

TOOLS OF THE TRADE: DENVER ART MUSEUM EXAMINES THE UNUSUAL STUDIES OF ARCHITECT BRAD CLOEPFIL

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Conceptual study for New York museum.
COURTESY ALLIED WORKS ARCHITECTURE

When Brad Cloepfil, principal of Allied Works Architecture, won the competition to design the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver in 2006, he found in its director, Dean Sobel, a client who was uncommonly receptive to his creative process. “It would scare most clients, who just want to know what the building’s going to look like,” said Cloepfil.

In architecture’s inner circles, Cloepfil has become known for his highly conceptual models and quick gestural drawings. He rarely shows these to clients but considers them an essential part of his “searching for a building.” Noticing these esoteric little studies popping up all over the worktables during his trips to Allied’s studios in New York and Portland, Oregon, Sobel convinced Cloepfil to collaborate on an exhibition dedicated to his process. “[Case Work: Studies in Form, Space & Construction by Brad Cloepfil/Allied Works Architecture](#),” with more than 60

handmade sculptural objects and sketches never before shown publicly, has just opened at the Denver Art Museum, conveniently located steps away from the Still Museum. (The exhibition travels to the Portland Art Museum in June.)



Dutchess County estate—guest house structure and site study, 2008. Charcoal on tracing paper, 24 x 40 inches.
COURTESY ALLIED WORKS ARCHITECTURE

operate in a unique way, inside a linear steel armature dominating the gallery (think of Fred Sandback’s planes outlined in space by yarn, a reference for Cloepfil).

The room offers viewers a circuitous route, with multiple iterations of projects including the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and the National Music Centre of Canada in Calgary scattered throughout the labyrinth and on the walls, and just a single postcard image of each finished building affixed to sketches dashed off in pastel and charcoal on vellum. More literal-minded viewers (like some of Cloepfil’s clients) looking to understand the evolution of a given building may be a bit frustrated, but the non-linear approach seems intended to mirror the creative process itself.

The challenge for Cloepfil was how to present what he calls “tools,” as opposed to buildings or artworks (despite the material allure of models made by stacking cedar shingles or collaging sawed-off colored pencils). Rather than put his three-dimensional forms on pedestals or in vitrines, the architect designed wooden toolboxes that open and pivot and slide to offer cantilevered ledges on which to show off his objects. “It feels to me like you could just keep pulling pieces out of the endlessly unfolding box,” said Cloepfil, who has suspended his ten toolboxes, which each



Conceptual study for the National Music Center of Canada.
COURTESY ALLIED WORKS ARCHITECTURE

It certainly offers dazzling moments of discovery. A 2009 model for the National Music Centre of Canada, made from a cut-up trombone cast inside concrete shafts suggesting a world of music amidst interconnected towers, is displayed in a mirror-lined toolbox. A cube of black walnut dovetailing with brass rods and tubes, a 2014 model for the competition to design the Metropolitan Museum’s Modern and Contemporary Wing (Cloepfil came in second), illuminates the places of intersection between the museum and Central Park. It is set atop a toolbox with velvet-lined sliding drawers holding bars of sample materials including gold leaf, copper wire, and pine cones. It is hard to tell what the expansion might have looked like, but the gemlike display is stunning.

Among the multiple studies for the Still Museum is the first little concept model from 2007 showing two white resin cells atop a rectangle rising up out of a charcoal ground. “We knew we wanted all the galleries on the top floor and the idea of shafts of light piercing the earth,” said Cloepfil. “The model isn’t representational but it has driven the building from the start. The building is that model.”

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