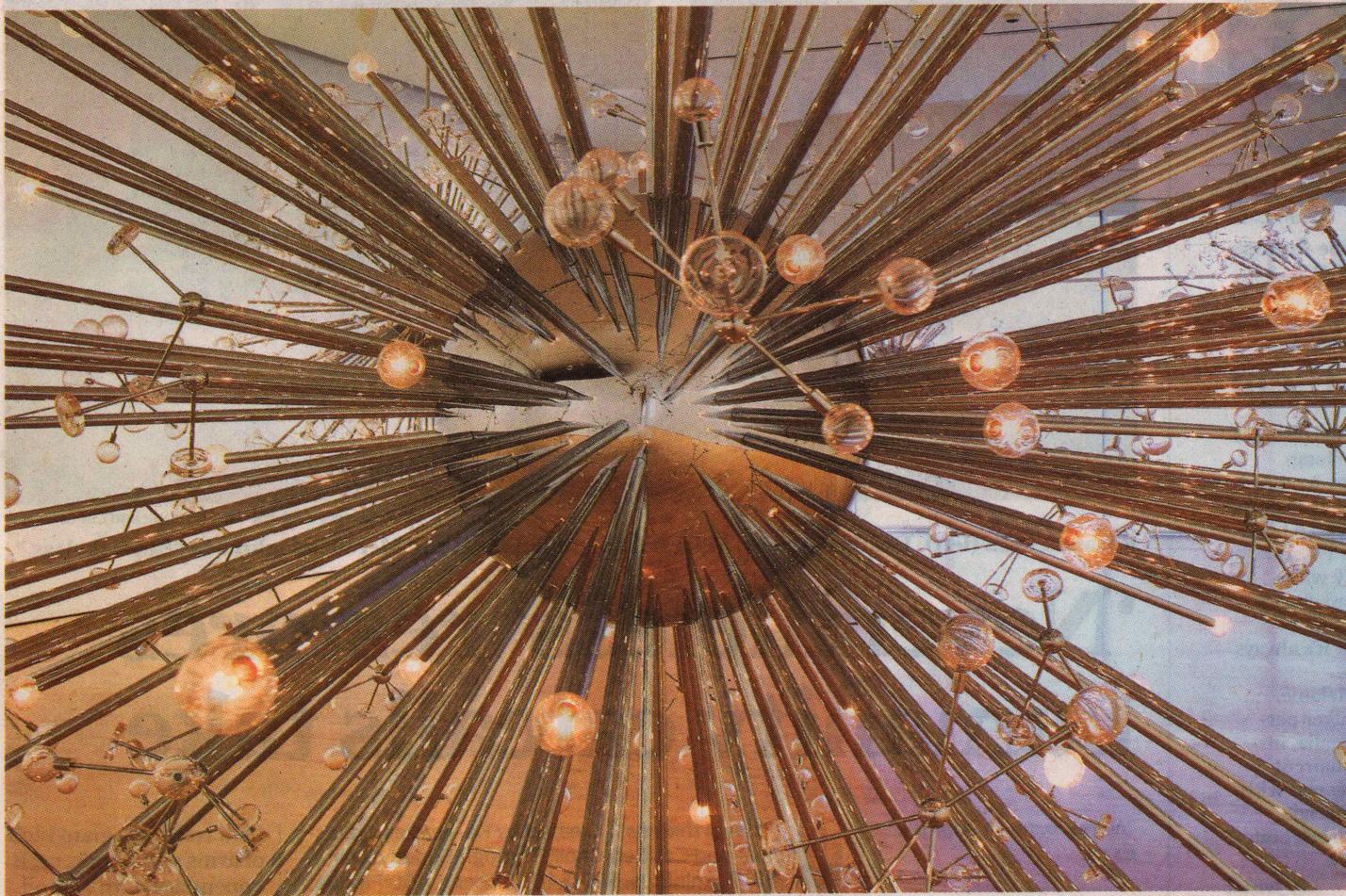




Photos by Johnna Arnold / © Josiah McElheny, White Cube, London

Installation captures a multiverse in glass

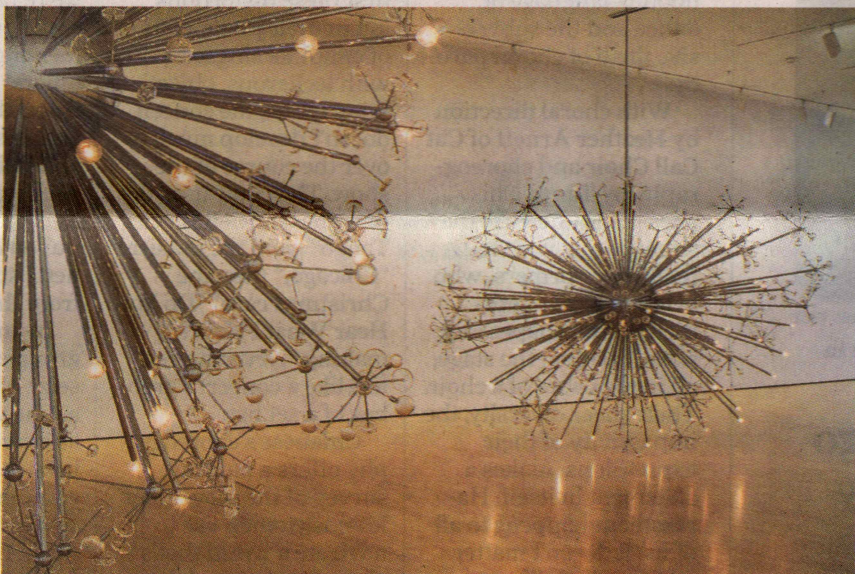
Politics, philosophy add dimension to Josiah McElheny's works at Stanford

By Charles Desmarais

Anyone privileged to attend a Metropolitan Opera production in New York will recall the pre-performance experience: As the audience stills in anticipation of the first strains of music, 12 starburst chandeliers slowly float into the house's celestial golden vault.

Josiah McElheny certainly remembers. A master in the craft of glasswork, beginning in 2004 he took upon himself the four-year task of reinterpreting the Met's so-called "sputniks" for his work "Island Universe." The five sculptures he made, along with related works on paper and a 20-minute film, are on view at Stanford University's Cantor Arts Center through Aug. 18.

McElheny was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 2006. He is surely the only glass artist to achieve that distinction, and it was based primarily upon the conceptual rigor of his work, not his exquisite craftsmanship. The artist is known for sculpture that ingeniously imbues the "decorative" arts with deeper meaning. Or, as in the case of



Josiah McElheny's installation "Island Universe" (2008) was inspired in part by the chandeliers at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

"Josiah McElheny: Island Universe": 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Wednesday-Monday; until 8 p.m. Thursdays. Through Aug. 18. Free. Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, 328 Lomita Drive, Stanford. 650-723-4177. <https://museum.stanford.edu>

"Island Universe," teases out the significance that lies behind the ornamental surface of utilitarian objects.

It turns out, McElheny learned in his research, that the design of the original Met chandeliers has a lot to

do with the cosmology it visually and intuitively suggests. Hans Harald Rath, designer for the Austrian glassware company Lobmeyr, worked closely with architect Wallace K. Harrison, who so wanted to invoke space and the stars that he sent to Rath a book by a prominent astrophysicist, marking specific pages. It was 1963, just as the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe was entering popular consciousness.

Scientific images — graphic representations of the phenomena and

McElheny continues on E2

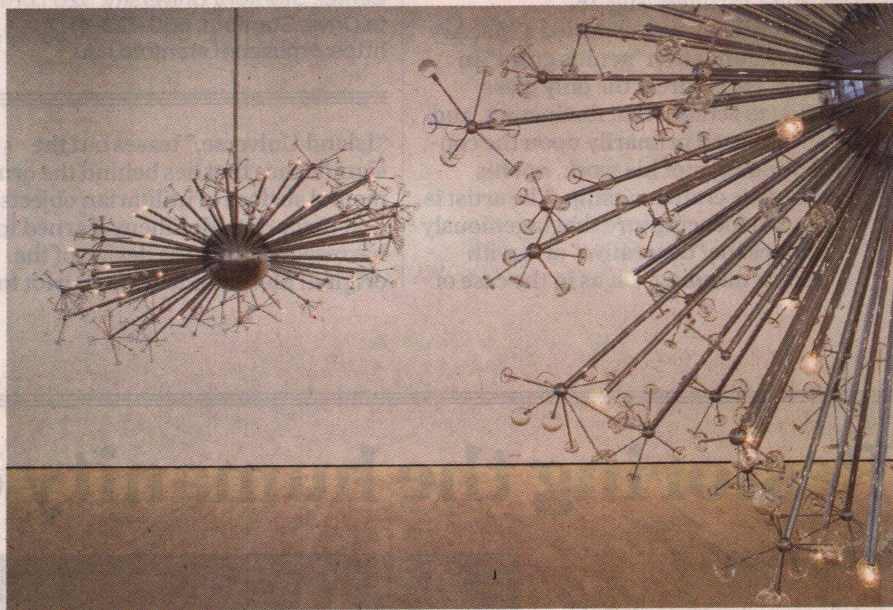
The universe of Josiah McElheny

McElheny from page E1

patterns of nature — have long occupied artists. There was a time when science and art were treated as equal and overlapping branches of the same body of knowledge. They are, in an important sense, the same thing: attempts to understand the world and its operations.

McElheny's installation at the Cantor is evidence of an ever deeper investigation, referencing ideas of our universe as just one "island" among many. These are concepts based not only on direct observation, but also on philosophical thought, starting with Immanuel Kant. On view among the works on paper is an 1872 book by a French revolutionary, Auguste Blanqui.

"Eternity Through the Stars" was first published in translation by the artist as part of his complex project. In its vitrine, the volume is turned to McElheny's fascinating afterword, in which he describes it as part astronomy, part anarchy. Ultimately, he says, it is "a sad book written by a man who spent much of his life in prison, an attempt to reconcile himself to the



Johnna Arnold / © Josiah McElheny, White Cube, London

"Island Universe" is on display at Stanford's Cantor Arts Center till August.

failure of his repeated efforts towards a socialist restructuring of society."

Which brings us to the sculptures themselves. They are dazzling, in the sense that modernist decor is often meant to be, with shimmering mirrored elements, fractal in form and fragmentary in reflection. To be honest, hung in an over-lighted gallery, fewer and considerably smaller than the originals, they don't have the drama of the opera-house fixtures. If, however, that is dis-

appointing, it does suggest that these are individual examples presented for close study, rather than ensemble players on a larger stage.

Each was developed in consultation with an astronomer, David H. Weinberg, to describe a mathematically credible model of a possible universe. As I understand it, the whole of the installation represents what is called the multiverse, the theoretical possibility of an infinite number of parallel universes.

For McElheny, the political dimension is as

significant as the material one. "The center is everywhere," Blanqui wrote, which suggests a democracy of the physical world.

It is an attractive metaphor for a world of innumerable, coequal social nuclei, each an island of hope in an uncertain sea.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfchronicle.com Free weekly newsletter: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>