

josiah McELHENY

the last scattering surface

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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

Josiah McElheny has grafted a distinguished art career out of two far-flung elements: conceptual art and a devoted study of traditional glass factory technique. He delights in making objects, particularly through the specialized and difficult techniques of blowing and shaping glass; he produces work of exceptional seductive beauty, which helps draw viewers into the complex ideas his art addresses. Although McElheny has explored the Renaissance and classical periods, much of his work examines the legacy and ideals of mid-century modern, which he has described as “...this weird transitional moment where modernism became infected with other influences.” One factor that influenced this focus was a commission from the Henry Art Gallery, culminating in his 1999 exhibition *An Historical Anecdote About Fashion*. Exploring the Henry’s diverse collections, McElheny was drawn to our select holdings of couture dresses, particularly the New Look as invented by Christian Dior. He created an elaborate fiction about a Venetian glassblowing factory and a museological display of vessels that convincingly resembled three distinct referents: figures of women, New Look garments, and the attenuated flowing abstraction of decorative objects from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since that point much of his work has continued to develop a critical perspective on mid 20th-century style in intricate combination with other cultural and historical issues. *The Last Scattering Surface*, an ideal example of his process, brings together the sputnik-like chandeliers of New York’s Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center with the Big Bang theory of the origin of the cosmos.

In 2005 McElheny was awarded a residency at the Wexner Center for the Arts. He was able to collaborate with Ohio State University cosmologist David H. Weinberg; together they worked to arrive at a visual model of the Big Bang as it is understood today. As a part of this process, McElheny researched the Met chandelier’s producer, J. & L. Lobmeyr, who he describes as “the first glass company to work

with modernist architects and designers like Adolf Loos.” These investigations resulted in two monumental “fallen” chandelier-like sculptures, *An End to Modernity* (2005), exhibited at the Wexner, and *The Last Scattering Surface*, as well as the film *Conceptual Drawings for a Chandelier, 1965* (which is shown in the Henry’s Media Gallery, adjacent to this space). The present sculpture represents two stages in the history of the cosmos that followed the Big Bang. As Professor Weinberg explained,

The Last Scattering Surface zeroes in on two special moments of that history [of the cosmos]: the present day, and the epoch of recombination, a time half a million years after the Big Bang when the expanding universe cooled to a temperature, 5000 degrees, that allowed electrons and protons to combine into atoms of hydrogen. Before recombination, free floating electrons scattered light rays much like the water molecules in a dense fog, making the universe opaque. When hydrogen atoms formed, the fog lifted, allowing light rays to travel on straight paths through transparent space.

A sculpture that appears as, but fails to function as a chandelier — and, at the same time, suggests an image of the space-time continuum, a tribute to Viennese glass manufacture and a critique of space-age design, and ultimately an abstraction, *The Last Scattering Surface* offers compelling food for thought to a variety of visitors. This range of allusions is particularly appropriate for a university art museum such as the Henry Art Gallery, surrounded as we are by the Department of Physics and Astronomy to the south; the School of Art to the north; departments of social sciences and humanities to the east, deeper into the campus; and the College of Architecture, across the street, west of the museum. Josiah McElheny has said he became an artist to join a community of people interested in ideas. This constellation of disciplines stands in testimony to how richly he has joined concepts and forms.