

Josiah McElheny

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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