

THE
LIGHT CLUB
OF VIZCAYA

A WOMEN'S PICTURE

JOSIAH MCELHENY

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CONTEMPORARY
ARTS
PROJECT

VIZCAYA
MUSEUM & GARDENS

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Ms. de Wolfe ordered us all to accompany her immediately to the bright round space whose location under the Mound's surface was to stay a complete secret. We took off all our clothes and entered the swimming pool above which hung a stone figure of Vulcan, god of the forge, unceremoniously being flung out of heaven.

Finally, we emerged wet and breathless over the threshold into the Light Club of Vizcaya. And there we found a circular glass palace below the raised surface—completely bright—dispelling all darkness.”

—A Woman Photographer, *The Light Club of Vizcaya*

Josiah McElheny's film and accompanying "movie posters"—both part of his commission for the Contemporary Arts Project—ask us to consider a concept worthy of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel: What if Vizcaya's creators built the elaborate estate only to conceal something even more extraordinary, such as a glass palace hidden under the grotto in the gardens?

In fact, the ambitions of Vizcaya's creators were only slightly less extravagant. They built an estate that fed the imagination of those who visited as well as the great many who read about it in the pages of illustrated magazines. Vizcaya was intended to be seen as an "ancient" Italian villa, furnished for a gentleman with refined aesthetic tastes. The reality of Vizcaya and its patron, James Deering, was rather distant from such imaginative representations.

Josiah McElheny's *The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture* gently pushes the threshold between fact and fiction. The project proposes the idea that imagined possibilities might allow us to make better sense of the past than bare, fragmentary facts. McElheny's art often describe a fictionalized history. He works primarily in glass, which in his hands becomes a lens to view how history is written.

For several years McElheny has been revisiting the writings of Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915), a German satirist and architectural theorist who published science fiction novels and short stories before World War I. Fascinated with the potential of glass architecture, Scheerbart envisioned a world composed entirely of crystalline, colored glass. In 1912, he published the "Light Club of Batavia," about the formation of a club dedicated to building a spa for bathing—not in water, but in light—at the bottom of an abandoned mineshaft. The story presents architecture as a way of realizing dreams and fantasies, and Vizcaya's architecture and geographic location almost perfectly echo the setting of the novella.

When we invited Josiah McElheny to create a project at Vizcaya, his first impulse was to use the estate as the stage for a literal re-enactment of the "Light Club of Batavia." But the thousands of letters, blueprints and photographs in Vizcaya's archives captured the artist's imagination. Photography quickly became the central theme of McElheny's project.

When Vizcaya was being built, Deering and Paul Chalfin (Vizcaya's artistic director) who were often out of Miami, followed the project through the photographs that documented every aspect of the construction. As soon as Vizcaya was completed, it was published in several illustrated magazines and the richness of the images suggests that some of its most spectacular features, such as the Barge, were conceived to be captured by the camera.

The person most responsible for Vizcaya's public image was a woman, Mattie Edwards Hewitt. Among the many individuals involved in the making of Vizcaya, Hewitt seems a minor character, but her role was crucial and her story was anything but ordinary. At the beginning of the twentieth century she had abandoned her husband and her Midwestern life to pursue a career as a photographer and a love interest in Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864–1952), a groundbreaking portrait and architecture photographer. The two women established a studio in New York City, and while Benjamin pursued more experimental paths, Hewitt specialized in architecture photography, or to be exact, in portraits of high-society mansions. For McElheny, Mattie Edwards Hewitt, a middle-aged bespectacled professional, became the key to unlocking a story that might have happened at Vizcaya. What if Hewitt's camera had captured more than what was published in the illustrated magazines? What if in old age she told a story about an underground glass palace too intriguing to be left unexplored?

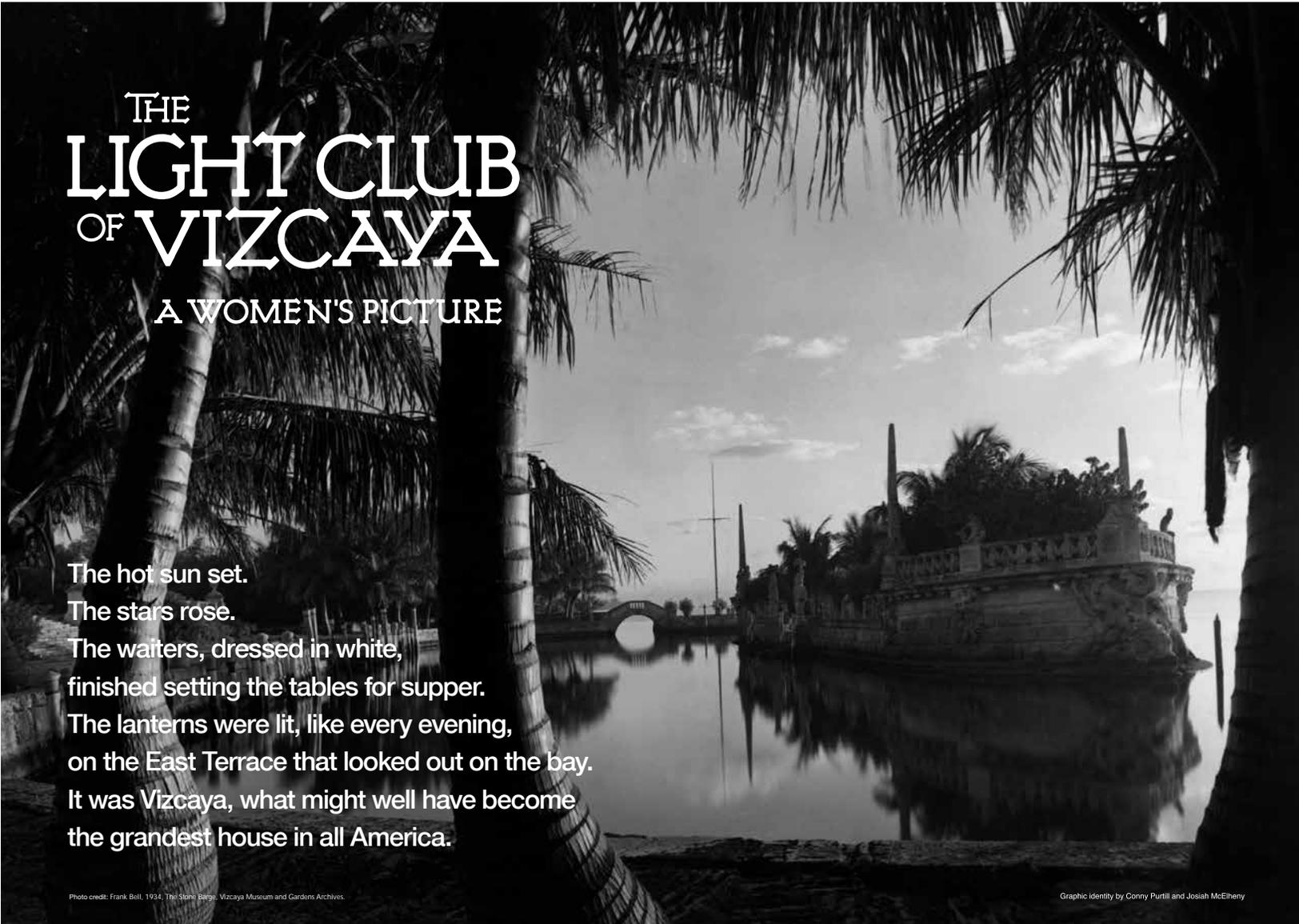
The Light Club of Vizcaya is the story of this quest, told through an imaginary voice, supposedly Hewitt's great grandniece. The centerpiece of McElheny's project is a thirty-minute film collage. The script entwines fragments of correspondence found in our archives with excerpts of Scheerbart's text, while the images combine historic photographs, blueprints and documents of Vizcaya with contemporary depictions of the estate. Around the Main House, McElheny has placed six "movie posters" utilizing original blueprints to expand upon the themes and characters of his film and to hint at its connections to James Deering's estate.

Despite profound differences, Vizcaya and Scheerbart's fiction are both manifestations of the boundless faith and enthusiasm in technology and the progress of humanity that pervaded the western world on the eve of World War I. Then the Great War came and everything changed in ways that still resonate with us. *The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture* takes us back to a place that never existed but that we can still imagine.

Flaminia Gennari-Santori
Deputy Director for Collections and Curatorial Affairs

THE LIGHT CLUB OF VIZCAYA: A WOMEN'S FILM

JOSIAH MCELHENY



THE LIGHT CLUB OF VIZCAYA

A WOMEN'S PICTURE

The hot sun set.
The stars rose.
The waiters, dressed in white,
finished setting the tables for supper.
The lanterns were lit, like every evening,
on the East Terrace that looked out on the bay.
It was Vizcaya, what might well have become
the grandest house in all America.

Photo credit: Frank Bell, 1934, The Storm Barge, Vizcaya Museum and Gardens Archives.

Graphic identity by Conny Purtill and Josiah McElheny

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Josiah McElheny (b. 1966, Boston, MA) investigates the overlap between fact and fiction and plausible alternative narratives in his artwork. Best known for his visually compelling glass installations, McElheny draws from a range of disciplines and works in a variety of media. Trained at the Rhode Island School of Design and glass foundries in Europe, McElheny is the recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, among others. He is represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York and White Cube in London.

Recent projects include *Some Thoughts About the Abstract Body*, a one-person

exhibition at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 2012; *The Bloomberg Commission: Josiah McElheny*, a year-long commissioned project at Whitechapel Gallery from 2010–2011 and a survey show at the ICA in Boston, *Some Pictures of the Infinite*. In 2013, *The Light Club of Vizcaya: A Women's Picture* will be exhibited at the Wexner Center for the Arts, where it was post-produced, and shown as part of the solo project titled *Josiah McElheny: Towards a Light Club*.

*The Light Club of Vizcaya:
A Women's Picture*
Logo by Conny Purtill and Josiah McElheny.