

## Josiah McElheny

DONALD YOUNG GALLERY

"Crystalline Modernity" opened with two color drawings that McElheny had made on silver-gelatin photographs of Mies van der Rohe's 1922 plans for a Glass Skyscraper. Not to be confused with Mies's visionary Friedrichstraße project, these plans were part of a series of experiments made the following year, in the wake of Friedrichstraße's failed construction. Such source imagery provided an apt introduction to an exhibition that reimagined the legacy of modernism by reframing its historical forms. The show's centerpiece, *Crystalline Landscape After Hablik and Luckhardt* (all works 2010), a diorama of a modernist utopia, was populated not by concrete pillars or hard-edged cubes of steel and glass but by red, yellow, green,

Josiah McElheny, *Blue Italian Modernism and Yellow Czech Modernism*, 2010, handblown glass with flashed color, extruded colored glass filters, LED electric lighting, painted wood display structure, 21 x 65 x 18 3/4".



and blue crystalline glass structures encased in a cabinet of two-way mirrors. Instead of Mies's or Le Corbusier's stoicism, however, McElheny gave us a fun house, and he filled it with forms derived from drawings and watercolors by Wenzel Hablik and Wassili Luckhardt, two early-twentieth-century German Expressionists who explored spirituality through graphic fantasies. In McElheny's realization as they appeared ad infinitum in the mirrored surround, the designs became strangely inhabitable, opening virtually endless pathways for the ambulatory eye.

Despite the apparently precise repetition of McElheny's glass forms, closer inspection revealed variation. Three blue *tempiettos* arched with slightly different curves, and the interiors of four yellow needle pyramids were each hollowed out by distinctly different volumes. Perhaps this was merely a residue of McElheny's construction process, in which the glass is molded in fabricated metal casts, the incidental deviation this method produces betraying the impossibility of mechanical perfection. And as Hablik's and Luckhardt's forms proliferated endlessly in the mirrored glass landscape, so too did their differences, demonstrating that modernism's legacy of standardization and uniformity cannot be sustained.

While *Crystalline Landscape* modeled a varied and hypertrophic urban plan, the three double vitrines mounted on the surrounding

walls offered comparative studies of historical difference. Each paired display case was backlit so that the glass objects within—facsimiles of twentieth-century designs—appeared to radiate in hues of modernism's prismatic trinity: blue, red, and yellow. Their titles—for example, *Red Finnish Modernism* and *Yellow Czech Modernism*—were straightforward and plainly described the small sets McElheny had grouped according to national origin. Bathed in a phosphorescent glow and organized in uniformly staggered rows, these three wall pieces read like clinical displays containing not sculptures but perhaps lab-ready modernist specimens.

Notably, McElheny's selection of nations—Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Italy—directed attention away from modernism's paradigmatic geographical center (and indeed, clear temporal coordinates). But this was hardly sculpture about the periphery. Instead, correspondences staged between the vessels (each mirroring the others in number, height, and often form) suggested a central theme. In *Blue Italian Modernism* and *Red Finnish Modernism*, for example, a bulbous Italian vessel with a ballooning spherical top and short narrow neck opposed a squat cylindrical Finnish piece featuring a mushroom cap protruding from its rim. Though their proportions were inverted, the objects mimed one another in their distended shapes and downward thrust. In effect, they were bound both by an ambient colored glow to the other objects of shared national origin, and by formal links to pieces similarly positioned across the diptych's divide.

This proclivity for variation across the show reproduced a tendency already evident in the opening images sourced from Mies's Glass Skyscraper project, images that constitute but two of the architect's countless versions. As though celebrating the lesson learned by Mies after the failure of Friedrichstraße, McElheny's exhibition articulated a vocabulary of modernism that, rather than tending toward homogeneity, produces a language for difference—one that he insists history already offers.

—Maggie Taft