

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 architecture associated with Mies by bombarding it with bits and pieces conjured from Taut's far less suave, rather plodding signifiers of class consciousness: his blunt 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 Wirkkala's glass forms in an exquisite yellow. And Red echoes shelving that could have been made in the Jean Prouve workshops after a version of the well-known Perriand 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