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DENVER'S UNCONVENTIONAL ART, READY FOR THE CONVENTION

By Kirk Johnson

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.

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



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. PHOTO BY KEVIN MOLONEY.

named the team the Broncos," he added, referring to the city's National Football League franchise.

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



THE YEARLING BY DONALD LIPSKI, ON DISPLAY AT THE DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY. PHOTO BY KEVIN MOLONEY.

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.

Daniel Libeskind's stark design for the Denver Art Museum — a 2006 building that rises like a raw mountain range in its birth pangs near the state capitol, all odd angles and tectonic energy — is the most overt statement of the city's ambition. The Museum of Contemporary Art, which opened

its doors last fall, and the Clyfford Still Museum, scheduled to open in 2010 to house most of the works of that Abstract Expressionist painter, round out the claim to a critical mass of art institutions.

But for most conventiongoers and their families, the horse on the chair, as many people call "The Yearling," and the blue bear are probably what they'll see first and think about most.

The bear, formally titled "I See What You Mean," by Lawrence Argent, stands peering into the Colorado Convention Center, where many of the Democratic National Convention meetings will be held.

The bear is firmly anchored at the intersection of kitsch and big-thought art that scholars and artists say has emerged as a Denver signature. Does the bear see human beings, in their glass-walled hideaway, as fine creatures or frivolous fools? Has he lumbered down from the mountain in curiosity or dread? Is he blue because we've messed up his world, or because we don't remotely understand it?

"In Denver the environment is just right in your face the way it isn't in a lot of other places" and affects the city's artistic temperament, said Erin Trapp, director of the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs. She said the question of how things fit together — what belongs and what doesn't in an outsized landscape — has raised a debate very much still underway.

"Kind of like the bear — it doesn't belong there, and yet it works," she said. The sense that whimsy and serious can coexist, and that a public art program should flirt with that idea, has been pushed from the top down as well by the city's mayor, John Hickenlooper, an art lover and former beer brewer who joined the board of the Denver Art Museum 12 years ago, long before he entered politics

"John knows all my curators on a first name basis," said Lewis Sharp, a former curator with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York who took over as director of Denver Art Museum in 1989. "When he was simply a restaurant owner and brewer, he gave beer to all our events," Mr. Sharp added. Now when I hear him talk about Clifford Still, who in my view is the most important painter of the 20th century, I know that he gets it, right to his core."

How much conventiongoers, obsessed as most of them are with politics, opinion polls and parties, will get of the art scene is uncertain.

But at the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, Ms. Tapp said a one-time notice is really not what Denver is after with its carefully orchestrated presentations like Dialog : City, which is bringing together international artists for 10 interactive installations in and around town during the convention.

The bigger goal, Ms. Tapp said, is patterned after New York City's efforts when it hosted party conventions in 1992(the Democrats) and 2004(the Republicans), and planners tried to link convention-week buzz to long-term promotional programs for Broadway and fashion district. Denver hopes to insinuate art into city life further and deeper over time, she said, with the energizing jolt of convention just another step in the process.

Local artists say the energy has been infectious.

Sharon Schaffner, a jewelry maker and sculptor who organized a gallery show to coincide with the convention, said she didn't have a particular plan in mind except to support the Democrats and create an avenue of expression for local artists who felt the same.

But when the pieces came in for the show, "Bleu" at the Show of Hands Gallery, she saw a common theme: they were mostly fun. Some were a harsh and biting sort of fun, others droll or off center, like "Lame Duck," by Denver artist, Mark Friday, featuring a wooden hunting decoy painted with question marks, perched above spindled legs gone askew.

Another artist, Jim Hawkins, a former Denver firefighter, mounted an old vinyl record of the song "There's Gonna be Some Changes Made Around Here" by Ernest Tubb on a weathered piece of wood from an old pioneer homestead that Mr. Hawkins said he found near his home in Western Colorado. Then he placed a rusty clarinet below that, with a spindled strand of American flag cloth spilling from the mouthpiece.



BIG SWEEP BY COOSJE VAN BRUGGEN AND CLAES OLDENBURG, OUTSIDE THE DENVER ART MUSEUM. PHOTO BY KEVIN MOLONEY

Ms. Schaffner said she thought the piece and most of the others in the show reflected the idea that a light touch, Denver style, can be as effective as a shove.

"You won't find a Rodin in a Denver park," she said.