



The People's Sculptor

I SEE WHAT YOU MEAN, 2005, COLORADO CONVENTION CENTER; PHOTO: TIM RYAN

Sculptor and Denver resident Lawrence Argent is one of the West's most beloved public artists. He gave the Colorado Convention Center its iconic sculpture, *I See What You Mean*, and more recently, he installed *Leap*, a giant red rabbit leaping toward a suitcase, in the Sacramento International Airport. Here, he reveals how he creates larger-than-life sculptures, why he won't make another bear—and why public art matters

BY HILARY MASELL OSWALD

CH&L: Let's talk about how you began creating public art. Was it always a goal of yours?

Lawrence Argent: Not at all. But I've always been an artist who creates with the whole in mind, meaning I think about how my work gets seen, how people will experience it, the control of the lighting—all of it. And public art can be a very powerful experience in total.

I got tired of seeing some of the bad public art that's around, and I thought, 'I've done commissions for private collections before, so I'm not new to the game of creating large pieces.' And I started to like the idea that I could affect change on a greater scale than the exclusivity of a gallery setting or an individual's collection.

Art can seem inaccessible. I thought it would be important to give people a sense of confidence, that they can participate in and understand art. I want to undermine this notion that art ought to be a certain thing. ▸



LEAP, 2011, SACRAMENTO AIRPORT; PHOTO: ED ASMUS



YOUR MOVE, 2011, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, CALHOUN LOFTS PROJECT; PHOTO: LAWRENCE ARGENT



LAWRENCE ARGENT

And then a big blue bear was born. How do you begin to design a 40-foot-tall bear, or a 56-foot-long rabbit?

It has to do with the site. [Since the completion of *I See What You Mean*,] I've been asked to make a 100-foot bear, and I said, 'It's not going to work because that bear was designed for Denver. It belongs in that particular place.' The sculpture addresses this city, this life.

But how did I do it? Let's talk about the rabbit. I wanted to deal with the idea of how you feel when you arrive from a journey. What happens on our own journeys, physically and mentally? How do we process those things? When you enter an airport, there's fear of what you have to do, fear about security, fear of the airline losing your favorite T-shirt. All these things create a cacophony of energy that's not necessarily positive. So how does an artist create something for this huge environment that gives you a moment to diffuse that energy? I wanted to create ▸



PILLOW TALK, 2001. DURA/POST PROPERTIES. PHOTO: TIM RYAN



REFLECTION, 2012. SHELBY PARK, NASHVILLE, TN. PHOTO: LAWRENCE ARGENT

something personable—a suitcase—that’s connected to this idea of journey. And I chose the rabbit because there have been so many parables written about the hare that it transcends culture and civilization.

And how does one make a giant aluminum rabbit?

I’ll tell you first, when the rabbit occurred to me, I was embarrassed. I knew it was right for the space, but I thought, ‘I’m going to be known as the guy who does big animals.’

To make these sculptures, I work a lot in the digital realm. From clay models, we create a 3D digital model and work from there. I work with a crew of people who are really knowledgeable. And when it came time to install the rabbit, we spent three months inside the airport building it, bringing 1,780 panels through the doors you would normally enter and exit.

Three months in an airport? That’s a tough gig.

Yes, not so glamorous.

But obviously important to you. Why do you think public art matters?

That’s a good question. It’s essential to our environment because it can alter our experience of place and site. It can surprise us, can make

us stop and be mindful of a moment we would otherwise ignore. I designed these big ice sculptures in Vail, and I got an email from a woman recently. She wrote that she had been diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury seven years ago. She said, ‘I sat down and looked at your sculptures, and I felt relaxed. I haven’t felt relaxed in seven years.’ It changed her. Public art gives you a chance to embrace peace and inquisitiveness. You become a part of it, and you’re changed.

You’re an artist and a professor [at the University of Denver]. What do you tell your students who want to become artists?

Don’t do it. Just kidding. It’s important for people to engage in a passion that opens them up to ideas, helps them wonder about what they don’t know. Creativity is letting go of what we think we know and jumping into the deep end, allowing something to surface that we can’t predict. If you decide to create art or become a doctor, the journey needs to be attended to with creativity and passion. If we knew what the next day was going to bring, then why would we live? □

See more of Lawrence Argent’s work at lawrenceargent.com.