

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 Alpine 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.

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



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

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