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A Tale of an  
Artist and a  
Big Blue Bear



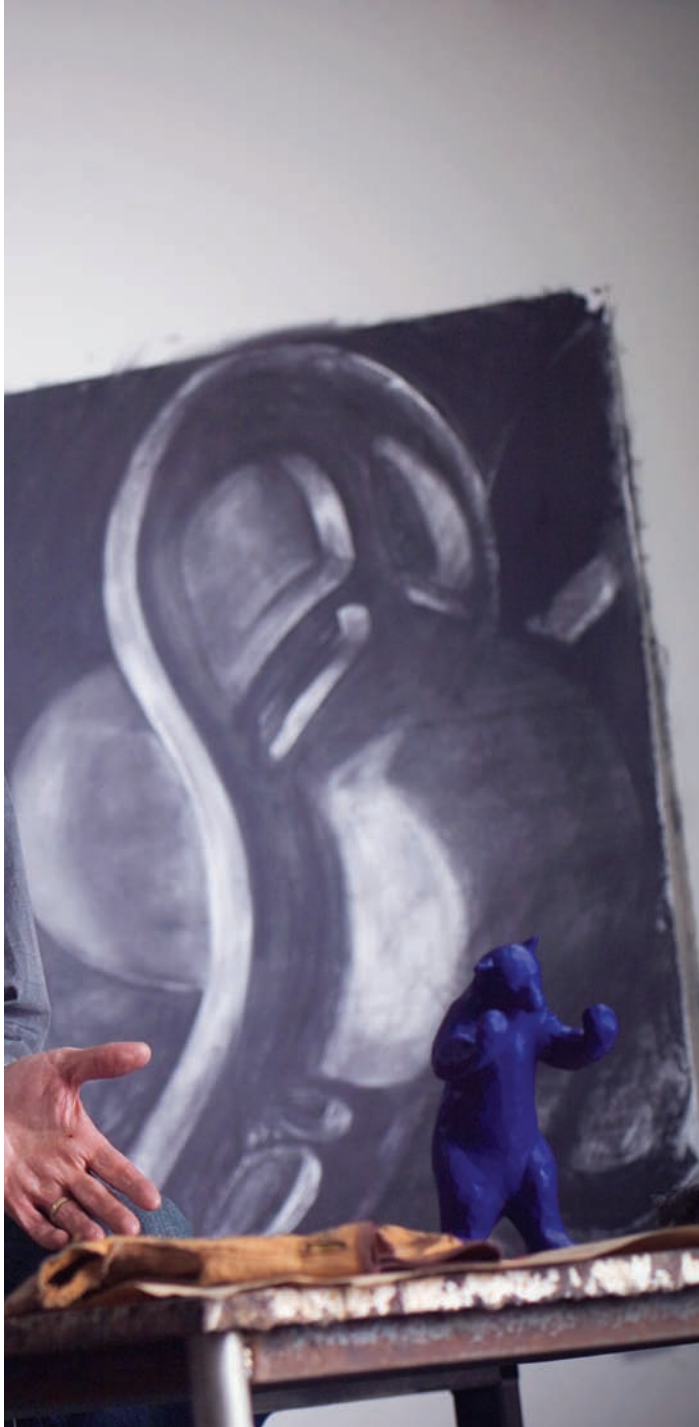
# A Tale of an Artist



Photo: Tim Ryan

Text: Leslie Petrovski, BA '82, MA '91

# and a Big Blue Bear



A mention of the monumental sculpture at 14th Street and Speer Boulevard in Denver is likely to elicit the response: “I love that bear!”

The sculpture in question is DU Associate Professor Lawrence Argent’s 40-foot-tall *I See What You Mean*, a Brobdingnagian blue beast that appears to be considering the activities inside the soaring atrium of the Colorado Convention Center’s new addition. Standing upright with its paws raised, the bear’s aspect is quizzical and friendly, as if the creature wants to attend convention breakout sessions.

Installed last summer, the \$425,000 bear—part of the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs’ Public Art Program—has become something of a chamber of commerce poster child, even making a guest appearance in a *Zippy the Pinhead* comic. Locals, seeking an easily identifiable meeting place downtown, now use the bear as a place to reconnoiter. And it’s amassed an eclectic array of fans, from the toddlers who gambol about its feet to cranky guardians of public funds.

Such fandom is rare for a piece of public sculpture. For the most part, public art is taken for granted as part of the landscape or, worse, derided as a titanic waste of resources.

In his review of the piece, *Westword* critic Michael Paglia praised the bear for its ability to engage both the hoi polloi and the gallery set. “Almost everyone,” he wrote, “is enthralled with the bear. This kind of positive response happens very rarely in the public-art realm.”

That the masses have embraced the whimsical bruin speaks to its accessibility and brilliance. This isn’t a ferocious, flesh-eating grizzly. Rather, it is a Steiff bear writ large, a cozy Colorado icon juxtaposed against the ultra modern glass-and-steel exterior of the convention center.

It also is an interesting work of art.



The product of computer modeling, the ursine sculpture began life as a tiny plastic toy that Argent digitized with a laser-scanning device, giving him a computer file he could scale. Next, he employed animation software to give the figure character and the correct pose. It also enabled him to “reduce” his data, abstracting the bear into a few thousand triangular facets. When he was finally satisfied with his design, he “printed” it using a machine that produces three-dimensional thermoplastic models.

The resulting miniature that emerged was a brilliant, startling blue. The color delighted the artist, and though the bear’s final shade evolved from that of the little prototype, from that moment on, the bear had to be blue.

“This is a risky piece,” Argent says. “It borders on being kitsch.” Arguably, the bear straddles the line between graphics and art. But put it in context and suddenly it’s about the cerulean blue Colorado skies; the tension between wildlife and the built environment; nature and technology; about seeing and being seen; about taking business and art a little less seriously.

The bear exemplifies a conceit Argent has used before, wherein he simultaneously extrapolates and reduces simple figures. In his 2003 piece *Virere*, for example, he has exaggerated a clump of grass into 15- and 20-foot-tall aluminum blades that are planted in a median of living xeriscape in Englewood, Colo. Like the bear, *Virere* has the visual simplicity of a cartoon and the size of a colossus. Install it in a surprising context and it becomes, well, kind of funny. And intriguing.

Born in England, Argent earned his BA in sculpture from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and his MFA from the Rinehart School of Sculpture at the Maryland Institute College of Art. He came to DU as a professor in 1993 after teaching at the Glassell School of Art in Houston, the University of California-Santa Barbara and Allan Hancock College in Santa Monica, Calif. A DU Distinguished Scholar, Argent has shown his work all over the country, received grants and is represented in Denver by the William Havu Gallery.

Mary Voelz Chandler, the art and architecture critic at the *Rocky Mountain News* and a long-time admirer of Argent’s work, doesn’t want to see him typecast as the guy who made the Big Blue Bear. “He is a serious artist with a great gift for taking simple things, making them look different and challenging our perceptions. I hope the bear opens people’s eyes to the other work he does.”

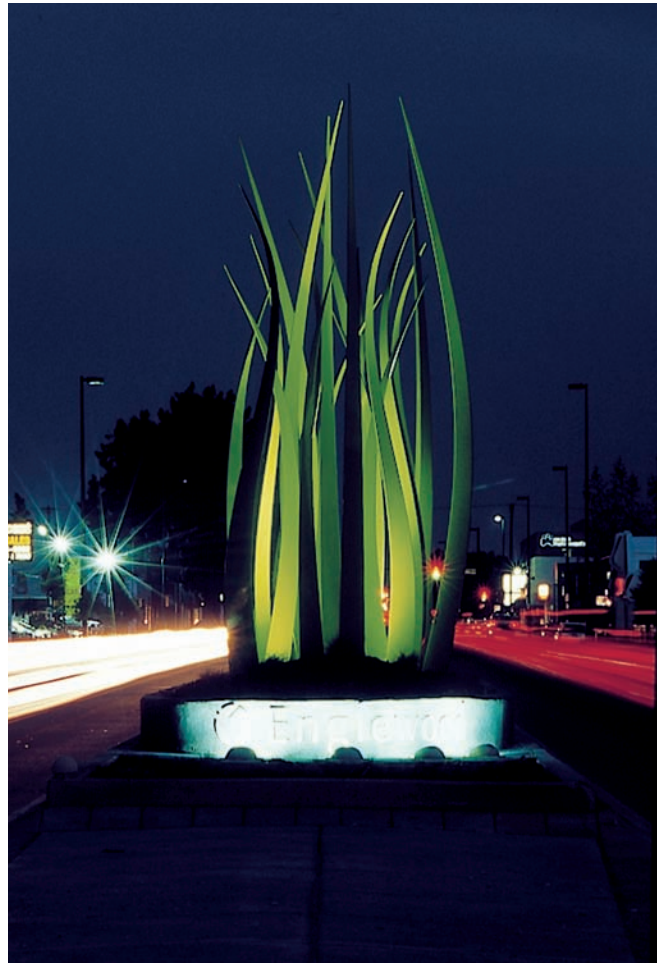


Photo: Lawrence Argent



Photo: Tim Ryan



Photo: Lawrence Argent

Among Lawrence Argent's most recognizable sculptures are *I See What You Mean* (above), *Virere* (facing page) and *Whispers* (left), which is located on the University of Denver campus.



As head of the DU School of Art and Art History sculpture program, Argent teaches studio sculpture courses wherein he tries to balance students' expectations of art world stardom with market realities and help them develop skills and creative confidence.

Restive and hardworking, Argent has a reputation among students for being a thoughtful, if tough, critic. "I don't sugar coat," he admits. "But teaching what I teach presents a wonderful opportunity to open people's minds to different experiences, to assist them in discovering their own possibilities. It's opening them to the possibilities that can exist and do exist."

"Because he's a working artist, he brought a sense of professionalism to the classroom," observes Joshua Bemelen, BFA '98, one of Argent's former students. "He taught me a way to look at objects around me and brought forth this idea that forms can be many things, that there's this dialogue between history and objects."

The word "conversation" arises again and again regarding Argent's work. He loves the idea of art engaging people and imbues his own work with a marked what's-up-with-that factor. His pieces are, to a large extent, mammoth conversation starters.

Consider his 1999 sculpture *Cojones*. Constructed from red street sweeper brushes and steel, the piece was comprised of two enormous glandular-shaped brushes suspended from the ceiling. What are those big, swinging things about? Why are those lips (*Whispers*, 2002) on poles near the Ritchie Center? Why is there a pile of marble pillows (*Pillow Talk*, 2001) at 19th and Penn?

This isn't art as commodity. This is art that demands both titters and questions. By bringing art into the public sphere where birds do their business and people take notice or not, art becomes a democratic experience.

"You go into a gallery," Argent says, "and there's this sense of connoisseurship, that what is inside is important. If you permit the individual to approach art in a manner that's more attuned to the self, you open up the possibilities of an experience that's not dictated by our baggage."

In recent years, Argent has pursued public projects not just because they dovetail nicely with his non-elitist views, but also because they enable him to function as a parent, professor *and* creator. Since massive works of art are largely collaborative, the public artist, in addition to conceiving the "big idea," becomes a kind of ringmaster in the process, managing budgets, finding resources and prodding vendors in the realization of the idea.

In the case of the blue bear, Argent collaborated with California-based Kreysler and Associates, which

fabricated the bear out of steel, fiberglass and concrete. The ability to dip in and out of a project during its less intense phases makes it possible, Argent says, for an artist to create, harness additional expertise and balance the exigencies of modern living.

With *I See What You Mean* now complete, Argent has moved on to other public pieces, including a commission outside the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art and an installation in the median strip in old town Aurora. Once again, he is working not so much to make art for a site, but to "make the site art." ■



Photo: Lawrence Argent

Argent's work, including *Pillow Talk* (above), is intended to spur questions and prompt conversation.