

Denver's Unconventional Art, Ready for the Convention



Kevin Moloney for The New York Times

Lawrence Argent's "I See What You Mean," at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver. The city is showcasing its growing art scene to visitors at the Democratic National Convention.

By KIRK JOHNSON
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DENVER — Just across town from the Pepsi Center, where Democrats will converge for their [national convention](#) beginning this weekend, there's a statue of a yearling pony outside the public library, dappled red and white, gazing into the distance as though imagining the future.

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Kevin Moloney for The New York Times
"The Yearling" by Donald Lipski, on display at the Denver Public Library.

Frederic Remington it's not. And forget the carved antlers and the black-velvet bison stampeding across the plains that have become parodies of art in the American West.

"The Yearling," by Donald Lipski, comes instead with a deeply cockeyed vision that Denver has come to call its own in recent years as the art scene here has blossomed with a confidence that the cow town of Colorado's past never knew. The sculpture, originally created for a New York City

school site but acquired by Denver in 1998, is now seen by many residents and visitors as a perfect vision of the New West, or perhaps the Old West turned upside down — more "Big Lebowski" than "Stagecoach" — because of the pony's gasp-inducing shift of scale and context. He stands, proud and muscular and fully life-sized, atop a giant straight-back classroom chair: the wild young creature as schoolboy.

"While it wasn't built for Denver, it seems perfect there now," said Mr. Lipski, who lives and works in Philadelphia. "It's not just out of the blue that they named the team the Broncos," he added, referring to the city's [National Football League](#) franchise.

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Denver is hoping to declare its emerging artistic identity to the world next week when the gaze of the global news media and political power turns on the city. Audio tours of public artworks like "The Yearling," gallery show invitations packed into delegates' welcome bags, and convention business meetings at the Denver Art Museum are cornerstones of the effort.

With that declaration comes a kind of unveiling of the city itself and its still young culture of antic playfulness, abundant sunshine and active outdoor life. The art that has matured in such a place might well have a message and lots to say, city artists say, but there's no sense getting all sturm und drang about it.

"It is kind of risky to go with art that is more humorous and playful," said Jim Green, a Denver artist who has four public works downtown, including one in the first-floor restrooms at the Denver Art Museum, where the sinks break into a chorus of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" when visitors put their hands under the faucets. "But the West has a history of being a more pioneering place, and the ability to take risks is part of that. There's a sophistication and informality at the same time that makes it work."

If Westerners are stereotyped as rugged individualists — Marlboro men with high-country wind burns and thousand-yard stares — the new art movement is about collaboration and the melding of cultures. Emanuel Martinez, a painter and sculptor in nearby Morrison, Colo., captured that thought with a downtown Denver mural showing a line of Western archetypes — cowboy, Indian, Hispanic — wearing identical mirrored sunglasses. If the old art focused on pristine nature, art in Denver is now about the complex relationship of the wild and urban.