

Josiah McElheny

The Crystal Land

1 March – 13 April 2017

South Galleries, Bermondsey

White Cube is pleased to present 'The Crystal Land', an exhibition by Josiah McElheny, which narrates a decade of the artist's efforts to visualise alternative histories of Modernism.

Presenting works made between 2008 and 2017 in various media, including sculpture, painting, film, installation, photograms and posters, the exhibition asserts McElheny's view that 'reconstructing history' can be a creative process itself and that aesthetics are always political.

The exhibition is divided into three distinct sections, each of which is inspired by an individual: the artist Robert Smithson, the writer Paul Scheerbart and the physicist Andrei Linde. In the first part of the exhibition, McElheny draws on some of Robert Smithson's lesser-known works and writing from 1964–66, including his essay *The Crystal Land* which was published in *Harpers Bazaar* in 1966 and from which the exhibition borrows its title. Smithson's series of 'paintings' from that same period – reflective plexiglass and painted metal, fashioned into three-dimensional, crystalline constructions – complicated the prevailing Modernist rejection of painting as a window onto the world and assertion of painting as pure surface. Using these works as models, McElheny has created his own series of 'Crystal Landscape Paintings', taking the form of faceted wall reliefs constructed out of painted metal and glass mirror with illuminated interior chambers. Inside these chambers, infinitely repeating images of crystalline, abstract reflective shapes recede into the distance. Interspersed among these 'paintings' are a series of new 'Anti-Vortex Drawings' in which lines appear to float inside glass against a fractured mirrored background, and a group of silver gelatin photograms, studies for new crystalline forms in which geometric shapes extend into black. In these works, McElheny proposes that an imaginary world could be something physical after all.

After the intimate vistas of McElheny's 'paintings', he offers a different kind of contemplation in the second part of the exhibition, through the combination of image and language. Here, movie posters beckon the audience into a 'glass cinema', whose subtle, multi-coloured light emanating from glass-block windows, sets the tone for the film playing inside. *The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture* (2012) emerged out of McElheny's interest in the work of Paul Scheerbart and is part of his effort to bring the German author's writing into the 21st-century – a project that includes the publication of two scholarly books on Scheerbart as well as a series of sculptures, drawings and performances based on his ideas. In this film, McElheny develops Scheerbart's short story *The Light Club of Batavia: A Ladies' Novelette* (1912), a fantastical tale about a group of socialites who meet at a hotel in Batavia (now known as Jakarta) and decide to build a spa at the bottom of an abandoned mineshaft so that they can 'bathe' in light. With a script written by Canadian poet Rachel Zolf and a voice-over narrated by the artist Zoe Leonard, McElheny presents a poetic, 'speculative expansion' of Scheerbart's original text, re-staging it in a different locale to create a story-within-a-story that playfully deals with themes of gender, sexuality, society and nature. Presenting an alternative view of Modernism, as experienced by a female protagonist, the work deals with Scheerbart's notion of universalist politics as a wholly other possible path of history. It proposes that Modernism might have been redirected from efficiency and restraint to expand the concept of the human.

In the third part of the exhibition, the scale of McElheny's 'models for worlds' expands to its

largest possible size with the installation *Island Universe* (2008). Fusing art, science, information and materiality, the installation sets out to describe the world, the universe and the multiverse as a set of infinite, individual possibilities and interpretations. Appearing like a magnificent set of constellations, it comprises five suspended sculptures made from chrome-plated aluminum and glass encoded with highly accurate scientific information. The project was inspired by the aesthetically hybrid, starburst forms of nickel-plated brass and cut-glass crystal chandeliers of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, which were produced by the design company Lobmeyr in Vienna in 1965 and combine both 19th-century and modernist motifs. McElheny saw them as a kind of 'Pop image of the Big Bang' and in an extensive collaboration with the astronomer David H Weinberg, went on to create models that depict various alternative interpretations of this event. In *Island Universe*, he presents a set of possible universes through sculptures whose every element have their own individual, cosmological equivalent. Creating multiple reflections of their own forms, the viewer's body and the space of the gallery in which they hang, they show us a universe without hierarchy where an infinite number of unique, true histories of the world can coexist.

The Super 16mm film *Island Universe* (2005–08), shot on location at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, is presented on a continuous loop in the auditorium every Sunday for the duration of the exhibition.