

It was Jonathan Swift who made a like comparison between the wits who ruled the Dublin coffee-houses of his day and weak soldiers who light fires and make excessive noise in an attempt to seem stronger and more numerous. If that analogy had been reality in SoHo last autumn many of its galleries would have burned to the ground. Never have I seen so much turbulent, chattering, desperate art: this artist made clumsy glass bird's nests by the dozen; that one scribbled on and on about the anxiety of scribbling on and on; this one bought some famous clothes and made furniture about it; that one painted as if a palette knife were a thesaurus.

Happily there were still a few artists confident enough just to go about their business: Josiah McElheny is one of them. His show comprised four groupings of glass artifacts displayed in conventional museum fashion accompanied by expository labels. Each of the wares was an exact replica of an object culled from art history or legend, most having to do with the Venetian Renaissance and the subordinate role its glass artisans played in the intellectual flowering of Europe. However, unlike artists who comment on (meaning: dabble in) a field in which they are ill-informed or poorly skilled (if not both), McElheny is a world class glassblower, a craftsman of the same quiet, respectful virtuosity as Kenneth Price or Giorgio Morandi.

McElheny likes ideas but wishes to make them palpable, even beautiful: thus he understands the first maxim of being persuasive. When McElheny makes something you believe in it, and it is precisely this belief with which he plays in his work, to slightly naïve but admirable effect. Naïve because, although a glassblower, McElheny aspires to the status of a conceptual artist: admirable in that his skill and sense of humor are deft enough for us to forgive him this apparent wish. And for the playful element of his work is vital, for were McElheny merely to make work based on the idea of, say, Venetian glassblowers as fabricators of the Renaissance Ideal of drawn perspective and illusory space, not too many of us would get there by staring at a swirled glass platter, no matter how beautiful it might be. Techno and turntables perhaps, Duchamp's Rotoreliefs maybe, but Tintoretto? I don't think so.

This is where McElheny shows his youthful exuberance, for rather than complaining about the plight of his craft he spins a few tales to validate it. In *Verzelini's Acts of Faith* (1997), a dark display case tenders some 30-odd cups, bowls and goblets. According to an accompanying label, they are all the work of Giacomo Verzelini, a minor Venetian nobleman and Christian who traveled throughout Europe paying homage to paintings of his beloved Christ. Then, as an act of devotion, he made exact replicas of the glassware represented in his favorite images: *The Nativity* by Hugo van der Goes. *The Crucifixion* by Pieter Faertner, *Supper in the House of Levi* by Veronese. The case is elegant, the glassware gorgeous and it's a fun, idiosyncratic story—and all true, except for the part about the glassblowing. There was a Venetian nobleman and glassblower named Giacomo Verzelini who lived from 1522-1606, and he did go on pilgrimages throughout the continent, but he never made glass from the paintings he'd seen, although as McElheny tells it, it seems an entirely plausible—even admirable—thing to do. And there goes the burden of truth out the window.

It sounds a bit cute, and probably would be, were it not for McElheny's sober museum vernacular playing it straight to his more fanciful turns. In this respect he is indebted to Broodthaers. Glass platters, bowls, stemware and vases rose and fell all around the room, each resting on upholstered

shelves and socles in addition to the large glass cabinet. All of which combined to make a ridiculously authoritative exhibition, one made all the more charming by McElheny's lack of apology for his quixotic control over it all.

However, if I had one complaint it would be that McElheny doth protest too much against his craft. All but three or four of the pieces in the show were blown out of clear glass, having been chosen by McElheny both for their symbolism and as a way of foregrounding their transparency as faux artifacts. While I can appreciate the sentiment it still seemed a bit ascetic, as if McElheny had shied away from making his work overly beautiful for fear of too near approaching God. Well, I say: God me—you've already impressed me with your skill, amused me with your wit and charmed me with your candor, why not seduce me and finish me off? But then, I can just imagine McElheny saying: 'In tyme, lad, in tyme'. I suspect it will be worth the wait.

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