



LAWRENCE ARGENT

Artist Lawrence Argent paints and works in photo-based imagery, but he is known primarily for his provocative sculptures and installations around the world.

Provocative? For this artist, who was born in England and raised in Australia, the idea is to blur the distinction between high art and low art, dragging art out of the museum or gallery, and setting it down firmly on the street. In the process, his non-hierarchical strategy pulls from representation, conceptualism, humor and a jolt of mischief, all designed to make people examine their surroundings, their intentions and their lives.

Argent is a pioneer in using 3-D technology and nontraditional materials in his work. The same inquisitive spirit drives Curtis Fentress, who always seeks more intelligent and sustainable solutions to problems involving materials, process and design.



He is candid about addressing the role his children have played in the way he approaches the idea of object and subject. The way he looks at things, really. His explorations of form and concept relate to place, culture, and the innate sense of human curiosity, just as designs by Curtis Fentress rely on the context of a project and the relationship of the building to its community, in order to marry building to site.

As Argent says, “Art can become more familiar if we can laugh at it first, then look at the seriousness and reflect on what we’re looking at.”

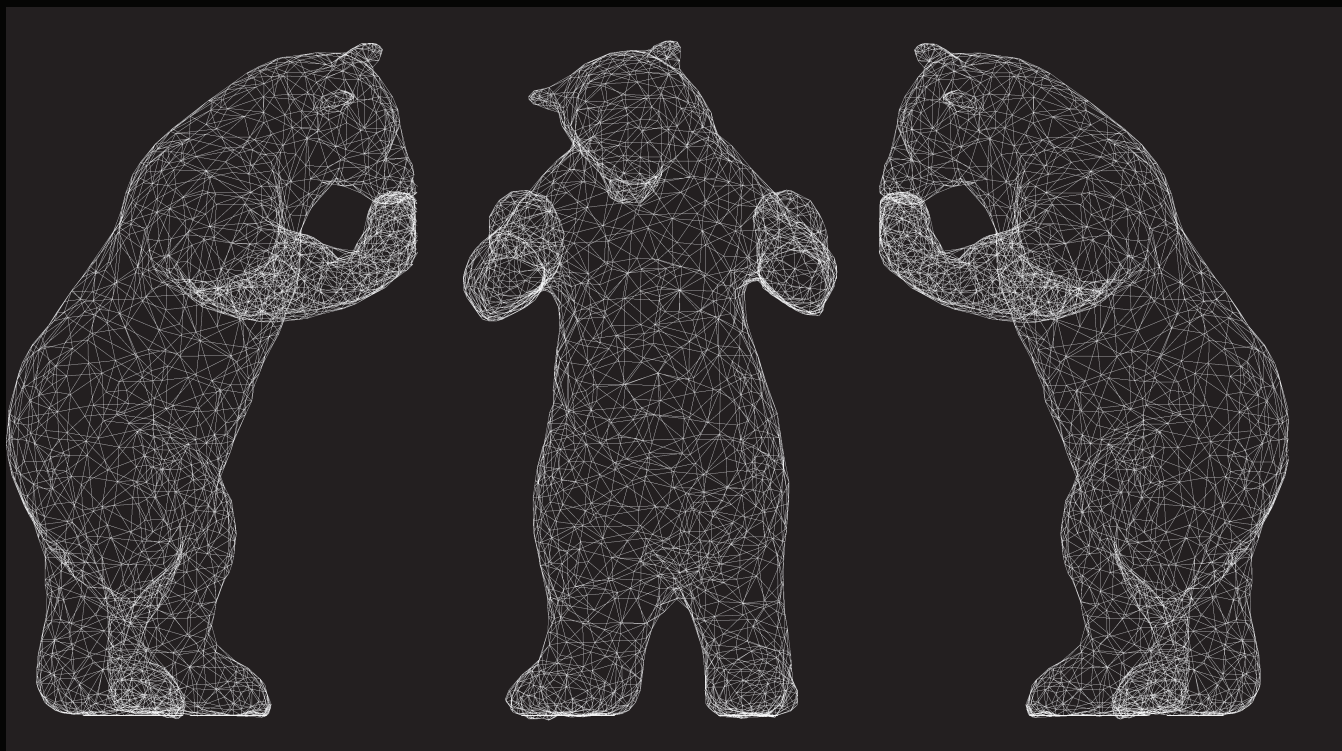
With *I See What You Mean* (*Big Blue Bear*, a 40-foot-tall faceted blue bear outside the Colorado Convention Center – the color was what he calls purely “serendipitous” Argent considered the relationship of locals and visitors, as well as the stereotypical view many out-of-towners have of Colorado. Just as many area residents will never spend a minute in the convention center, this Big Blue Bear is curious to know just what all these strangers are doing in there.

The techniques Argent used were groundbreaking. His model for the bear was created through the use of a rapid prototyping machine, a printing device that turns digital images into dimensional objects. Argent then worked with the computer animation and visual effects production company Pixel Kitchen, of Boulder, Colorado, to create hundreds of thousands of triangulations in the bear’s image to expand the figure into a 40-foot-tall bear.

From there, the process shifted to Kreysler and Associates of American Canyon, California, where Argent machined segments of the surface from blocks of disposable, recyclable foam. These created molds for the bear’s fiberglass “skin.” Segment by segment -- up to about 70 in all – led to the full exterior shell of the sculpture. A steel skeleton, or armature, fills about one-third of the piece, and segments were assembled like a big dimensional jigsaw puzzle. Bulkheads were installed at strategic spots to strengthen the sculpture as segments were joined. The sculpture was shipped to Denver in five pieces, and erected on the Colorado Convention Center site on a very windy day.

“Obviously, no one entity can possess all the accoutrements to define all of Colorado, but there are icons that are used profusely for this relationship. With a tongue-in-cheek approach, I thought about the fauna being representative of the mountains. The type of fauna merged as an image of the bear, and more specifically, the black bear. The image of the bear has been transformed into chainsaw-sculpted personages or somewhat realistic representations that confer a ‘regional Western art’ aesthetic. Reinforcing my mission of public art being the ability to communicate a non-hierarchical art experience that can be interpreted on many levels, the element of whimsy became augmented when I wished to make it really large.”

As for *Untitled* (*The Red Rabbit*), in Terminal B of Sacramento International Airport, Argent says he has no wish to become an “animal” artist, despite the fact that one of his most talked-about works is a big blue bear and his portfolio of public art commissions soon will include a big red rabbit. But the concept of dramatizing the anxiety travelers feel hovering around a baggage carousel waiting for their belongings to pop out of the chute was just too strong to ignore.



“What surfaced repeatedly as I looked into what I was attempting to create to interact with the space emerged from the amplified meaning associated with ‘baggage,’ literally and metaphorically,” Argent says. “The joy in the sense of reconciliation, the part that was separated is now joined, to form the happy union of owner and owned. It is spit out on the rotating tarmac; yes, it’s yours, the elation, relief, the ode to now being complete after the ‘journey.’ You feel one again.”

The untitled, three-part sculptural installation for the University of Houston includes three orbs – two of stone and one of bronze. Argent used computer modeling and prototyping equipment to design the markings for the pieces. He then transmitted the digitized data to a fabricator in China for the raw materials to be carved by hand.

“The human element is where things change, where mistakes can be made, so that these pieces are not perfect. You look at the work and you say ‘You’ve got it, but something about it is different.’ ”

Head of the sculpture department at the University of Denver, Lawrence Argent trained in sculpture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, in Baltimore. He has received numerous fellowships and been an artist-in-residence at the John Michael Kohler Foundation. He has made his home in Denver since the early 1990s, moving here to teach at DU.

Argent was playing with his children and a veritable zoo of stuffed animals when the idea clicked for the sculpture outside the Colorado Convention Center. He asked himself, “which was the most potent one” in terms of the animal’s pull on memory and emotion. The bear won. “Life and Art have always intertwined themselves in peculiar ways for me. ... Over recent years my domestic landscape has altered considerably. I have two young children that in perpetuity litter my terrain with new forms, some recognizable and others not so.

“As I lay there with the side of my face imprinted with the fine weaving of the living room carpet from my much needed catatonic slumber, I crank open my eyelids to a new vista. It is here I began looking afresh at these pieces of plastic, wood, rubber and fur alongside my assumptions of my children’s own possible perception and association. As I was decoding their language of materiality and form and removing subjectivity from this digestion, it became apparent my journey was to play with how something, ‘an object,’ once de-contextualized has potential for unnerving the familiar.”

