Phenomenological Tessellations: Ólafur Elíasson In Real Life

By Marcelo de Melo

Detail of *Model Room*
2003
size variable
wood table with steel legs, mixed media models, maquettes, prototypes.

In December 2019, I had the privilege of visiting *In Real Life*, an individual exhibition by Danish-Icelandic artist Ólafur Elíasson at the Tate Modern in London. Elíasson is best known for his installation work *The Weather Project*, created especially for the Turbine Hall (Tate Modern) in 2003, when he filled the monumental space with fine mist and a mesmerising artificial sun made up of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps.

In Real Life marked the return of the artist to the gallery, a retrospective exhibition that included sketches, maquettes and several of his early works. At the core of the show was the introduction of natural phenomena to the space of the gallery such as rain-

bows, mist and natural light. What is impressive about his practice is his ability to create engaging spaces of sociability and interaction with the most basic materials: water, light, glass, movement and time itself. A great fan of his work, I was overwhelmed by the phenomenological encounter with his art. Each room triggered new sensations and thoughts about our interaction with the world: some, contemplation and the feeling of absolute presence; others, hallucination and phobia. Walking through the installation *Your blind passenger* (2010), an extremely long corridor filled with fog and coloured light, proved very challenging.

Most of the works on display were never seen in the United Kingdom before. They are the result of Elíasson's comprehensive research into complex geometry, natural phenomena and colour theory. The study of Optics, for instance, finds its inception in observations of actual mosaic work by Claudius Ptolemaeus (Ptolemy) in ancient Alexandria (c. 100 - 170 AD), supporting the premise that the connection between Elíasson's tessellated constructions and optically charged mosaics is not a coincidence. Elíasson's research led him to these particular pieces, which can be interpreted along the lines of a theoretical framework usually ignored by contemporary critical analyses that concentrate on meaning alone and neglect formal elements of composition and the construction of artworks.

In the exhibition, tessellation, an intrinsic feature of

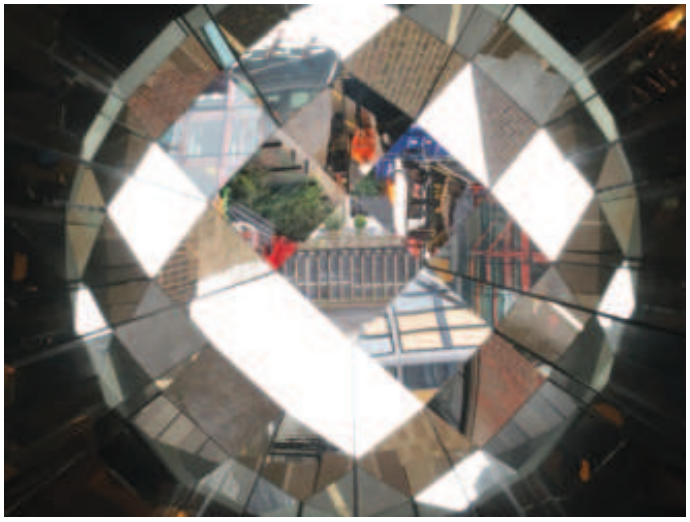
In real life
2019
diameter 208 cm
aluminium, colour-effect filter glass (green, yellow, orange, red, pink, cyan), LED light

above, left
detail

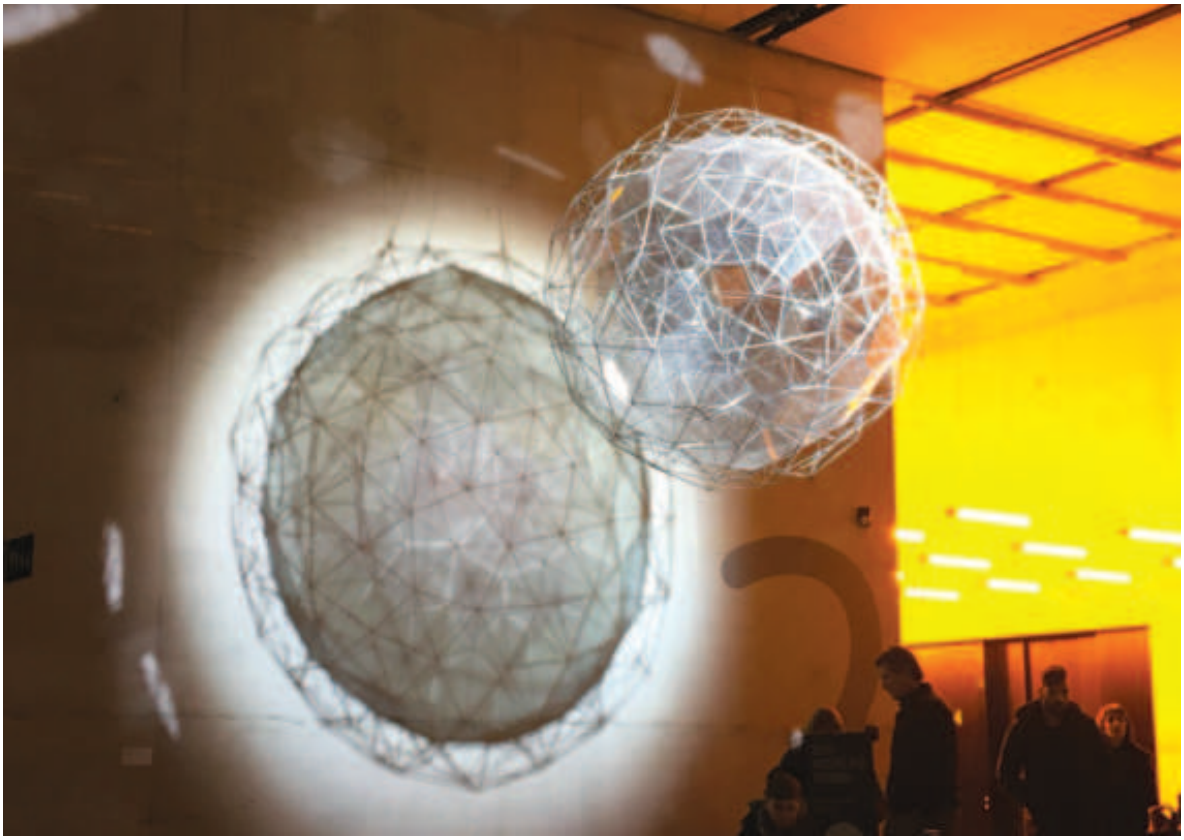
Glacial spherical flare
2019
180 x 180 x 3,5 cm
silver coloured glass (beige, white), silver coloured glacier-rock-flour glass (various greens), gold ruby glass (pink), aluminium.

below, detail

Detail of *Your planetary window*
2019
255 x 75 x 115 cm
glass mirrors, stainless steel, aluminium



mosaic, is explored by Elíasson symbolically in a diverse manner. The work *Your planetary window* (2019) prompts the viewer to look through the external wall of the gallery and see an ever-changing kaleidoscopic image of the surroundings. The work consists of a row of tapering shafts set into the wall, lined with serialised units of reflective glass. *In real life* (2019), a spherical sculpture developed through mosaic principles, once honed by stained-glass practitioners in the Middle Ages (see Vasari *On Technique*, 1568), fills the space with a variety of geometric light projections or fragments of colour, turning the entire room into a cathedral-like environment. This sculptural technique based on stained-glass is also used for other works on display, like *Cold wind sphere* (2012) and *Stardust particle* (2014). Another interesting piece is his *Glacial spherical flare* (2019), an *opus sectile* work made of coloured mirror glass and glacier-rock-flour glass cut to perfection, where the interstices are as important as the units for the overall composition.
By deploying the phenomenological power of tes-



Cold wind sphere
2012
diameter 170 cm
stainless steel, coloured glass (dark blue, blue and light grey), mirror, colour-effect filter glass (blue), light bulb

Stardust particle
2014
diameter 170 cm
stainless steel, glass, motor and spotlight

sellation, Elíasson proves that ancient techniques, commonly dismissed as outdated, decorative and devoid of artistic potential, can be used effectively to produce compelling contemporary works of art. In doing so, he reconfigures immersive experiences of the past for a new audience, highlighting tactility, haptic and somatic responses to the lived environment, where art has a central role to play, not science alone. Elíasson's practice produces knowledge that is comprehensive and multi-sensorial, not simply based on the isolation of the visual sense. ■