

# DENVER'S ICONIC, INTERACTIVE, AND INCITING PUBLIC ART

[by a museum person who loves this town]

Beth Kaminsky

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In a field that grew up in an age of colonial cabinets of curiosities that's still grappling with elitist barriers (perceived and actual), many museums struggle to connect with people and communities. As professionals working in and for museums, we talk about welcoming indicators when we invite users in, take experiences outside our walls, and develop programs with individuals and groups whose stories we aspire to share.

It's through this lens that I consider the significance of public art in Denver: art that exists in public spaces – selected through an official city process, commissioned by nonprofits and private entities, and spontaneously created by artists. What might museums learn from it? Often single touch points (in contrast to multimodal experiences with narrative arcs that run through many exhibition galleries), public art can tell passionate stories that powerfully connect.

The critique is a writer's assessment shaped by their professional expertise and their own visitor experience, and formed without (or with only minimal) consultation with the exhibit's creators. Its audience is the profession.



COURTESY DETOUR, HIERO, TUKEONE



## ICONIC

*Successful public art is art people talk about. It inspires conversations and builds identity.*

If you fly into Denver International Airport and ride into town along the boulevard named for Federico Peña – Denver's first Latino mayor, who in 1988 signed an Executive Order dedicating 1 percent of capital improvement projects with budgets over \$1 million to art<sup>1</sup> – you'll catch sight of the famed big blue horse. With fiery eyes and a backstory fit for the juiciest of public art telenovelas,<sup>2</sup> “Blucifer” (officially *Mustang/Mesteño* by Luis Jiménez), might be one of the most iconic works in Denver's official public art collection (fig. 1).

In a city that oscillates between embracing and denying its cow town reputation, Denverites live in an oddly comfortable zone of ambiguous identity – simultaneously worldly and laid-back. Polished to a rugged level of sophistication, the Mile High City (the Queen City of the Plains, Paris on the Platte) can consecutively consume cosmos in crystal and Coors from the can. Denver shows off big art by big-name artists who often create works with whimsical, tongue-in-cheek attitudes for sites here.

Known by descriptors more than titles, the big blue bear (*I See What You Mean* by Lawrence Argent) at the Colorado Convention Center (fig. 2), big white figures (*Dancers* by Jonathan Borofsky) at the Denver Performing Arts Complex (fig. 3), and the little horse on a big red

chair (*The Yearling* by Donald Lipski) at the Denver Public Library (fig. 4) exemplify public artworks that provoke reactions and conversations. Some pieces we love, and some we love to hate.

While museums love to be loved and thought of as infinitely trustworthy, we may finally be moving beyond discussions of “neutrality.”<sup>3</sup> If we loosen our grip a bit and adopt a more open-ended attitude, museums that encourage visitors' unique opinions and divergent understandings might just expand their identities and come to be seen as safe places for civil discourse.

## INTERACTIVE

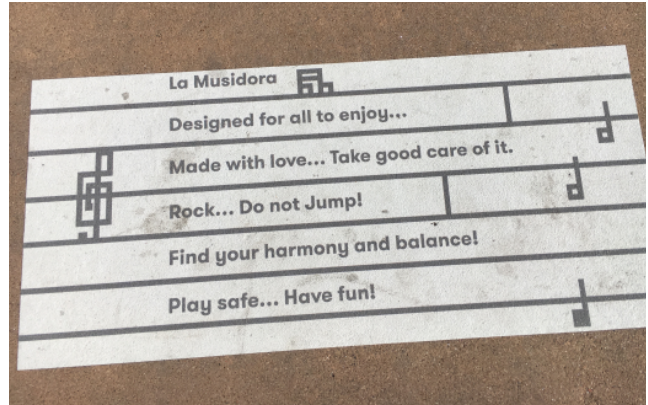
*Successful public art engages people. It fosters creativity and supports healthy communities.*

Just south of Civic Center Park, which grew out of the national City Beautiful movement of the early 1900s,<sup>4</sup> on the plaza between the Denver Art Museum (DAM) and the Denver Public Library (DPL), people converge and engage with works of public art and with one another. Here, the welcoming, permeable sphere of the library faces off against the historically grounded impression of art museums as accessible only to a privileged elite, creating a public space full of powerful potential.

Commissioned by DAM, *La Musidora* by Héctor Esrawe and Ignacio Cadena was so popular that the museum reprised its installation beyond the originally intended number of summers.

Fig. 1. Luis Jiménez, *Mustang/Mesteño*, 2008.  
Fig. 2. Lawrence Argent, *I See What You Mean*, 2005.  
Fig. 3. Jonathan Borofsky, *Dancers*, 2003.  
Fig. 4. Donald Lipski, *The Yearling*, 1993 (installed in Denver, 1998).





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Fig. 5 & 6. Héctor Esrawe and Ignacio Cadena, *La Musidora*, 2017, and its friendly pathway label.



Fig. 7. Front to back: Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne, Arapaho), *Wheel*, 1997; Beverly Pepper, *Denver Monoliths*, 2006; and Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Big Sweep*, 2006.

People flocked to the 90-foot row of colorful woven musical rocking lounge chairs on the DAM/DPL plaza, smiling, laughing, and following the directions of lively instructional labels painted directly on the pavement (figs. 5 & 6):

La Musidora  
 Designed for all to enjoy...  
 Made with love...Take good care of it.  
 Rock... Do not Jump!  
 Find your harmony and balance!  
 Play safe... Have fun!

Other works of art invite thought and activity on the DAM/DPL plaza year-round, for example the interplay among *Wheel* by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne, Arapaho); *Denver Monoliths* by Beverly Pepper; and *Big Sweep* by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen (fig. 7). The intended level of interaction isn't always clear, however. Dan Ostermiller's *Scottish Angus Cow & Calf* (fig. 8) begs the question, "Are we allowed to climb the cows?"

This freedom to ask and to query basic behavioral expectations can – and should – spill into museums. Just as the "shushing" of a spectacled librarian with a tight bun is an outdated myth, so too can museums shed off-putting airs of restrictive exclusivity. Let's find ways to move past the touch/don't touch dilemma, deal with ambiguity, and design spaces where visitors intuitively sense their roles. We can open doors and share welcoming spaces where users at the very least feel comfortable existing.



Fig. 8. Dan Ostermiller, *Scottish Angus Cow & Calf*, 2003.

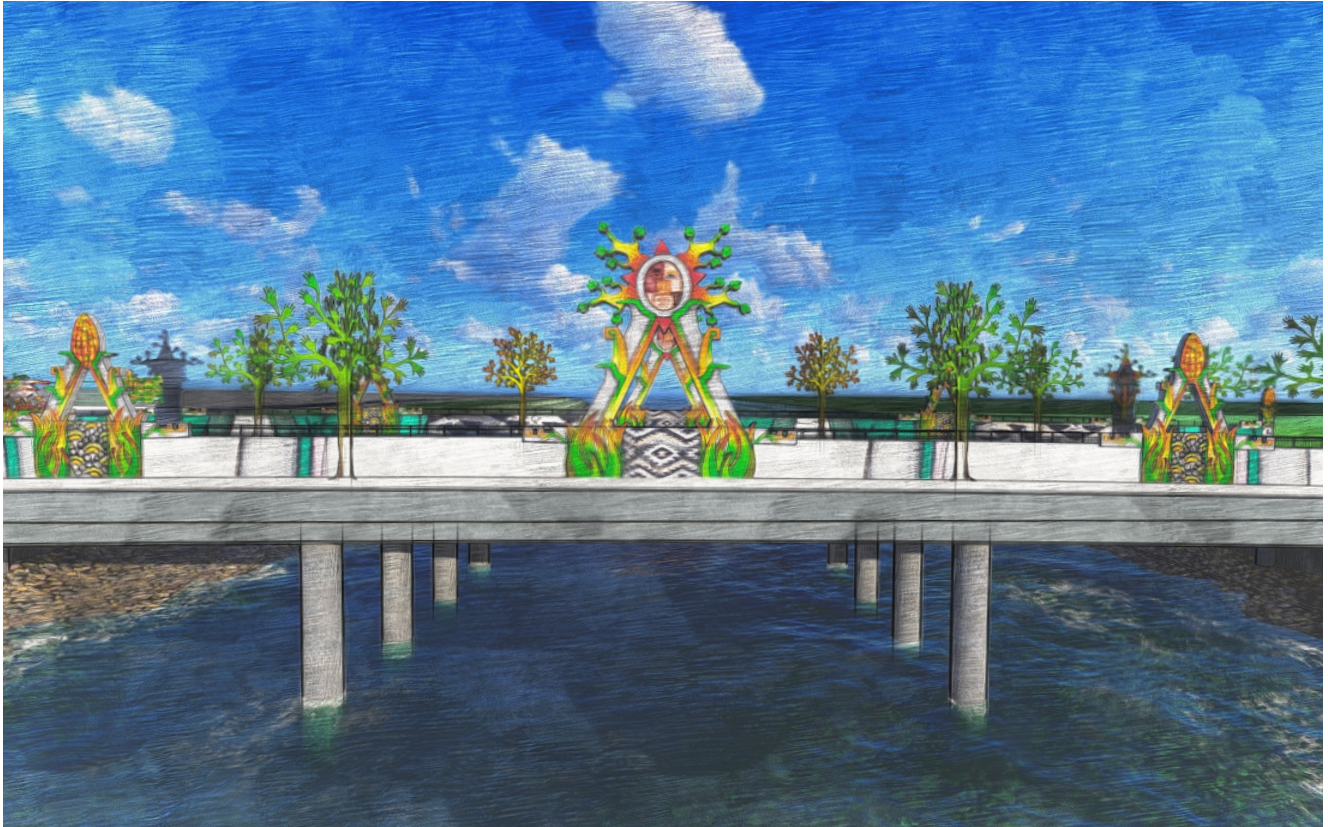


Fig. 9. David Ocelotl Garcia, rendering of *People's Bridge of the Sun/Puente del Sol del Pueblo*, 2022.

Across town at the redeveloping and expanding National Western Center, two bridges will soon connect neighborhoods that have been divided since stockyards, slaughterhouses, railroads, and highways obscured the natural landscape beginning in the 1880s.<sup>5</sup> Through the city's official public art process, local artist David Ocelotl Garcia was selected to create works for the bridges. He envisioned installations genuinely welcoming to the people living around them. Garcia employed a familiar-to-many-museums co-creation model that was Public (with a capital P) in both product and process, inviting participation in the production of the *People's Bridge of the Sun/Puente del Sol del Pueblo* (fig. 9) and *People's Bridge of the Moon/Puente de la Luna del Pueblo*.<sup>6</sup> When complete, surrounding

communities will see themselves in the work – taking the idea of bridges as connectors to another level entirely.

### INCITING

*Successful public art powers creative action. It sparks and sustains social justice movements.*

With roots in the Mexican Muralist movement of the 1920s,<sup>7</sup> public art continues to empower communities by celebrating cultural heritage and bringing to the forefront – in brilliant color and through deep symbolism and prominent placement – issues that demand attention.

The influence of public art comes from its immediate availability. Unlike museums,

which have competing priorities of preservation and accessibility – with the bulk of collections living well protected in storage behind locked doors – works of public art exist in the public realm. Artworks not overseen, owned, and/or maintained by municipalities, nonprofits, or private entities may be easier to access and enjoy than objects in museums, and they’re also more vulnerable to natural degradation, defacement, and destruction.

In Denver, significant murals from the 1970s, the height of *el Movimiento*, the Chicano Movement in Colorado,<sup>8</sup> and more recent masterpieces have been destroyed. Recognizing this substantial loss and the ongoing threat of development and gentrification on murals that remain, Lucha Martínez de Luna founded the Chicano/a/x

Community Murals of Colorado Project. She says, “The murals in our neighborhoods created a sense of place in a country that has denied us access to our history, native language, and feeling a sense of belonging.”<sup>9</sup> In a testament to the significance of the organization and the murals it seeks to protect, the National Trust for Historic Preservation included it on its annual list of America’s most endangered historic places in 2022.<sup>10</sup>

A mural that survives on an exterior wall of the recreation center in La Alma-Lincoln Park epitomizes the importance of public art in Denver. Painted by artist and activist Emanuel Martínez, *La Alma* references history reclaimed by a community suppressed by systemic injustices and exudes unceasing strength (fig. 10).

Fig. 10.

Emanuel Martínez,  
*La Alma*, 1978.





# RECORD BOOK OF SAND CREEK

Council of Forty Four

White Antelope  
One Eye  
Yellow Wolf  
Big Man  
War Bonnet  
Spotted Crow  
Bear Robe  
Over 230  
Cheyenne  
Arapaho  
Men  
Women  
Children



@NONOKEHTI.BEE3EISEL



EMILY KAMINSKY

2008

**Fig. 11.**

Sarah Ortegon,  
(Eastern Shoshone,  
Northern Arapaho),  
*What's in a Name*,  
2022.

Like temporary exhibitions and fluctuating themed programming initiated by museums, short-term public art can enrich communal spaces with provocative, contentious, and deeply emotional imagery. A mural near the entrance to an outdoor sporting goods store near downtown addresses national and local rebranding dialogues. In *What's in a Name*, artist Sarah Ortegon (Eastern Shoshone, Northern Arapaho), draws the connection between the old designation of a well-known mountain and the tragic history of the Sand Creek Massacre. She advocates for “Mount Blue Sky,” a name that affirms the Tribal legacy of the land (fig. 11). The timing of the temporary mural during the renaming debate and its location at a can't-be-missed spot on a popular and relevant retail outlet give weight to its message.

In Five Points (a neighborhood rebranded “RiNo,” for “River North,” in an unfortunately typical gesture of the deliberate erasure of displaced communities of color through gentrification) a brewery dedicated a wall to rotating murals. A remembrance of Elijah McClain – a young Black man heartbreakingly and unnecessarily killed by police in Denver's

bordering city of Aurora – recently looked out, calling attention to ongoing and widespread racism and brutality (intro image). Artists Detour, Hiero, and Tukeone understood that their *Elijah McClain* mural was temporary and would be painted over as the schedule dictated. But its message lives on.

Like museums, public art exists in context. Influenced by history, it emerges at a specific moment and in a particular place and often continues as part of an evolving contemporary landscape. A product of the artists who create it and the communities that consume it, public art reflects society's priorities; meanings shift among people and through time. I wonder what would happen if museums, shedding the instinct to have complete control over the narrative, took advantage of their unique positions in society to spark even more awareness – offering places and resources to communities to tell their own stories and heightening exposure to new ideas for existing and potential audiences.

Denver is lucky to have a vibrant public art scene bolstered by infinitely talented artists and passionate art advocates. What's the



public art scene like in your hometown? Does it bring people together? Spark discussion and debate? Reflect and elevate issues? What can museums learn from it – what lessons does public art hold that museums might apply as we navigate competing agendas, justify funding, and defend our existence? ■

### Acknowledgements

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1 To learn more about Denver's Public Art Program see, "About," Public Art: Denver Arts & Venues, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://denverpublicart.org/about/>.

2 Intrigued? See, Kirk Johnson, "And Behold a Big Blue Horse? Many in Denver Just Say Neigh," *New York Times*, March 1, 2009, [https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/02/arts/design/02hors.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/02/arts/design/02hors.html?_r=0).

3 Elizabeth Merritt, "Exploring Museums and Trust 2021," American Alliance of Museums, Center for the Future of Museums Blog, October 5, 2021, <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/10/05/exploring-museums-and-trust-2021/>.

4 See Ida Yalzadeh, "City Beautiful movement: urban planning," Britannica, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/City-Beautiful-movement>. For more about the movement in Denver, see David Forsyth, "The City Beautiful Movement in Denver," Colorado Encyclopedia, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/city-beautiful-movement-denver>.

5 See "History of the Site," National Western Center, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://nationalwesterncenter.com/about/what-is-the-nwc/history-about-the-site/>.

6 "National Western Center Bridges Art Project," Abstract Imaginism: Current Projects, David Ocelotl Garcia, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.ocelotlart.com/nwcbridge-art-project.html>, and Richard Eversley, "South Platte River Public Art Workshop-2019," vimeo, accessed January 20, 2023, [https://vimeo.com/382932758?embedded=true&source=vimeo\\_logo&owner=25600891](https://vimeo.com/382932758?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=25600891).

7 "Mexican Muralism," Movements, The Art Story, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/mexican-muralism/>.

8 For more on *el Movimiento*, see Hayley Sanchez "1969 Denver school walkout helped launch Chicano movement," Colorado Politics, March 24, 2019, [https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/1969-denver-school-walkout-helped-launch-chicano-movement/article\\_6440a4da-4ce5-11e9-bb09-2f7cc5da9b0d.html](https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/1969-denver-school-walkout-helped-launch-chicano-movement/article_6440a4da-4ce5-11e9-bb09-2f7cc5da9b0d.html).

9 Lucha Martínez de Luna, quoted in Zascha Fox, "These Chicana/o Murals Are The Soul of La Alma-Lincoln Park," 303 Magazine.com, May 27, 2021, <https://303magazine.com/2021/05/chicano-murals-la-alma-lincoln-park/>.

10 "Discover America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2022," National Trust for Historic Preservation, May 4, 2022, <https://savingplaces.org/stories/11-most-endangered-historic-places-for-2022>.