

Portrait of the artist as a blue bear

Blue Bear is the spiritual original of the Mâtco, or grizzly bear, in American Indian folklore and it took an expat Australian sculptor to resurrect all 14 metres of it in Denver, Colorado. Rachael Bernstone reports



"I dabbled in architecture, sculpture and photography, and also considered becoming a doctor, but the discovery that exists in working with something new, that's why I chose sculpture – I wanted to push myself to understand how to use new tools," he explains. "As a teacher, I think that is the basis of people exploring their own creativity. It's a matter of constantly moving forward into things we don't know that we don't know."

To create the bear, Argent further explored computer animation and modelling programs to create virtual and physical maquettes of the bear, before outputting the data. The fabrication process, which took place in San Francisco, was the most challenging phase of the three-year program, he says. In fact, when Argent discovered that the bear's concrete mounting pad at the site had been poured back to front, he thought the \$424,000 commission was going to fail. Transporting the finished pieces from California to Colorado for assembly and installation also generated some major headaches.

It all came good in July, though, when the bear gradually rose to its full 14-metre height. "The most magical moment occurred when the left arm went on and was sucked into place, and it sat one foot off the glass, just as it was meant to," Argent says. "You don't experience that on the computer, and it was truly amazing to realise it in real life."

Argent's friendly-looking, big blue bear was greeted extremely enthusiastically by the people of Denver and the local press.

"The positive affirmations I've received via email, letters and people calling have been incredible," he says. "I've had good shows before, but never at the point of this abundance. Everyone just loves it!"

www.lawrenceargent.com

www.digitalstoneproject.org

See www.artreview.com.au for a direct link to these websites.

LAWRENCE ARGENT WAS BORN IN ENGLAND, GREW UP IN Australia then moved to the US, his adopted home for more than 20 years.

But he still considers himself an Australian, as do his American friends and colleagues. "As an Aussie living here, part of it's always been a battle," he explains. "During grad school I was working under the table, and then I spent two years as an illegal alien before getting legal status when I was appointed to my first teaching role, in 1988."

Despite his critical and professional success in America, part of Argent is still a foreigner, which might explain the genesis of some of the ideas in his latest work. Argent's four-storey high, blue bear sculpture, *I See What You Mean*, is also an outsider looking in.

Argent chose his bear as a symbol of the Rocky Mountain region, but positioned it to look into the glass façade of the recently expanded Denver Convention Center to reference the curiosity that locals may experience, if they should wonder just what visitors are getting up to inside. In another distortion of tradition, this piece appears to look at people, rather than people looking at the art.

The bear also allowed Argent to push his technological limits, which was one of the initial attractions of sculpture, he says.



Lawrence Argent's bear sculpture, *I See What You Mean*, was recently installed at the Denver Convention Center. Courtesy Daniel Junge.

Argent's blue bear broke new ground in sculpture through its use of digital technologies. Courtesy Lawrence Argent.

Digital rendering of the bear in situ. Courtesy Lawrence Argent.