Single artist museum finds surprise success in varied programming

Denver's Clifford Still Museum has kept visitors coming back with ten special exhibitions in the three years since it opened.

By Judith H. Dobrzynski. Web only. Published online: 07 October 2014.

With the opening of "The War Begins: Clifford Still's Path to Abstraction" on October 10, the Clifford Still Museum in Denver unveils its tenth special exhibition in less than three years of operation. That is something of which the museum's new director rightly feels surprised. "It's a success," he says, "and we have no idea how it happened.

Still, who died in 1960, is celebrated as an important artist for his career, which included exhibitions at major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The museum's opening exhibition was "The Art of Conservation: Understanding Clifford Still," which ran from May 16 to July 16. It was the first major exhibition at the museum, which opened on April 10, 2011.

As of last month, the museum had received 36,868 visitors in 2014, which is already close to the 40,000 the museum originally projected for an entire year and likely to surpass last year's total of 42,685. In its first full year, the museum attracted 61,204 visitors.

"Denver has really embraced it," says Christopher Heinrich, the director of the Denver Art Museum, which is next door. "People bring their visiting friends here."

Dean Sobel, the Still museum's director, says that some 80% of the visitors are first-timers; they come from "most of the 50 states and 25 foreign countries."

While many Denverites have yet to visit on their own, Heinrich says, "from the 'Statue of Liberty phenomenon'" named for New Yorkers who never go to visit Lady Liberty because she's always there - repeat trips by those who have been to the museum have been "from the get-go."

The changing exhibitions have been one obvious key to success. In addition to the "inaugural" exhibitions that surveyed Still's artistic career from 1929 to the late 1970s, the museum has also presented "Vincenzo/Still," featuring paintings and works on paper created during Still's early years, when his subjects and palette echoed van Gogh's (it coincided with the Denver Art Museum's "Becoming van Gogh" exhibition). The exhibition "The Art of Conservation: Understanding Clifford Still," which ran from May 16 to July 16, was the first major exhibition at the museum, which opened on April 10, 2011.

"1995" occupied simultaneously with the DMA's "Modern Masters: 20th-century Icons from the Albert-Knox Art Gallery," which proved highly popular. Sobel curated both exhibitions, and the two museums collaborated on joint ticketing, programming and marketing. "1995" brought visitor numbers that matched those of the Still museum's opening month.

However, Sobel says the changing exhibition pace "will slow down a bit." Sobel notes that the city's competition to build a museum dedicated to Still, which is now under construction, will limit the number of exhibitions that can be mounted in the museum's early years. "It's a real strain on our resources," Sobel says.

The museum's策exhibitions include works by artists such as Vincenzo, Still, and Vincent Van Gogh, as well as contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons and Christopher Wool. The museum also hosts a variety of events, including lectures, workshops, and performances. The museum's策exhibitions include works by artists such as Vincenzo, Still, and Vincent Van Gogh, as well as contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons and Christopher Wool. The museum also hosts a variety of events, including lectures, workshops, and performances.