, there have been artists willing to contravene that demand's suffocating utility. Josiah McElheny is one such artist, and the extent to which



Frank Lloyd Wright (*White*), 2000, stained glass, steel, pedestal, 73¼" x 30" x 10", courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, photo Tom Van Eynde



From Verzelini's *Acts of Faith: The Last Supper According to Bonifacio Pitati and Beato Angelico*, 1996, blown glass, text, display, 37" x 53" x 25", courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, photo Claire Garoutte

he turns his contravention to his advantage is the extent to which his work succeeds.

McElheny's strength and liability have always been that he works with blown glass, a material that is capable of tremendous beauty but also suffers from being "craft," meaning that it is perceived as being explicitly useful and decorative rather than marginally so. This is a rather paranoid perception, however, since 20th-century painting and sculpture were in many ways rivaled by their brethren in the decorative arts, the decorative arts suffering only from the flaw that their innovations were accomplished with the assent of the discriminating public. If museums like MoMA have been reluctant to release their design collection from its fifth-floor ghetto, then I suspect it is because the legitimacy of such objects is already so ingrained in people's minds as to render the museum redundant. An Eero Saarinen *Womb Sofa* might be the perfect seating arrangement from which to contemplate Jackson Pollock's *Number 31* (both, incidentally, date from 1950), but equating Saarinen's cultural production with that of Pollock is a can of worms that MoMA (and

most museums) would rather keep closed.

Josiah McElheny's work is about that can of worms. And although he is not interested in critiquing art museums – let alone working outside their sway – his work does contain a social dimension resistant to the notion of museum display as the pinnacle of an object's life. In *The Theory of Measurement* (1995), McElheny presents two glass forms common to the Roman Empire: the *modius*, a precise vessel for measuring grain; and the *modiolus*, a handled chalice of similar form but varying size. An accompanying label acknowledges a reasonable amount of confusion inherent to interpreting the objects' similar names and forms, but its firm museological rhetoric would have us believe that the matter has been resolved. Beneath McElheny's authoritative style, however, is the implication that any Roman could have told the difference between a *modius* and a *modiolus*, regardless of how similar they might seem.

Unlike Marcel Duchamp's strategy of the Readymade, by which the inclusion of any object in a museum is *de facto* certification of its status as a work of art, McElheny's *The Theory of*

*Measurement* reminds us that such objects as urinals or *modii* are the product of elaborate social customs that make it possible for them to be "elevated" in the first place. Were we not able to recognize a urinal as a urinal, the radicality of Duchamp's *Fountain* as a work of art would not be possible. Thus, where Duchamp's Readymades emphasized the authority of museums, McElheny defers to the authority of the object and the role of the people who made it. Where Duchamp focused on the object's destination, McElheny focuses on the journey that got it there.

This is not to say that McElheny strives for a kind of populist truth in his work in contrast to a dominant culture's pack of lies. For him it's all storytelling, and if such a thing as a "dominant culture" exists, then it's because that culture has won the war of persuasion. Just as the Catholic Church employs material opulence and ritual magic in its

sales pitch for Christianity, McElheny appreciates the power of beauty and myth in the construction of faith in art. In *Verzelini's Acts of Faith* (1997), an elaborate wall case tenders some 30-odd cups, bowls and goblets blown from clear glass. The attendant label says they are the work of Giacomo Verzelini, a minor Venetian nobleman who traveled throughout Europe paying homage to paintings of his beloved Christ. Later, as an act of devotion, he made replicas of the glassware represented in his favorite depictions: *The Nativity* by Hugo van der Goes; *The Crucifixion* by Pieter Gaertner; *Supper in the House of Levi* by Veronese. The case is elegant, the glassware is gorgeous, and it's a charming, idiosyncratic story – and all true, except for the part about the glassblowing. There was a Venetian nobleman named Giacomo Verzelini, and he did go on pilgrimages throughout the continent, but he never made glass from the

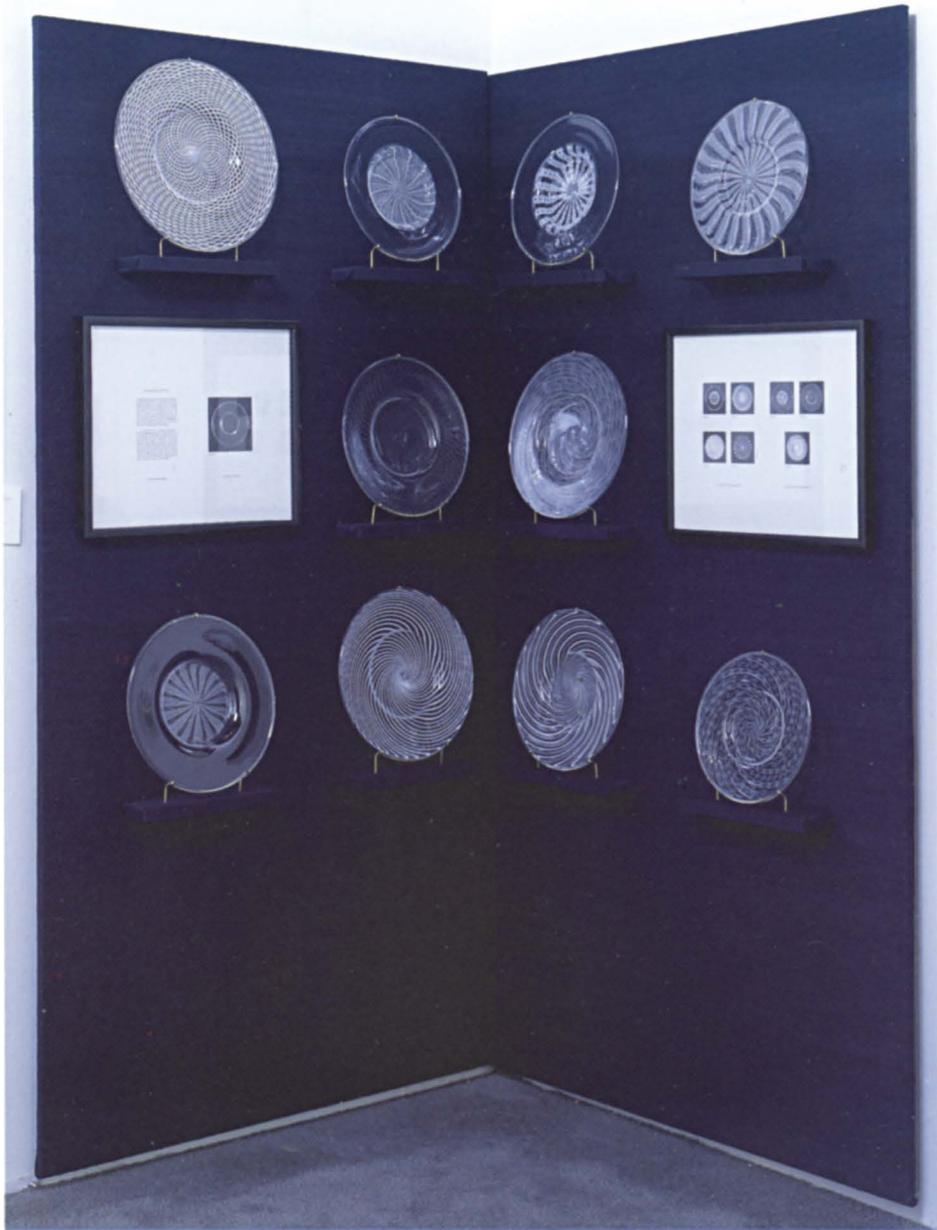
paintings he'd seen, although the story is so compelling we're willing to believe it whether it's true or not.

Although he began his career trying to distance himself from the tradition of craft, over the years McElheny has transformed that tradition into an art of fabrication utterly germane to contemporary society. No less an authority than Cher has observed that "all of us invent ourselves, some of us just have more imagination than others,"<sup>1</sup> meaning that we're all in the business of persuading others to believe in what we do. The more we persuade people, the more we craft a constituency whose power is based on the faith it holds in common.

McElheny's recent work is noteworthy, then, in that it places even greater emphasis on craftsmanship as a proselytizing force, relying on the corrupt physical beauty of his objects without having to spin any tales. *Charlotte Perriand, Carlo Scarpa, and*



*From an Historical Anecdote about Fashion*, 2000, blown-glass objects, display case, five framed digital prints, display case 72" x 120", digital prints 18" x 25½" each, courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, photo Tom Van Eynde



*Collection of Glass Concerning the Search for Infinity*, 1998, blown glass, text, photographs and display, dimensions variable, courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, photo Michael Tropea

*others (White)* (2000) employs neither McElheny's trademark expository labels nor his vernacular museum displays, instead condensing the former's arcane charm and the latter's cultural veracity into an icon of mid-century design: Charlotte Perriand's *Le Mexique*, a versatile, freestanding bookcase originally made of wood, steel and lacquered aluminum. Rendered solid white, its alternate storage spaces filled with white glass replicas of designs by Carlo Scarpa and Gio Ponti, McElheny's

version of *Le Mexique* is, quite literally, full of it. Full of confidence, full of craft, full of information and innuendo.

Most importantly, full of silence. Through a long, slow, circular evolution, *Charlotte Perriand, Carlo Scarpa, and others (White)* arrives at a beauty so self-evident it doesn't need to be understood, nor does it need to be placed in a historical context that explains why it's here today. Like the transcendental religiosity of high modernism or the unapologetic sensuality

of Italian design, looking at *Charlotte Perriand, Carlo Scarpa, and others (White)* is its own reward. Whether that experience is sacred or profane depends on how you use it, whether you enjoy the sumptuous whimsy of white on white or the fact that you recognize whatever information the piece withholds. Be you an unrepentant pagan or a design connoisseur, *Charlotte Perriand, Carlo Scarpa, and others (White)* lets you worship however you want. Where McElheny's earlier work assumed you didn't know something, the new work assumes you do.

Twenty-five years ago, in a short text buried in an obscure catalog, Marcel Broodthaers wrote: "I choose to consider Art a useless labor, apolitical and of little moral significance. Urged on by some base inspiration, I confess I would experience a kind of pleasure at being proved wrong. A guilty pleasure, since it would be at the expense of the victims, those who thought I was right."<sup>2</sup> Josiah McElheny's recent work would have us believe that, as he suspected, Broodthaers was wrong. Art is useful – not in the sense of driving a nail or shedding rain – but in the sense of providing a reason for us to congregate, look at something and converse. Like stamp collecting or cat breeding, art is a foil for the freedom to associate with others – nothing more, nothing less. The question is: Now that McElheny has abandoned his museological infatuations, who does he want to be associated with? The answer is neither a category nor a place, but a moment in time. For Josiah McElheny, the time is now.

—Joe Scanlan, artist  
Brooklyn, New York

#### Notes

1. See Joe Scanlan, *Pay For Your Pleasure (reprise)* exhibition catalogue, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998.
2. Marcel Broodthaers, "To be blind," in *Le Privilege de l'Art* exhibition catalog, Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1975. Reprinted in *October 42: Marcel Broodthaers*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

Cover: *Charlotte Perriand, Carlos Scarpa, others (White)*, 2000, blown-glass objects, wood and metal display case, 89½" x 93½", courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago, photo credit Tom Van Eynde