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## Naked City

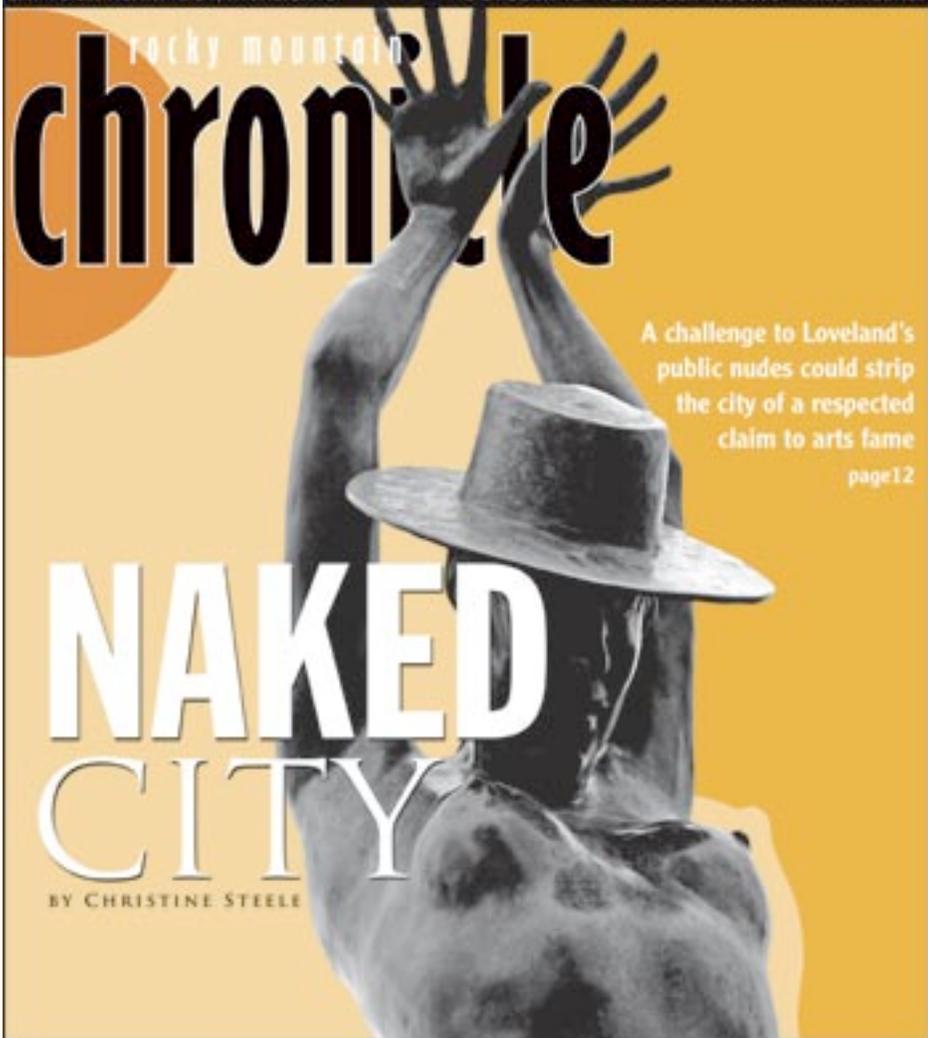
By CHRISTINE STEELE

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***A challenge to Loveland's public nudes could strip the city of a respected claim to arts fame***

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Arguments over nudity in sculpture and art flourish throughout history. Nudes abound, from ancient Greece to the present, from the Vatican to the streets of Minneapolis, Phoenix and – downtown Loveland. Loveland's public art collection includes a diverse mix of pieces, 285 to be exact. Of those, eight – including the latest addition to the outdoor sculpture set, called "Triangle" – depict nudity.

"Triangle" has been dubbed "R-rated," "X-rated" and "pagan." Despite the attacks, most everyone seems to agree that the controversy at least has people talking about public art.

"There is nothing worse than to be an artist or a writer and have no public response," says Erika Doss, an author and professor of art history at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

The controversy over Loveland's "Triangle" sculpture has blipped the radars of public art circles across the nation. And although the piece seems safely in place for now, Loveland's

reputation as one of America's top art towns isn't as secure.

## Ring of fire

"Triangle," created by Norwegian artist Kirsten Kokkin, came about as a prize for one of that country's largest construction companies, commemorating the company's accomplishments in health, environment and safety in the workplace.

Two nude figures, a man and a woman, hold aloft another nude female figure, forming a triangle shape. They are arranged so that each depends upon the other to hold its position. The triangle creates a "ring of humanity and eternity linked together," Kokkin says in her artist statement to the Loveland Visual Arts Commission. It is meant to symbolize humanity and our interdependence.

But that's not what some residents see.

Even before the sculpture was placed in a traffic circle at the intersection of East First Street and Sculptor Drive – surrounded by green fields and sprouting subdivisions – the controversy began.

At a July 13 meeting of the visual arts commission, nearly two dozen residents turned out to speak on the subject of nudity in public art and the placement of the sculpture. Some are members of the Abiding Love Lutheran Church, which is constructing a new building down the road from the roundabout. The commission took no action

to postpone or relocate the sculpture, and it was installed as planned in August.

Still, the opponents spread their gospel, and the story made its way across the nation, featured in newspapers from the New York Times to the Salt Lake Tribune, even the Turkish Daily News. From as close as Fort Collins to as far away as Turkey, local public arts officials, national art experts and censorship monitors now have their eyes trained on the Sweetheart City.

Svetlana Mintcheva, director of the arts program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, first heard about the controversy this summer, when a message about the issue appeared in her email inbox.

“Nudes are on the radar with predictable regularity,” she says.

Nudity is no stranger to art, and art is no stranger to controversy. Often the presence of nude pieces will generate protests and vocal outcries, Mintcheva says, but when she later discovered that the Loveland City Council was considering a proposal to overrule the visual arts commission, she found cause for concern.

“The First Amendment bars government officials from pandering to the most vocal groups,” she says. “Government officials cannot impose one point of view or one person’s case on everybody.”

The council later voted down two proposed ordinances addressing the issue. The first would have allowed citizens the right to challenge the placement of any piece of public art they found offensive. The second would have given the city manager veto authority to ban structures in roundabouts if he deemed them a safety hazard.

While both issues failed at the Sept. 5 city council meeting, the subject is far from dead.

## The latest crusade

Larry Dassow, a Loveland resident who served on the city council from 1996 to 2000, says he’s not ready to let the issue rest. Dassow calls himself “an advocate for the citizens of Loveland” who, he feels, have a difficult time being heard by the elected body.

Although he’s not sure how he became the leader in this particular crusade, Dassow says he plans to continue the fight against “Triangle” and lobby for its removal and relocation to a less public, public location – a place where children are not forced to see it. Because, he says, they might have questions at inopportune times.

“Loveland is a family-oriented community,” Dassow says. “People want to raise their children and teach them about the birds and the bees in their own time and in their own way. They don’t want to have something thrust in front of them where they may have to get into the subject before they are necessarily ready.”



Larry Dassow

Movies, books, television and the Internet can all be controlled by parents, Dassow maintains. Public art cannot. That's why Dassow plans to attend city council and arts commission meetings this month to follow the action the two bodies may take. If they do nothing, Dassow says, he will press on.

The visual arts commission, which has met seven or eight times over the past three months regarding the sculpture, has never formally discussed moving the piece, says member Roger Clark. It has, however, considered changing its acquisition process to include publishing a photo of the image and its proposed location in local newspapers, as a way of making that information more accessible to the public and encouraging public input.

But that doesn't necessarily mean the public will get to decide on the appropriateness and placement of every piece of public art, he says.

"Sometimes people believe that because the decision doesn't go their way, they haven't been listened to," says Clark. "That isn't necessarily true. It just means the decision didn't go their way. Virtually any single piece of art would be remarkable if it pleased everyone in the community."

While "Triangle" is the most recent target in Loveland's debate over the nude's place in public, emotions have flared over the placement of at least two other nude, or at least partially nude, sculptures in the city.

Denny Haskew's "Moulding Our Future," which shows a bare-breasted mother holding her son, was installed in Thompson Park on Fourth Street in downtown Loveland in 1988. The sculpture was called "incestuous" by one clergyman, Haskew says.

Jack Kreutzer's "Spanish Daggers" also raised eyebrows in 2001, when it was placed in Benson Park Sculpture Garden. Protestors claimed the piece, which depicts a nude female dancer wearing a bolero-style hat with her

hands poised over her head, was inappropriate for placement across from Loveland High School. The sculpture has occasionally been clothed – once adorned with a hula skirt and once in a graduation gown – but never harmed, Kreutzer says.

## A bold move

While relocating a piece of public art may not shake Loveland’s reputation in the art world, the reason behind a possible relocation could. Mintcheva, from the National Coalition Against Censorship, says moving a piece of public art once it has been placed in accordance with a commission’s guidelines is controversial at best.

“It’s basically unconstitutional, not to mention bad public policy,” she says.

If the commission starts reversing its decisions every time a protest occurs, she adds, it will be in a weaker position the next time someone decides they don’t like a particular piece of public art.

“It’s like saying, ‘Let’s have public art out of the public view,’” she says. “Next time, maybe it’s a not a nude. Maybe it’s a historical figure. You have to stand by principle. Letting one person veto their decision would be a very dangerous and self-destructive decision. People are watching around the country, and it could affect the image of Loveland as a city that values art.”

Elliot Mincberg, vice president, general counsel and legal director of the democracy advocacy organization People for the American Way Foundation, says the issue hints at censorship.

“There is the question, ‘Is something being done out of the ordinary?’” he says. Decisions should be made in principle, he says, not in reaction to a particular piece of art that a person doesn’t like. Having neutral, consistent criteria and a process with which the community is comfortable and can provide feedback will help prevent it from violating any legal principles. So what if it leads to bland, homogenous art?

But even that won’t free a community of controversy completely, he says.

“In an abstract manner, some people may agree with that process but may disagree when they see a particular piece of art,” he says.

However, it’s most dangerous when communities deal with the issue on an ad hoc basis, he says.

“To move something to a significantly less prominent place because people object to the form, content or viewpoint of the art could be a form of censorship.”

Moving a piece of public art is not unheard of. John Kinkade, executive director of the National Sculptors’ Guild, which is housed in Loveland’s Columbine Gallery, helps artists, cities and public art groups across the country place public art.



John Kinkaid

Kinkade is occasionally called upon to help a city relocate a piece after it is placed, he says. If a public art commission later determines that a piece doesn't fit the placement site, isn't being shown in the best light, or if vandalism is an issue, then relocating a sculpture makes sense. But it is costly, and commissioners should question their motives behind a potential move.

"Is it because they can do a better job of placing it, or is it because of censorship?" he asks.

Kinkade says he has never been asked to relocate a piece because of nudity. While he doesn't believe the outcome of the controversy will affect Loveland's standing in the art world, he says it should give public art committees across the country a chance to reflect on how they do things.

## Follow the Sweetheart

Keller, Tex., says it wants to be the "Loveland of the South."

The city of 36,000, situated less than 20 miles north of Fort Worth and 30 miles northwest of Dallas, shares some commonalities with the Sweetheart City. It has an extensive parks and trails system. It launched a public arts program in 2001 and, in four years, has added eight pieces to its collection. In October 2004, Keller premiered its very own sculpture show, modeled after Loveland's, on the grounds of Keller City Hall.

But one thing the city does not want to share with Loveland is its controversy.

"We would be much more conservative in our choices of our artwork than Loveland has been in the past," says Kevin Lahner, Keller's assistant city manager and the city's liaison to the public arts commission.

A couple thousand miles away, officials in Leesburg, Va., are in the beginning stages of putting together their town's public arts program, which was launched in May. This town of 37,000 is in the fastest growing county in the country, according to the U.S. Census. Leesburg is the Loudoun County seat and rich in history dating back to pre-Revolutionary War days. The newly formed public arts commission is still gathering information to determine its guidelines.

"We have to watch as many other jurisdictions as possible when it comes to public art," says Tami Watkins, a management specialist with the city and liaison to the commission. The commission's goal is to make the area fertile ground for artists while upholding the historical character of the downtown.

"There is a conservative base here," says Judy Craun, chairwoman on the Commission on Public Arts. "Jerry Falwell and Pat Roberston are both from Virginia."

What will pass public muster in Leesburg remains to be seen, but officials have a close eye on Loveland.

"Obviously, how Loveland responds is going to shape how we are going to respond," says Watkins.

Next door, in Fort Collins, public-arts officials are keeping a low profile when it comes to the Loveland controversy. But Cultural Services Director Jill Stilwell, who oversees the city's 10-year-old Art in Public Places program, says she is watching closely, interested to see how the flap plays out, and what its effect on public art will be.

Fort Collins, which has amassed 50 pieces in its collection with another 20 in progress, does not have any realistic nudes, Stilwell says.

## Pulling rank

"Are we so entitled that we actually remove things from the public sphere and public space that offends us?" asks CU art historian Erika Doss.

John Villani, director of the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, hopes not.

“Loveland has always impressed me as a place where the Hatfields and the McCoys slug it out in the art world,” he says. “It seems as if passions boil just beneath the surface of what appears to be a quiet and laid-back arts scene.”



Triangle

Loveland was, in fact, the inspiration for Villani’s book *The 100 Best Art Towns in America*. The town recently climbed to No. 2 in the book’s latest edition. Whether it will stay there could depend on the outcome of the “Triangle” controversy.

“These bumps in the road are mere potholes along the route to educating an entire community and an entire group of visitors,” he says. “It seems to me that Loveland would diminish its stature as a national center for three-dimensional art were it to engage in some sort of government initiated or supported effort to censor the content of art.

“If the city or the commission lacks the fortitude to stand behind its decision, I think it is going to be a very sad chapter in the history of Loveland. If Loveland isn’t careful, it might find itself the butt of a whole series of jokes on censorship and the overzealous guarding of the public libido.”

But Dassow, the unofficial citizens' advocate, will not be swayed.

"I want to prove that the average citizen can accomplish something," Dassow says of his quest to get the sculpture moved. "That's my goal." RMC

The Loveland Visual Arts Commission will meet 5 pm. on Thursday, Oct. 19 in the basement of the Loveland Museum and Gallery, 500 N. Lincoln Ave.

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