



## ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH by Walter Robinson

Denver is one cow town that's got it all goin' on. The central city is an urbanist's dream, with gleaming skyscrapers, a neo-classical city hall, plenty of parks and a free 16-block tram down the main shopping street. All three sports stadiums -- Mile High Field for the **Broncos**, Coors Field for the **Colorado Rockies** and the Pepsi Center basketball arena for the **Nuggets** -- are located right downtown, just like **Rudy Giuliani** wanted when he tried to put the **New York Yankees** on Manhattan's West Side.

About 8,000 people live in Denver's center, and standing on the roof terrace of a new four-story condo, a person can see a 100-car coal train snaking through the city, running alongside the South Platte River. Plenty of large public sculptures dot the area, including a \$1.58 million, six-story-tall *Dancing Couple* by **Jonathan Borofsky** at the **Denver Performing Arts Complex** and Denver art professor **Lawrence Argent's** \$400,000, 40-foot-tall blue bear standing on its rear legs and peeking into the glass façade of the new **Colorado Convention Center**.

### **Libeskind's new Denver Art Museum**

As of this month, the crown jewel to this rich mix is the new building for the **Denver Art Museum** designed by **Daniel Libeskind**, his first completed building in his adopted country. At first impression, the \$180-million, 150,000-square-foot structure looks fantastic -- turn the corner, and bam! there it is. *Time* magazine was even moved to write that the building was like actor **George Clooney**, with no bad angles. They call it DAM for short, or, as the marketers like to say, "Hot DAM!"

Clad in light gray titanium "shingles," the building looks something like an explosion of six trapezoidal volumes, or a multifaceted quartz crystal, with a narrow base and a sharply pointed "prow" extending over the street towards the old DMA facility, a 20-sided 1971 structure by the Italian designer **Gio Ponti** (1891-1979), which looks rather like a castle and still houses the permanent collection, especially strong in pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial art.

Libeskind has noted the role of the nearby Rocky Mountains as an inspiring trope, and also compared the design to origami. Apparently, he and his architectural colleagues toyed with folded sheets of paper to come up with the building scheme. It's true that the design can seem remarkably arbitrary, and even make one yearn for the elegant logic of the International Style.

Inside, the building is a bewildering funnel of angles and planes ascending around an interior atrium, which spirals upward 120 feet like a Bizarro World version of **Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum** rotunda. It's not so much that the building contains no

vertical walls as that it includes walls that go off at any and all angles. The space has the baroque organicism of a rockslide in a gully, as writer **Julia Morton** pointed out to me during a side trip to the Red Rocks city park 15 miles west of Denver.

None of the curatorial staff would admit to having any reservations whatsoever in regards to the architecture and the challenges of installing artworks in it. The building does seem to favor sculpture and video projections. A **Dan Flavin** light sculpture is placed in a corner, for instance, so that its green light washes up the neighboring wall, which seems to have a slope of about 75 degrees.

Or, a projection of multicolored, falling, fluttering scarves washes down another inclining wall, like a gentle video waterfall, a specially commissioned work by Denver-born Los Angeles artist **Jennifer Steinkamp** called *Rock Formation* (2006). And, the otherwise-impossible interior space of the building's trademark "prow" proves to be the perfect site for a nova-like assembly of small steel bars by **Antony Gormley**.

A **Donald Judd** sculpture -- a row of large metal boxes -- is installed on an upper terrace, which boasts an impressive view of the city skyline as well as an ominous overhang of the new building's façade. In situ, the Judd sculpture looks just a little bit like an air conditioning unit.

As for paintings, photographs and other flat works, the Libeskind building provides a curious "in-between" exhibition -- not art, not architecture -- devoted to ways of installing paintings and photographs. They can be hung suspended in front of slanting walls on wires from the ceiling, they can be propped up on sheetrock platforms built out from slanting walls, or they can be suspended out from walls on elaborate brackets. Ingenious.

The initial installation is pretty much a mix-and-match affair, with works from different periods combined willy-nilly, or rather, by purely visual correspondences. A systemic, neo-minimalist sculpture of stacked wood sheets by **Jackie Ferrara** is paired with a Washington Color School painting by **Gene Davis**, for instance, the latter's slim vertical stripes echoing the former's horizontal plywood edges. The special exhibition in the museum's Western art gallery, which fills the "bridge gallery" that links the old and new buildings, combines photos of **Christo's Valley Curtain** with paintings by **Remington** and **Russell**, plus lots in between.

Most telling of all, perhaps, is the special exhibition, a selection of works from the impressive trove of contemporary art assembled by Vail collectors **Kent and Vicki Logan**, patrons of both Denver and the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**. Dubbed "Radar," the exhibition is exemplary when it comes to truth-in-labeling, for the Logans certainly do have good radar, at least in regard to the works on view, all of which are highly valued by the contemporary art scene and most likely worth more now than when they were first purchased. It's on display as part of an amorphous mass that is generally understood as "contemporary," with subdivisions corresponding to collecting category, in this case designations for new global markets, such as "Chinese" and "Japanese."

Stumbling out into the daylight, I came to a quick conclusion -- this is easily the most confusing space I've ever been in. At the end of a three-hour tour, I still had no idea of what I'd seen. A sign of my own impending senility, or a strange, if effective, way to prompt repeat visits? I do need to go back and take another look.

In the meantime, it should be noted that the Libeskind building -- officially named the **Frederic C. Hamilton Building**, after the museum board chairman, a generous local patron who hosted the opening festivities alongside museum director **Lewis Sharp**, an

avuncular man with considerable administrative skills -- sits on an amiable cultural "campus." The entrance to the new building is flanked by a moderately sized **Louise Bourgeois** "spider" sculpture and a giant whiskbroom and dustpan by **Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen**.

Across the street is a huge red sculpture by **Mark di Suvero** on the plaza of the **Denver Public Library**, a likeable postmodernist folly designed by **Michael Graves**. In addition to the DMA's old building, the campus includes some arty new condos designed by Libeskind and hiding a parking structure, and a site behind the new Libeskind building reserved for the **Clyfford Still Museum**, which is in the planning stage.

### **The Lab at Belmar**

Denver's other new art facility is **The Lab at Belmar**, an 11,500-square-foot two-story exhibition space that opened this fall in a new shopping center. That's right, it's just across the asphalt from **Foot Locker** and **Merle Norman Cosmetics**, part of a 104-acre development in Denver's Belmar suburb that also includes 1,300 residential units and 10 acres of parkland. This ambitious bit of urban planning is the work of Continuum Partners, whose managing partner is **Mark Falcone**, a Denver art collector.

The Lab opened with the U.S. debut of **Isaac Julien's** three-screen film projection *Fantôme Afrique*, Sept. 16-Dec. 30, 2006, a beautiful avant-garde travelogue with scenes of life in West Africa (sans any actual narrative, of course). Next up is a show by British conceptual artist **Liam Gillick**.

Before it opened, the Lab made a name for itself with an unusual series of "Tag Team Lectures" that randomly paired two presentations on unrelated topics from entirely different fields, like flower arranging and the philosophy of **Hannah Arendt**, or **T.S. Eliot** and fresh meat sausage, or video art and migratory birds. It's all done in the "spirit of reinvigorating inquiry," according to **Adam Lerner**, executive director and overall guiding light of the Lab. The plan is "to allow for openness and still allow for knowledge." For more details, see [www.belmarlab.org](http://www.belmarlab.org).

### **The Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver**

Walk up to Denver's **Museum of Contemporary Art** and the building talks to you. "Hello there, you're looking good today," it says, perhaps a bit too cheerfully, via a sound piece by Denver artist **Jim Green** (b. 1948). It's called *Affirmative Greetings*. Inside the museum is a telephone, a direct line to the artist himself, who may or may not be home if you pick up the line. (Green also has a piece over at the old DMA, commissioned in 2002, called *Singing Sinks*. It's in the bathroom.)

The cheery welcome is part of "Extended Remix," a show of Colorado artists organized by MCA director and curator **Cydney Payton** as a kind of farewell to the seven-year-old museum's current home, a modest split-level space in the ground floor of a residential high-rise. Among the other works in the show is a lifelike sculpture of a female nude, cast in polyvinyl, painted in oil and complete with black wig, made in 1990 by **John DeAndrea**, a longtime Colorado resident.

Other works in the show include a suite of exotic "Goldslider" sculptures by **Mary Ehrin** (b. 1959), made with coral and golden porcelain on bases of blue acrylic mirror, and a large abstract painting by **Clark Richert** (b. 1941), a veteran of the famous **Drop City** commune founded in 1965 outside Trinidad, Co. (known for the Fuller domes made from shapes cut from the tops of wrecked cars). Richert's work in the show, *A/C Triacon* (2003), is a systemic dot abstraction based on the "non-periodic tessellation" pattern that was

simultaneously discovered by Richert and the British mathematician **Robert Penrose** in 1970.

By now the MCA has moved into temporary quarters while waiting for construction of its new \$15 million, 27,000-square-foot facility, designed by British architect **David Adjaye**. Ground has been broken for the new building, which is sited on a tight, golden section-shaped lot and is to be clad with glass and creamy white polypropylene panels. The interior is designed to have three independent spaces with a slim shaft-like skylight. The building is scheduled to open in 10 months, on land donated by Falcone, who is clearly a double-barreled patron. (Falcone is building a group of condos next door, including one for himself and his wife that features several gallery spaces, including a space for early Renaissance art.)

### **Dikeou Collection, Invisible Museum**

No tour of Denver's contemporary art scene would be complete without mention of the great artist and Denver native **Devon Dikeou**, long known to art-world insiders for her own works -- old-fashioned lobby signboards with moveable white letters spelling out the announcements for all the group shows she was in -- as well as for *Zingmagazine*, the densely avant-garde publication of contemporary art projects that she oversees from offices in New York.

In Denver, Devon has teamed up with her brother **Pany Dikeou**, a real estate developer, to assemble the **Dikeou Collection**, a presentation of art by more than 20 artists whose works "challenge questions of space, tangible reality and the collaboration of ideas." Open to the public since 2003, the collection is installed in downtown Denver on the fifth floor of the Colorado Building, a renovated seven-story structure originally built in the 1860s and featuring considerable Art Deco-period glazed terracotta. Or, as the directions usually put it, upstairs from **Jamba Juice**.



Momoyo Torimitsu's *Somehow I Don't Feel Comfortable* (2000) at the Dikeou Collection

The art in the Dikeou Collection is pleasantly underground, consisting of artists as yet undiscovered by the lemming-like herds of contemporary collectors who run up the prices at **Christie's** and **Sotheby's**. Exemplary of the collection is **Momoyo Torimitsu's** pair of 16-foot-tall, inflatable pink bunnies, titled *Somehow I Don't Feel Comfortable* (2000) -- *Through the Looking Glass* hallucinations for the 21st century. "Daily life," the artist explains, "consists of a 'reality' in which one never encounters anything authentically real." Another signature work is **Wade Guyton's** *The Room Moved, the Way Blocked (Stage 1)* (1998), a parquet wood "floor" that has swelled up, so to speak, into a kind of neo-Minimalist folly -- a five-foot-tall rectangular volume, of the same proportions as the Colorado Building, that speaks not of gestalts but rather of the illusions of Minimalism.



Devon Dikeou with Lawrence Seward's sculpture in the Dikeou Collection

Among the new pieces in the collection is a suite of black-and-white photographs by **Janine Gordon** taken within a mosh pit; a giant-sized sculptural self-portrait by **Lawrence Seward**, an artist who lives in New York and Honolulu, complete with a tiny island landscape within the figure's slightly open mouth, and Dikeou's own *Once Upon a Time*, a room installed with tin ceiling on the floor, so that the antique patterns are gradually flattened out as visitors walk through the exhibition.



Misaki Kawai in "Unwrapping the Wing" in an installation sponsored by the Invisible Museum

Another Denver organization devoted to new art is the **Invisible Museum**, which specializes in "the exchange of ideas." One plan of the fairly new group -- it formerly published a periodical called *Eyelevel Magazine*, which was co-founded by artist **Marina Graves**, its first editor, and put out six numbers between 1999 and 2002 -- is a series of exhibitions organized in nomadic spaces. The plan is to bring curators and artists to Denver from elsewhere.

For the first exhibition, however, the Invisible Museum tapped Dikeou to organize a show in a pair of office spaces next door to the Dikeou Collection. The result is "Unwrapping the Wing," an exhibition by 14 artists who were invited to make art using the protective plastic sheeting that covered the titanium panels of the new Libeskind building at the DMA. One of the works, by **Masaki Kawai**, is a papier-mache tableau of a girl walking her dog in the rain, wearing waterproof gear made of the DMA sheeting.



One of Rainer Ganahl's "Use a Bicycle" parking meter covers, installed in Denver by the Invisible Museum

The Invisible Museum also sponsored a public artwork by **Rainer Ganahl** that was no doubt much appreciated by Denver drivers. Dubbed *Use a Bicycle*, the piece puts black cloth shrouds over several hundred downtown parking meters, covers that are emblazoned with the pro-environmental motto, "Use a bicycle." Of course, the shrouded meters also allow free parking, as if to suggest that social engineering doesn't always deliver the intended results.

### **Museo, Denver galleries**

Denver's local Chicano population (and others, of course) is served by the **Museo de las Américas**, a 5,000-square-foot museum on Santa Fe Drive in the city's Lincoln Park neighborhood. **Patty Ortiz**, who has been executive director of the space for about 18 months, said she wants to "slightly repurpose" the museum to give it a new emphasis on the art of all Latin America.

The exhibition program is inventive. Currently on view is "Heaven and Earth," a selection of works from the collection of local collectors **Jan and Frederick Mayer** that depict the "leaders" of heaven and earth side-by-side in Colonial-era artworks. Next up is "Mapping Nativity," Oct. 27-Dec. 31, 2006, which features a folk-art nativity from every country in South America. Further in the future is "Altar Girls," an exhibition focusing on female saints. Denver has a couple of gallery districts, and the Museo de las Américas is in the middle of the **Santa Fe Art District**, which boasts a monthly art walk and a website. One of the best commercial galleries on Santa Fe Drive is **Rule**, a gallery run by veteran Denver dealer **Robin Rule**. At present, the gallery boasts a show of prints from **ULAE**, ranging from a 2004 **Jasper Johns** intaglio for \$75,000 to a comic inkjet print by **Ed Ruscha** called *Bow-Tie Palm Springs* (2003) for \$3,500. Rule works with Clark Richert and Devon Dikeou,

among other local artists, as well as out-of-towners like **Carl Andre**, **Mary Obering** and **Sandy Skoglund**.

Other Santa Fe Drive galleries include **Spark** and **Core**, which are co-op galleries, and **Space Gallery**, a five-year-old establishment founded by Scottish artist **Michael Burnett** to show his own work and those of others. "I found out that if you only show your own work, the critics call it a 'vanity gallery' and don't review you -- so I went ahead and opened the gallery and now it's a business," he said. His New York School-style abstractions range in price from \$450 for a monoprint to \$3,800 for larger paintings.

**Translations Gallery**, which specializes in contemporary textile art, was just opened on Santa Fe Drive by **Judy Hagler**, another artist who recently decided to join the other team. The current exhibition, "Taking a Stand: Voices in Fiber," Sept. 1-Oct. 28, 2006, features quilts and fiber works by almost 25 artists on political themes, including a 47 x 33 in. textile of the U.S. flag done in beautiful sky blues and sea greens by **Angie Nordstrum**. Titled *Beautiful Mother*, it gives a fresh twist to a familiar theme. It's \$3,000. Coming up is a show of 30 artists from the **Studio Art Quilts Association**.

One of the funkier spaces on Santa Fe Drive is **Capsule**, which was hosting a 24-hour-long comic-drawing marathon in a workshop space and, in the gallery space, an exhibition of a videotape by **Rebecca Vaughan** called *The Love Committee*, chronicling a dinner party at which she had six different blind dates -- all at once. The Capsule crew mounted what they called the "Boom," a complete art show in a rented truck that they fitted out with lights and white walls and then parked outside the DMA during its 36-hour opening ceremony (for details, see [www.boomdenver.com](http://www.boomdenver.com)).

Capsule has been run by artist **Laurie Murphy** for the past three years, but she said she was planning to close the space in a month or two. "Three years of distraction from my work is plenty," she said. "Now it's back to being an artist."

Not everyone is on Santa Fe, of course. One of the city's best commercial galleries, **Robischon Gallery**, is located downtown, and is currently showing large-scale photographs and videos by the Swedish artist **Maria Friberg**. **Artyard Contemporary Sculpture** features finely made kinetic sculptures by **Ira Sherman**, including a funky exercycle that is connected to the microprocessor brain of a Furby toy. "Instead of you playing with the toy, the Furby plays with you," said Sherman. And, the city has its own art dealer's association, delightfully dubbed **DADA**, which is available at [www.denverart.org](http://www.denverart.org).

### **The CU Art Museum, Boulder**

Half an hour northwest of Denver is Boulder, the famously countercultural redoubt that is home of the **CU Art Museum** at the **University of Colorado at Boulder**. Headed by **Lisa Tamiris Becker**, the rather humble if spacious museum facility is sited within a campus building housing studios and classrooms for the undergraduate and MFA programs, which number some 1,100 students. All the same, the shows are ambitious, and have included "Techno Sublime" (2005), an art-and-technology survey of works by 17 artists, including **Jeremy Blake**, **Mary Lucier** and **John F. Simon Jr.**, and "Because the Earth is 1/3 Dirt (2004)," a group show designed "to investigate the material, visceral and metaphoric potency" of ceramics.

Just closing at the CU Art Museum is "Waves on the Turquoise Lake: Contemporary Expressions of Tibetan Art," the first major show of contemporary artists working both inside and outside Tibet. The work on view by almost 20 artists is impressive, embodying in artistic terms questions of Tibetan identity and modernization. The exhibition is organized



with the **Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art** in Boulder; for more info, see [www.mechak.org](http://www.mechak.org).

What's more, the CU Art Museum is about to get a new, \$56 million facility designed by **Michael McKinnell**, architect of the **Blanton Museum** in Austin. Demolition for the new building begins in August, with construction slated to take two years.

### **Art at the airport**

One of our hosts during our visit to Denver was the artist and former *Eyelevel Magazine* editor Marina Graves, who was kind enough to drive us out to the Red Rocks amphitheater and serve as tour guide for the city's commercial galleries. So it was with some delight that we spotted one of her works installed in the concourse at the Denver airport, a restrained "process and materials" piece, titled *MDF Series #1* (2004) and consisting of six or seven painted "lines," hanging from a pair of rods like so many trout from a fisherman's line. She did say something about the South Platte being little more than a trout stream.

**WALTER ROBINSON** is editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at [wrobinson@artnet.com](mailto:wrobinson@artnet.com)