

Westword

Craig Walsh's *Monuments* Will Light Up Trees in Breckenridge for BIFA

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Craig Walsh's living projections will loom over downtown Breckenridge.
Chris Phutully, courtesy Breckenridge Creative Arts

The Breckenridge International Festival of the Arts returns to the Rockies this weekend on a wave of positive expansion — but without any sign of growing pains. It's going to be big and loud and in your face, with eye-popping interactive attractions from near (Denver's Itchy-O marching band kicks off the festival on the evening of Friday, August 11) and far (giant ants from Australia's Polyglot Theatre and the Dutch Close-Act Theatre's illuminated prehistoric birds will roam the streets of Breck on select dates), with smaller-scale, side-tripping performances and art installations to be found mid-hike along mountain trails.

And then there will be Craig Walsh — whose eerie and inspiring projections of human faces on trees are already an Internet sensation. Known for these large-scale, site-specific installations that connect with communities by casting the faces of local heroes on familiar forms from the landscape, both natural and man-made, Walsh will bring *Monuments* — a tribute to three unsung yet intrinsic Breckenridge personalities — to BIFA, casting their likenesses like living topiaries in strategic spots around downtown Breckenridge. The spectacle will light up nightly in changing locations over the length of the fest, which runs through August 20.

For Walsh, who chooses to disengage himself from the business of art to focus on creating egalitarian experiences, the medium is the message: “I’m seeking out new paths for contemporary art,” Walsh says. “So my work is more experiential, as opposed to being object-based. My philosophy is to stay outside the commodity of art and create works that are purely about the experience, and not about the purchasing of art.”



Chris Phutully, courtesy Breckenridge Creative Arts

That's an equalizing sort of public relations on his part, aimed at reaching a larger audience. "I find working in public spaces an opportunity to have immediacy with an audience outside those traditions," Walsh adds. "And above that, I look to subvert the expectations we have of art and the conditioning that takes place around that experience. My work subverts the idea of the artist as genius." All demographics are welcome.

Walsh collaborates with his surroundings wherever he goes. "When I go to a specific community, it's a real exchange," he explains. "What's exciting to me is that it leads me to work in ways I might not have expected through that exchange." While Walsh often likes to spend time becoming familiar with the milieu his work will reflect in a given location, his visit to Breckenridge will be short and sweet, so BIFA director Robb Woulfe did some groundwork for him by selecting the subjects for his Breckenridge installation, each representing a different generation: Historian and early Colorado ski pioneer Maureen Nicholls, biking enthusiast Jeff Wescott, and twelve-year-old dancer Zoe Gallup, whose faces will weave a story of Breckenridge's past, present and future.

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"This project is a great way to delve into a community," Walsh observes. "It becomes collaborative in its approach, and the projections may be everyday people who make strong contributions but don't always get accolades." And it's no accident that these tributes are fleeting, here today and gone tomorrow: "It's temporary, and you can only see it at night," he notes. "There's none of the baggage usually contained in creating a monument."



Chris Phutully, courtesy Breckenridge Creative Arts

For that reason, Walsh is confident that his Breckenridge audience will be wowed without being bowled over by another pompous representation of art. "I'm looking for a way to broaden history around a site by incorporating contributions to the community," he says. "This feeds back into the concept of how we look at public places by looking at sculptures in specific monuments. You start questioning the selection and the history behind the public art, which is dictated by political or economic terms.

"It's something they've never seen before," he says. "There's a synergy between the tree and and the projection that solidifies my philosophy about the pure engagement of the audience beyond the history of art and the idea of selling something. I suspect that will happen here."

See for yourself at BIFA, August 11 through 20, in and around Breckenridge. Most events and attractions are free. Craig Walsh's *Monuments* can be seen at BIFA nightly from 8:30 to 11 p.m. at

Blue River Plaza, Riverwalk Center Lawn and surrounding areas. Walsh will also give an artist talk at 7 p.m. Sunday, August 13, at the Old Masonic Hall, 136 South Main Street, Breckenridge. A guided walk-through of the installation with the artist follows after the talk. For more information, visit BIFA online.

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