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# Clyfford Still museum by Frank Greene

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The AJ Writing Prize 2014: Entry

Construction in *beton brut*, the raw concrete so poetically employed by Le Corbusier, has diminished to near extinction. The unfortunate appellation “Brutalism” has become a pejorative, a description of architecture that is inhumane, harsh and cruel to the eye. Major mid-century Brutalist buildings are despised by their owners and communities, and threatened with impending demolition.

In this context few contemporary architects would propose a prominent new building with such risk of public disapproval. Other than Tadao Ando, few today dare utilize this ancient material. Allied Works not only chose raw concrete as the material for their new Clyfford Still museum, but introduced a process that celebrates that risk, capturing the transformation of concrete from liquid to solid.

To experience a Clyfford Still painting is to enter a world of painstaking craft and daring accidental. Rarely seen, heroic in scale, yet intricate and intimate, his paintings suggest an inner life of epic struggle and disciplined rigor. The artist’s insistence that his paintings only be displayed in highly restrictive settings means that they were little seen until the construction of the new Clyfford Still museum in Denver, Colorado.

The building is a low slung block in the downtown Cultural District of Denver, hard by the titanium clad Denver Art Museum addition by Daniel Liebeskind, and as quiet and meditative as that building is shrill and exuberant. Raw concrete is stretched to express qualities of texture, lightness, and even transparency. Inspired perhaps by the eccentricities of Gio Ponti’s concrete Denver Art Museum facing across the lawn, Allied Works ambition was to create for the Still painting hoard a container infused with the spirit of the artist’s work, in this least forgiving of materials.

The sidelong approach to the corner entrance across a lawn, or up a ramp from the sidewalk, begins an experience of transformation from the everyday to the sublime. Entering under a perilous corner cantilever, a glance upwards reveals the artistry of the corrugated texture of the finish. A delicate vertical tracery of fractured concrete marks the surface of the wall above, the oozing of concrete from board forms spaced with a few millimeters to allow this breathtaking artifact of the process of making.

This first marvel, at the audacity of leaving the exterior materiality of the building to the chance fracturing of concrete resulting from the removal of the board formwork leaves one in awe at the careful planning that this must have required between designer, contractor, and artisan, as well as the trust required of the owner. One could imagine the conversations, tests, recalibrations, scheduling, and then on the day of the concrete pour, the absolute commitment to an outcome that could in no way be completely predicted and controlled. All or nothing. Perfect imperfection or disaster.

From that moment of pause, entry begins with compression through a low smooth concrete-ceilinged lobby, and then ascension to the galleries above on a boat-like wood stair. Slowly revealed is the next marvel, the perforated poured concrete lay-light above that unifies the sequence of galleries. Set on the diagonal to the building plan, this screen of delicately scalloped apertures admits a diffuse glow of high desert light from the skylights above. Formed from a single continuous concrete pour, not assembled from thousands of individual elements, its insistent separation from the plan below and its extraordinarily fine attenuation cause one to sit and stare in mute disbelief.

One eventually brings the room into focus, observing how the sequence of galleries and transition spaces allow spaces for intimate contemplation of individual paintings, as well as vistas to works in the other galleries. Here one see only Clyfford Still paintings displayed, without the distraction of comparison to other Giants of Abstract Expressionism he so categorically refused. With only

his rigorous expression as context, and with this marvelous purpose built museum as its setting, Still's vision rings with the exquisite clarity.

A final, unexpected wonder: an outdoor porch, with a screen wall of vertical wood strips, perhaps negatives to the exterior concrete texture positive, with a wood deck and a patch of grass. No artwork displayed, only the Denver light and crisp air, and the presence of architecture. After this break from the all-consuming emotions of the galleries, a return yields fresh insights: the fractal like profiles in the paintings echoed in the broken concrete ribs of the wall surface, the vivid colors in the paintings set off against stone and wood hues in the building.

Following along the subtle sequence of gallery spaces, forming soul bonds with paintings in deep reds, blue-green blacks and radiant golds, time seems to disappear. My pace slowed, my thoughts deepened, my eyes dilated to a dialogue between a painter and an architect, or perhaps between Painting and Architecture, such as I've not seen since visiting the Sistine Chapel after its restoration. In this case, the painting preceded and inspired the architecture, and somehow, magically, marvelously the response exceeds any reasonable expectation.

Upon leaving the building, and paying my tithes in the bookshop, who should I see but a great bad boy of contemporary architecture walking up the path, eyes aglow, about to be as overwhelmed in turn. I can only imagine that he thought what any of us would: may I one day do a building half a good as this....

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