

Allan Wexler is an artist with an architect's training. He works like a surrealist or expressionist painter; only instead of slinging paint, he throws architectural scenarios. This first retrospective of his work, titled "Custom Built" (March 19–April 25), was jointly curated by Chris Scoates and Debra Wilbur and exhibited at the Atlanta College of Art Gallery and the City Gallery at Chastain. Wexler's scenarios are drawn from various sources including Jewish mysticism, the Japanese tea ceremony and the Puritan Home Depot—ground for works on mythology, ritualism and utilitarianism. Wexler presents them as scale models and prototypes, and he builds them without premeditation in a subconscious and spontaneous way. Reaching for archetypes, he evokes the primitive hut, magic and nature.

As an artist, it is not Wexler's place to make conclusions but to expand possibilities, which exist in infinite numbers. As an architect, Wexler must act rationally and employ scientific methods. A large body of work results. Experiments are catalogued, hypotheses amass. Research continues into the night and through the next day. Sketches fall to the floor. A table top is cleared to start work on another model, embodying another theory. Relentlessly tackling questions, Wexler's life is an endless charrette.

Some of the questions Wexler addresses through his works: Is it possible to build a room in such a way that its walls can convert into its furnishings? What objects in a prison cell can be used to create a painting? What if tablecloth stains made coffee cups instead of coffee cups making stains? Can a chair make a painting? What kind of chair can you make in one day? What if shirts had dinner parties instead of people? How many different types of buildings can be made using a fixed quantity of lumber? How many different types of buildings can be made on a slope? Can two rooms share one space alternately? What does a bucket do? What kind of umbrella does a roof make?

Wexler's brainstorming is unusual because he sketches in three dimensions. There are over 100 models in this exhibit, ranging in size from three cubic inches to two cubic feet. They are made with plaster, glass, acrylic, basswood, brass and wax. Larger projects are represented photographically. There are comparatively few drawings.

Some diagrammatical plans, drawn on vellum paper, have been cut out and folded together to actually make the three-dimensional forms they represent. Like sewing together the pattern for a dress instead of the fabric, the conceptual representation becomes the thing. In *Scaffold Paper Chair*, a full-sized paper chair is assembled like a pop-up greeting card. Lacking strength, it floats lifelessly. The yellowed vellum quivers in response to every motion in the room. Too frail to stand alone, it is gently held upright by an outer frame of pine scaffolding. The two figures are co-dependent—the ethereal body rests in the arms of the sustaining body. An exercise in design results in a Pietà.

By keeping his hands busy with so many experiments, Wexler clears his mind for reverie. Sometimes his ideas flow in a stream of consciousness, as in the scale models for buildings. We see buildings crawling on wiggly legs, buildings on wheels or without floors, buildings designed to be carried by men, and buildings with spiritual twins. Deep philosophical beliefs surface; cognitive structures become real structures.

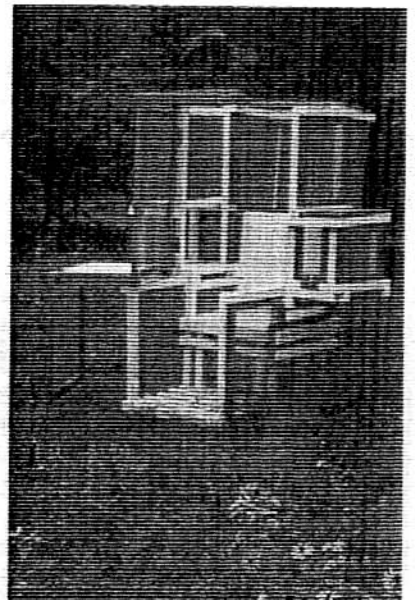
There is no need for any of these plans to be realized; they are complete in their prototypical form. By proposing his ideas as vignettes in imaginary worlds, the artist becomes storyteller. Each little model tells its own delightful tale. They have the feeling of parables or folktales, demonstrating the artist's mythological consciousness.

One model depicts two identical houses, each containing a table and four chairs. Each piece of furniture is connected, by an extended brace, to its twin piece of furniture in the other house. As one house is lived in, the furniture in the other house echoes the movement and vice-versa. This activity inevitably would restrict the motion of furniture and people in both houses, therefore controlling the patterns of daily life. A frightening metaphor for social constraint, the hypothesis is the art.

In *Twenty-Four Unfolded Houses*, Wexler displays 24 different patterns that are drawn on vellum and cut out to be folded into 24 houses that look exactly the same. It reads as a social critique, a satire on the design choices presented to the new home buyer. His presentation is comical. Assembled paper houses are lined up uniformly along the bottom of the frame. Above them, the varying patterns are pinned flat to a board like so many dissected frogs.

It is this scientific distance—the cold gaze—that detaches us from an emotional reading. Yet the image is implanted, and the message is transferred for us to ponder. Wexler's work is cerebral, but this is fitting because it is an exercise in rational thought. Every decision is utilitarian, every piece of wood has a function, nothing is decorative except by accident. By tracing his analytical processes, he creates an aesthetic form while demonstrating the vastness of human ingenuity.

Ruth Dusseault, Atlanta



Allan Wexler, *Screen Chair*, 1991, mixed media, 6' x 5' x 4' (photo courtesy of the Atlanta College of Art Gallery)