

spotlight

Look out!

Artist Lawrence Argent's big, blue bear peers in to capture curiosity at convention center

By Mary Voelz Chandler

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Lawrence Argent creates benches that talk, grass that is forever green, and pillows out of stone.

An artist who finds the edge in even the most universal of objects, Argent has created large-scale approximations of testicles out of street-sweeping brushes and eerie suitcases out of glass.

And then there is the "ghost trolley" he's proposed for East Colfax Avenue in Aurora.

But the associate professor at the University of Denver is about to see perhaps his most unusual piece become part of the public conversation: A 40-foot-tall blue bear that looks as if it is peering in a window on the Colorado Convention Center's 14th Street facade.

I See What You Mean — a sculptural interpretation of a creature that doubles as a wild animal and a childhood toy — begins to arrive here June 21 from a fabricator in California for installation to begin that day.

One leg, then another, a big belly, an arm, then another, ending with the giant head, all will be bolted together. A concrete pad for the piece already is in place, covered by sod. The contract for the piece: \$424,400.

Argent's personal build-a-bear program was announced in 2002, during a period in which drought had sent more than one bear down from the hills into the metro area. Now one will be in permanent residence.

It's called taking a chance, and that is what the 48-year-old artist says interests him in using new tools to create work and educate others about art.

"You're creating an experience, rather than having an experience created for you. So many people dive off the deep end with a life preserver and think that's risk."

And if the process of creating the bear was serious, the after-effect is not.

"The first revelation that what I had done was going to be successful was when I went out (to the fabricator) and saw the head. It has the character of what I wanted it to have. I was elated. I realized I had created the appropriate relationship."

It started small

The bear began as many sculptures do, as a maquette, or model, less than a foot tall.

Argent was among more than 20 artists, culled from about 280 applicants, asked to present proposals for convention center art to a selection panel assembled as part of the city's Percent for Art program. A \$3,000 stipend allowed him to get help on the computer aspects of the project for his presentation.

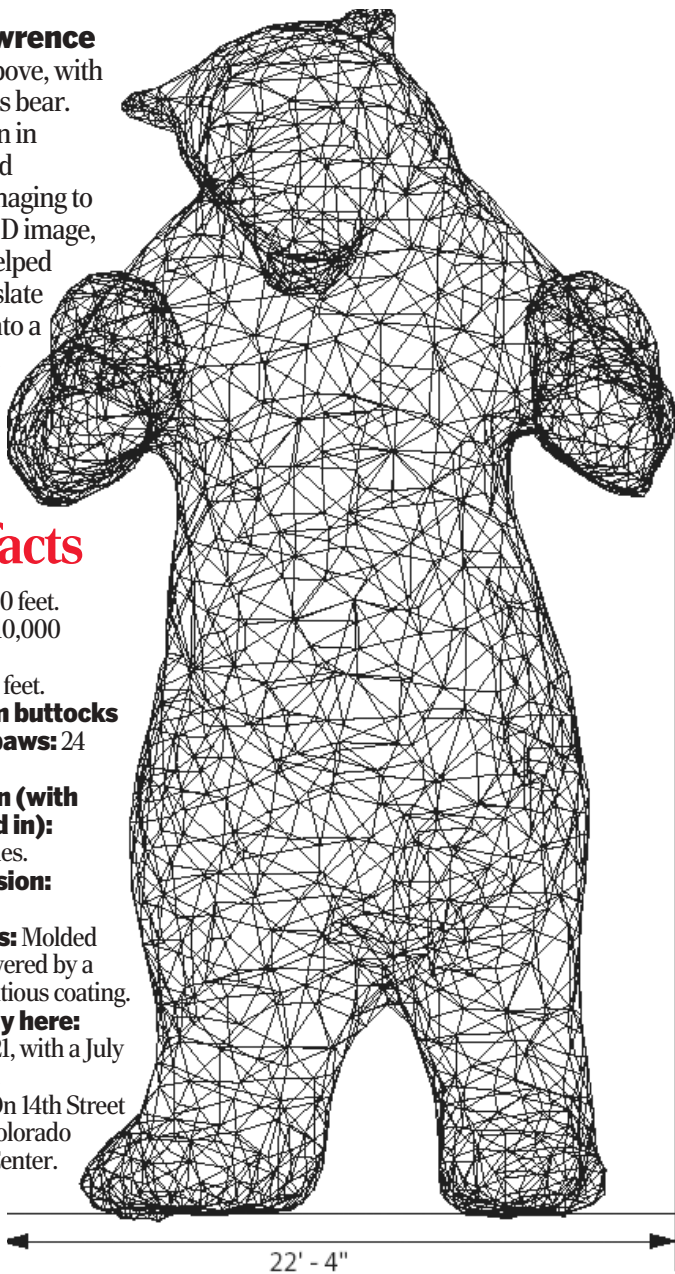
The reaction of the selection panel to Argent's pro-



ELLEN JASKOL/ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Artist Lawrence Argent, above, with models of his bear.

Pixel Kitchen in Boulder used computer imaging to create the 3-D image, right, that helped Argent translate the model into a 40-foot high sculpture.



Bear facts

- **Height:** 40 feet.
- **Weight:** 10,000 pounds.
- **Chest:** 18 feet.
- **Size from buttocks to front of paws:** 24 feet, 4 inches.
- **Arm span (with paws pulled in):** 22 feet, 4 inches.
- **Commission:** \$424,400.
- **Materials:** Molded Fiberglas, covered by a blue cementitious coating.
- **Assembly here:** Begins June 21, with a July 21 dedication.
- **Where:** On 14th Street outside the Colorado Convention Center.



BILL KREYSLER/KREYSLER & ASSOC.

A limb of Argent's big blue bear is prepared for shipment from California to Denver. It was fabricated using computer-created molds.

Spot check

A CHEAP ADVENTURE

■ **What:** Free day for Colorado residents at the Museum of Nature and Science

■ **When:** 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday

■ **Et cetera:** Because it's a free day, you'll see the fine "Lewis & Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition" at a reduced rate of \$5 (adults) and \$4 (age 65 and up). It's free for those 18 and under or museum members.

■ **Details:** 303-322-7009



STILL SELLING

The Recording Industry Association just certified Australian rockers **AC/DC's** 1980 album *Back in Black* with U.S. shipments of 21 million copies, tying it for fifth place on RIAA's all-time best-sellers list. The top five:

- **The Eagles:** *Their Greatest Hits* (28 million)
- **Michael Jackson:** *Thriller* (27 million)
- **Pink Floyd:** *The Wall* (23 million)
- **Led Zeppelin:** *Led Zeppelin IV* (22 million)
- **AC/DC:** *Back in Black* (21 million)
- **Billy Joel:** *Greatest Hits Vol. I & II* (21 million)

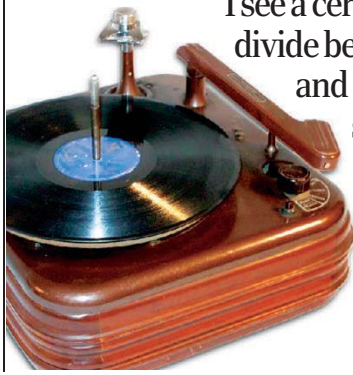


THEY SAID IT

"I see a certain generational divide between ownership and not having something tangible."

Syd Schwartz, vice president of interactive marketing at Virgin, noting that some people prefer owning a piece of music versus temporarily storing it on their hard drive a la Napster and Yahoo.

Source: Los Angeles Daily News



PRICEY TALK

36 percent. Amount of pay raises actors who provide the voices for video games would receive over the next 3½ years under tentative agreements reached this week by the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists.

Source: Associated Press



SUMMER CLEARANCE





THE COLORADO CONVENTION CENTER EXPANSION PUBLIC ART PROJECT

Bear: Work's blue color serendipity, artist says

Continued from 1D
posol "was a microcosm of what happens on a larger scale" when people encounter the concept of a 40-foot-tall bear looking at a bunch of conventioners, says John Grant, the city's public art administrator.

As in: "I can't believe that's there. They were surprised to see something that playful, large, bombastic and 'how dare you?' Nobody says 'Let's put a 40-foot bear there.' It's what is great about the arts in general. It's a wonderful event."

It's also a hallmark of Argent's work. "He hides a lot of theory and concept inside playful images," says Grant.

Robin Ault, a member of that panel because he was part of the convention center project design team of Fentress Braddum Architects, remembers his initial response.

"Shock. It was completely different than anything that had been proposed to that point."

Ault also realizes that Argent was commenting on the relationship local residents have with a building basically designed for out-of-towners.

"Very few people who live here will go to the convention center," says Ault. "This represents people who live here who are trying to figure out what is going on inside."

Argent had almost given up on the project before he figured out how to tie together the concept of a convention center — "Where people come to see the latest technology, cars, stuff" — and the need "to make people come outside and look at what Denver is and the broader aspect of what Colorado is."

While playing with his children with some stuffed animals, he wondered: "Which is the most potent one?"

The bear won. And that blue color? Serendipity, Argent says.

The day before the presentation, the artist got the model back from a rapid prototyping machine, a printing device that turns digital images into actual objects. The color was blue.

"I thought it looked really wonderful in this color and ultimately worked more cohesively with my concepts."

Building a bigger bear

That 3-D print of a small blue bear was just the beginning. Argent worked with Boulder-based Pixel Kitchen to create thousands of triangulations within the bear's image to expand into a 40-foot-tall bear.

Bill Kreysler of Kreysler and Associates of American Canyon, Calif., picks up the process from there.

"From the 3-D computer file sent from the artist we machined 'segments' of the surface. These segments, machined from blocks of disposable, recyclable foam, created molds into which fiberglass could be placed.

"When the fiberglass cured it was removed from the disposable mold, which was then re-machined to create the next mold, and so on until we had made as many molds from a particular block of foam as possible. I believe that we ended

up making nearly 70 individual fiberglass segments to create the entire exterior shell of the sculpture."

The segments then were assembled "much like a 3-D jigsaw puzzle." Kreysler says a steel skeleton, or armature, rises inside about one third of its height, with bulkheads installed at strategic spots.

Argent's bear "may very well be the first time such a process has ever been used on this scale," says Kreysler.

"It is certainly the first time a large-scale sculpture has been realized using this method."

An artist's travels

Argent moved to Denver in 1993 from California, where he was a visiting lecturer at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

The reason was to take the DU teaching job, and it was another step on his journey to feed a craving for what he calls "the travel bug."

He moved halfway around the world to pursue education, but also the "nurture of travel." He spent a year in India while in undergraduate school, and says that his current stay here is "the longest I've been in one place."

Born in England, Argent's family moved to Australia in 1959 when he was 2. He studied to become a doctor, but three years of working in a hospital as a theater technician — operating theater being the British term for operating room — changed his mind.

"It's the rebellious nature of my self," he says. "I've always seemed to buck the system and the hierarchical nature of a hospital was not for me. I said, 'I've got to get out of here.'"

Argent created his first piece of public art in Australia, a project he won through a national competition to mark the 1976 death of 36 workers on the West Gate Bridge. The 1979 piece, sponsored by the West Gate Bridge Authority and Amalgamated Metal Workers Union, is painted steel in "forms in space." Argent now pronounces the work "terrible."

"It stylistically is what everyone else sees: Junky forms."

"I learned," he now says, "how the public gets left with some bad things."

The last time he saw the piece, it was still primer gray. "It was eye-opening to find a vocation (in public art), but I needed more of life's experiences."

It was also a new way to see art. "I was brought up on what art was by my father's architecture, the family aesthetic." (His father designed commercial structures across Southeast Asia and Australia.)

"He was a great artist without realizing he was an artist," Argent recalls of his father's drawing skills. His aesthetic was modernism, and Argent said he had to move forward to find his own style.

"(My father's) art was not at the cutting edge. The potency of what art could be was a lot stronger. At the end of my first year (of art school), a professor stimulated questions on how we perceive. Life is all about how we perceive."

But "public art didn't enter my con-



BILL KREYSLER/KREYSLER & ASSOC.

A computer rendering, at top, shows the placement of the bear on 14th Street outside the recently expanded Colorado Convention Center. The bear's head, shown awaiting shipment outside the California workshop where it was fabricated, is one of six pieces being trucked to Denver for installation.

sciousness because of my experience" with the memorial. I always thought of art as an experience relevant to myself, a desire to communicate the universal about the personal. But always with an edge of humor."

"(The works) weren't done with any commercial aspect in terms of the art. I desire to make an opportunity, not sell a product. That's not why I do what I do."

Besides, "art can become much more familiar if we can laugh at it first, then look at the seriousness and reflect on what we're looking at."

The artist earned a bachelor's degree in sculpture from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1983, but had to leave the country to pursue a graduate degree because no Australian university offered a master's degree in art.

He moved to the United States in 1984, and two years later earned a master of fine arts degree from the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute, College of Art. That led to travel through the United States as an instructor and artist-in-residence at places as diverse as the Georgia Fine Art Academy in Calhoun, Ga., and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's Arts/Industry Program in Wisconsin.

He took odd jobs restoring houses, and honed his skills working in stone and metal, the kind of materials that can survive in public art. At one point, his director in one arts program asked why "I couldn't get a job like everybody else, like working in a pizza parlor. I wasn't like everybody else."

A body of work

When Argent isn't teaching or working on public art commissions, he shows at William Havu Gallery in Denver.

Recent work has moved into photo-

graphs and sculpture related to the form of the pacifier, an area of inquiry that began when Argent and his wife had two sons, now ages 4 and 6. In abstracted views in Argent's photographs, the universal baby soporific looks like amber.

"He never ceases to surprise me," says gallery owner William Havu, who has handled his work since 2000. "From one body of work to the next exploration of ideas, some of which are very mundane."

Like those pacifiers. "Everyone can identify with this, but he renders them in such a way to make it extraordinary. He's constantly looking at things from this point of view: the familiar rendered in an unfamiliar process."

A recent interview took place inside another Argent creation: He and his wife (and printmaker) Anne Argent, are partners in the restaurant Mona's. The space that opened last year on 15th Street near Platte Street, used to house sculptor John De Andrea's studio.

"There was no breakfast place down here with good, healthful food," says Argent, who works and lives in the nearby Highland neighborhood.

After two decades of making art created to prompt questions, the big blue bear should inspire some big ones. How does that affect a career?

"If he were to do a second piece (like this), it would hurt," says Grant. "But he has such a wide repertoire. It will be part of the city's consciousness."

Wide is putting it mildly. His most recent commission, which still needs approval by Aurora officials, is for an 18-inch-wide green fiberglass trolley car for the median of East Colfax Avenue in front of the new Martin Luther King Jr. Library. The piece would be 17 feet long, and 9 feet high and glow from with-

Bear fits into bigger picture

Lawrence Argent's bear isn't the only public art going up at the Colorado Convention Center.

Other new works being installed this month include some of the prehistoric landscape paintings by Kirk Johnson and Jan Vriesen and a group of granite sculptures by Jonathan Bonner.

Though all the pieces by Johnson and Vriesen will not be in place until fall, the city plans a July 21 dedication of the artwork commissioned for the convention center.

In all, eight artists or teams created about \$2 million worth of art for the convention center as part of Denver's Percent for Art program, where 1 percent of hard costs for construction of a city building must be devoted to art. That's the largest amount for one structure in the city outside of Denver International Airport.

in. From certain angles it would seem to be a mere line of light, a ghost vehicle steaming down Colfax.

"History is important to me," Argent said. "It has to surface in some manifestation. Aurora wouldn't have been founded without the trolley car."

It's the same approach he's taking to a piece for the plaza outside the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art. As consultant, he wants to refer to the sugar beet, critical boon to that area's economy for years. But putting a sugar beet in front of the museum isn't the idea.

"It doesn't have to be a normal sugar beet. You can take the head of the sugar beet and twist it, and liquid can come out. It's all about flow."

Working in the realm of public art has taught him to "like collaboration, understanding of a new way of doing something and using experts' advice to get a newer product. Things need to evolve. How can you make work within a budget, how do I get what I want, but make it better than what I want?"

Indeed, the bear project has helped him evolve.

"As complex as this is," says Argent, "as many attributes as it has to many layers of art discourse, it has made me think about what to do in the studio in a similar way."

Is Argent afraid of the bear? After all, it is a work that will move off the art pages onto the front page. He thinks for a minute.

"Without an egotistical attitude, the things I work on are all the same. This is just 40 feet tall. The city has embraced it, and I was permitted to do it. That doesn't happen very often."

Mary Voelz Chandler is the art and architecture critic. 303-892-2677 or Chandlerm@RockyMountainNews.com



Also by Lawrence Argent

■ **Whispers**, at the University of Denver, involves stone benches made from digital images of students' lips. Each is accompanied by a soft sound-track of conversations. It was selected in 1999 for an interactive outdoor sculpture installation.

■ **Pillow Talk**, at East 20th Avenue and Pennsylvania Street, features a stack of stone pillows in a building courtyard. Selected in 2000 for the Denver Urban Renewal Authority and Post Properties.

■ **Argent was tapped in 2001 to make art for four sites in Englewood** for the Gateway Monumentation Project. The first —

the painted aluminum *Virere* (at left) — was installed in 2003 at the intersection of Broadway and Yale Avenue. Argent is still involved in the project, but because of budget issues, the city is working with private developers on two of the pieces.

■ **He was selected in 2003 as artist to consult on design** and art plans for the Oak Street Plaza in Fort Collins, outside the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art.

■ **Picked this year to create a piece of public art** along East Colfax Avenue in the Old Town part of Aurora (still needs approval).