**DIA Conspiracies Take Off**

Conspiracy theorists think something's fishy at Denver International Airport.

**By** [**Jared Jacang Maher**](http://www.westword.com/feedback/EmailAnEmployee/?to=222674)

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"Have you ever been through the Denver airport? It's strange. It's one of the busiest, but I'm telling you, it's weird. There's a firestorm of people talking about this thing."

* Jim J. Narcy

Skeptics read unnatural things into Leo Tanguma's "In Peace and Harmony With Nature."

* Jim J. Narcy

Artist Leo Tanguma doesn't understand how conspiracy theorists find hidden messages in his mural on environmentalism.

* Jim J. Narcy

The capstone in the Great Hall at DIA contains a time capsule Â— and lots of symbolism.

**Details:**

To see videos produced by DIA conspiracy theorists, click [**here**](http://blogs.westword.com/latestword/2007/08/the_truth_is_out_there_in_east.php).

**Subject(s):**

[**Denver International Airport**](http://www.westword.com/search/?keywords=Denver%20International%20Airport), [**conspiracy theories**](http://www.westword.com/search/?keywords=conspiracy%20theories), [**Leo Tanguma**](http://www.westword.com/search/?keywords=Leo%20Tanguma), [**Freemasons**](http://www.westword.com/search/?keywords=Freemasons)

Especially on June 11, when George Noory devotes all four hours of *Coast to Coast*, his nationally syndicated talk-radio program dedicated to the "paranormal, extraterrestrial and other topics typically overlooked by more mainstream media outlets," to a discussion of Denver International Airport. Broadcast on more than 500 affiliate stations, including KHOW, the popular overnight show is the *60 Minutes* of conspiracy theories, often with self-educated experts expounding on such subjects as the occult, psychic visions, crop circles, Skull and Bones and apocalyptic predictions. And almost all of these conspiracies intersect at DIA.

For the show this night, a special line is set up for listeners in Colorado. Susan from Denver finds it strange that so many contractors were dismissed during the airport's construction, and speculates that this was a tactic to prevent workers from understanding the true scope of the project, allowing planners to build a facility six stories underground "without anyone questioning it." Chris from Indianapolis has heard that the tunnels below DIA were constructed as a kind of Noah's Ark so that five million people could escape the coming earth change; shaken and earnest, he asks how someone might go about getting on the list.

"Well, you first need a lot of money," replies guest expert Jay Weidner. "And then you need a lot of influence."

Weidner, a filmmaker and freelance journalist, is on Noory's show to promote *2012: The Odyssey*, a new documentary that connects Weidner's previous work uncovering the secrets of ancient alchemy with a growing interest in the year 2012 as a historical "end date" for the world as we know it, a kind of new-age Armageddon. Some conspiracy buffs predict this end/beginning nexus will generate a telepathic wave of harmony throughout humanity; others see signs that 2012 will be fraught with fire and warfare. The date comes from the ancient Mayan calendar, which marks a day in December five years from now as the conclusion of the 5th Sun. Weidner has found evidence in monuments built by alchemists and Freemasons that they were not only aware of this Mayan prophecy but have been secretly preparing for 2012 for generations. His film examines a 150-year-old cross in France, a Stonehenge-like structure in Georgia and Masonic connections in Washington, D.C. It concludes at DIA, where Weidner shows the capstone located in the terminal's Great Hall — a name that's no accident, since Masonic temples call their main meeting rooms by the same name. Engraved in the marble facade is a coffee-cup-sized icon of a square and compass, symbols of the Masonic order, with the words "New World Airport Commission." Weidner associates this with the New World Order, an autonomous behind-the-scenes government that manipulates global events and communications.

"And my feeling is that the Denver airport is some kind of cathedral to these guys, a cathedral to the world that they're making," Weidner tells the listening audience.

The airport holds more clues. "These murals, which are shown in the film, are a story," Weidner continues.

"Like a message?" Noory asks. "Are they trying to tell us something? Or are they trying to [rub] it in our face?"

Weidner explains that some high-level factions in Masonic society may be using the murals to alert the general population to the earth-shattering political and environmental changes in store for 2012. Either that, or those factions are amazingly arrogant. Because for Weidner and other conspiracy experts, the symbolism is as explicit as a manifesto.

One mural features three women in coffins surrounded by endangered animals, including a Quetzal bird, named after the Mayan god Quetzalcoatl, in a glass cage — an "extinction message," Weidner says. The next panel shows children of the world gathered around a "gigantic psychedelic plant of some kind. And they're all extolling that all the races are going to live together in a world of peace."

"It's like the one-world government bylaws," says Noory.

But the peace doesn't last. Another mural depicts a Gestapo-like figure "knifing the dove of peace with his bayonet," surrounded by crushed cities and starving citizens. Considered in the context of other curiosities captured in his documentary, Weidner concludes that these DIA murals reveal that 2012 will be a time of intense military oppression.

"To put it bluntly," he says, putting it bluntly, "It's going to be a real nail-biter."

Back in 1994, Leo Tanguma was working in his studio in the Lakeside Mall when a van full of people pulled up.

"And they weren't hostile," he recalls. "They asked a lot of questions." They wanted to know about all the different symbols in the murals that he'd been commissioned to make for the still-unopened DIA. "And I explained it like I explain it to everybody," the artist says. The first part of the environmental mural is about the ways that humans destroy nature and themselves through destruction and genocide. The second part is about humanity coming together to rehabilitate nature and revive their own compassion.

Tanguma likes to keep things simple. He may be left-wing, but he says he's not a liberal intellectual. He's a Christian who thinks of his murals as painted sermons, depicting the virtues of the poor and hardworking, and warning against the evils of greed and violence. Like many painters trained in the Mexican style of mural art, Tanguma gears his work to the street and all of its elements, everyone from businessmen and college professors to people like his parents, who were all but illiterate. The last thing Tanguma wants is for viewers to mistake his meaning.

The visitors stayed for more than an hour, looking around his studio, talking. One of the women asked Tanguma if the airport had told him what to paint. He remembers that, because he remembers how she said it. He told her no, that he was given no instructions on content. And then the visitors began to talk about how the United Nations was another conspiracy to take over the United States.

"How do you figure that?" he asked.

Before they left, they went to the back of their van and pulled out a thick, photocopied book detailing the U.N. conspiracy. They gave Tanguma the book. He knew where it was until about ten years ago, when he moved his studio from the strip mall to a modest house in Arvada where he lives with his wife.

Now that his art has become so central to a growing group of conspiracies, he wishes he could find it.

Even before the U.N. came into being, the United States had a rich history of conspiracy movements. It stretches back to seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts, where Puritans began executing witches in hopes of saving their crops and livestock from God's wrath. In a 1964 article for *Harper's* magazine, Richard Hofstadter labeled groups prone to such "exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" as having "paranoid style," and he compared the anti-Masonic movements of the previous century with the McCarthyism trials of the 1950s. Hofstadter wrote this piece before the Jimmy Hoffa disappearance and the Apollo moon-landing hoax became mainstays of conspiracy subculture, but the assassination of John F. Kennedy was already providing plenty of fodder.

In the '90s, Waco and the Oklahoma City bombing massacre both prompted bumps in theorizing, but the events of September 11, 2001, really kicked government coverup conspiracies into high gear. The 9-11 Truth Movement points to purported incongruities in the official explanation of the attacks as proof that the events were actually conducted by elements within the U.S. government. And other large-scale disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, have also fallen under the microscope of conspiracy theorists.

It's not difficult to see why national disasters and global catastrophes would inspire suspicion, but a set of paintings at an airport in middle America? How the Tanguma murals became the focus of such a diverse spectrum of conspiracists is a mystery in itself. Still, whispers of shadowy plots, nefarious schemes and activities ranging from paranormal to extraterrestrial have been tied to DIA since even before it opened in 1995, and the growth of the Internet and the increased interest in conspiracies since 9/11 have combined to pull even the most cryptic oddities from the back of the web to the forefront of the conspiracy networks.

Today, dozens of websites are devoted to the "Denver Airport Conspiracy," and theorists have even nicknamed the place "Area 52." Wikipedia presents DIA as a primary example of New World Order symbolism, above the entry about the eyeball/pyramid insignia on the one-dollar bill. And over the past two years, DIA has been the subject of books, articles, documentaries, radio interviews and countless YouTube and forum board postings, all attempting to unlock its mysteries. While the most extreme claim maintains that a massive underground facility exists below the airport where an alien race of reptilian humanoids feeds on missing children while awaiting the date of government-sponsored rapture, all of the assorted theories share a common thread: The key to decoding the truth about DIA and the sinister forces that control our reality is contained within the two Tanguma murals, "In Peace and Harmony With Nature" and "The Children of the World Dream of Peace."

The murals each stretch about 28 feet along wide hallways near the baggage claims on the east and west sides of the rectangular Great Hall. Each is split into two parts by access-area doorways. Painted in the Mexican "muralista" style typified by such artists as Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco, with simplified figures cast in bright, solid colors, the characters in the murals — mostly children of various ethnicities — are portrayed with almost cartoonish qualities and laden with symbolism, such as a boy weeping as he holds a soon-to-be-extinct chipmunk in front of a burning forest. According to the DIA website, the murals function metaphorically as diptychs (hinged tablets of theological artwork and writing often placed on Catholic altars) designed with two simple themes: environmental destruction vs. environmental healing and war vs. peace.

But conspiracy theorists from as far away as Australia, Romania and Japan offer their own analyses of the paintings on message boards and blogs. Some think the murals depicting peace and environmental harmony are meant to be read first, which makes the second parts of the visual narratives — genocide and the devastation of the natural world — the conclusion; the murals can then be read as prophetic warnings from all-knowing groups or celestial beings that humans must clean up their act. Others view the murals not as an oracle, but as a propaganda tool of power-hungry interests who hope to distract people with false concerns over global warming, lulling citizens into complacency with dreams of peace. Once all the swords have been beaten into plowshares — as Tanguma's "Dream of Peace" mural illustrates — then the evil forces, represented by the military figure in the adjacent panel, will enact their brutal overthrow of the world.

When Syracuse University professor Michael Barkun was researching his 2006 book *A Culture of Conspiracy*, he found DIA in the stream of conspiracy theory that considers the Freemasons, a fraternal organization that grew out of the stone-mason guilds of medieval Europe, as a group secretly in control of world politics. "We think of anti-Masonic material as essentially a nineteenth-century genre," Barkun says. "But there is an enormous amount of anti-Masonic stuff being recycled." Barkun wasn't really surprised by DIA's Freemason-to-Illuminati-to-New World Order conspiracy connection, but he was intrigued by how DIA conspiracies intersected not only with UFO and 2012 "millennialist" contingents, but also the conspiracy branches concerned with underground military bases and reptilian aliens. Left-wing radicals, fundamentalist Christians, UFO hunters, white nationalists, hippie mystics, Vietnam veterans and anti-U.N. Libertarians are all able to pick out evidence within the main body of DIA infatuation to support their competing perspectives.

And not all these theorists are Unabomber-like crackpots uploading their hallucinations from basement lairs. Former BBC media personality David Icke, for example, has written twenty books in his quest to prove that the world is controlled by an elite group of reptilian aliens known as the Babylonian Brotherhood, whose ranks include George W. Bush, Queen Elizabeth II, the Jews and Kris Kristofferson. In various writings, lectures and interviews, he has long argued that DIA is one of many home bases for the otherworldly creatures, a fact revealed in the lizard/alien-faced military figure shown in Tanguma's murals.

"Denver is scheduled to be the Western headquarters of the US New World Order during martial law take over," Icke wrote in his 1999 book, *The Biggest Secret*. "Other contacts who have been underground at the Denver Airport claim that there are large numbers of human slaves, many of them children, working there under the control of the reptilians."

On the other end of the conspiracy spectrum is anti-vaccination activist Dr. Len Horowitz, who believes that global viruses such as AIDS, Ebola, West Nile, tuberculosis and SARS are actually population-control plots engineered by the government. The former dentist from Florida does not speak about 2012 or reptiles — in fact, he sees Icke's Jewish alien lizards as a Masonic plot to divert observers from the true earthly enemies: remnants of the Third Reich. He even used the mural's sword-wielding military figure as the front cover of his 2001 book, *Death in the Air*.

"The Nazi alien symbolizes the Nazi-fascist links between contemporary population controllers and the military-medical-petrochemical-pharmaceutical cartel largely accountable for Hitler's rise to power," Horowitz explained in a 2003 interview with BookWire. A YouTube video dated last fall shows him standing before a podium as he deconstructs photos of the murals projected onto a large screen. He points to Tanguma's work as an "expression of the devil-doers' confidence" in their plan to generate mass genocide of undesirable populations through air-based chemical warfare. The wispy rainbow that extends between the two adjacent murals is a stand-in for lethal toxins sprayed into the atmosphere, he tells the audience, "and as a result, you have dying people, mostly ethnic populations."

Evangelical Christians have also found messages in the murals. In a 2003 newsletter, biblical research group Cephas Ministry included photos of the murals, along with the caution that they referred to bio-warfare, 9/11 and paganism. "They are frightening to Christians as well as American citizenry since one speaks of death to Christianity as we know it," the newsletter noted. Another grainy YouTube video shows a speaker alleging that the murals indicate that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has built a concentration camp below the airport to systematically murder the "people that Lucifer hates."

Many of these Internet speculators believe that DIA is linked via underground tunnels to nearby conspiratorial hotbeds such as NORAD and the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. But some also believe that the conspiracy stretches from the airport to controversial Colorado tragedies such as Columbine. (A few even posit that those students may have been consumed by aliens.) One 1998 article posted on [www.konformist.com](http://www.konformist.com/) managed to connect the DIA conspiracy to JonBenét and the Denver Broncos. Reached by phone at his home in Las Vegas, the site's creator, Robert Sterling, admits that the best conspiracy theories often necessitate dizzying leaps of logic, demonstrated by a kind of free-association exercise he calls "the conspiracy game."

Even though Sterling realizes that these connections are more than a little tenuous, he is willing to err on the side of speculation, given the sheer weirdness of the murals and evidence of DIA's capstone. "The idea that [DIA] is a temple or monument to the New World Order, it almost in some bizarre way makes sense," he says.

In his sociological observations of conspiracy culture, Barkun has noticed a rise in the number of individuals suspicious of Freemasonry, a trend he thinks may be the cause (or effect) of conspiracy-thriller novelist Dan Brown's popularity. As with *The Da Vinci Code*, there's a belief that the future can be accessed if you can only decipher the code. "It's often something that's in plain sight as it is [at DIA]. But their claim is that there's a hidden meaning," Barkun says. "Most often it is thought to exist in text; people have long done this with the Bible. But it can often be visual, as in the case of DIA."

Although conspiracy theories vary widely, they all share three commonalities. "One is the belief that nothing happens by accident," Barkun points out. "Another is that everything is connected. And a third is that nothing is as it seems."

Jay Weidner would agree with that. From his office in Seattle, the former National Public Radio talk-show host says that world events like the war in Iraq, the oil crisis and the erosion of global economies signal that a fundamental alteration in human history is on the horizon.

"There's some profound shift that's about to happen," he says. "And for those of us who are prescient and aware and conscious, we can feel there's something going on here." And they can see it in the Tanguma murals.

Although the DIA conspiracies have branched off into wild ideological directions, they're all rooted in a 1996 radio interview with Alex Christopher, an interview whose transcription has been republished on hundreds of websites. Many theorists surmise that the man quoted in this transcription is dead.

Actually, Christopher is a 65-year-old grandmother living in Alabama.

Christopher first became interested in the New World Order in the mid-'80s, and she started writing a book on the subject. In the mid-'90s, she came to Denver for the Global Sciences Congress conference, where she gave a lecture on her theories about aliens and the globalist agenda. People there were talking about how odd the long-delayed airport was, "and I started looking at all the murals and floors and weirdness," she remembers. "I got really intrigued."

At the conference, she met people who she claims took her into DIA's underground tunnels. The first time, she went with a man who worked there. "It was really spooky," she remembers. Then she returned with fellow conspiracy theorist Phil Schneider, and they went down four levels.

That was enough to convince Christopher that something funny was going on at DIA. "As far as I know, I'm the one who started all that," she acknowledges.

She went with a few family members to visit Tanguma at his studio, where he was working on the second mural. "And I asked him, 'Where on earth are you coming up with this material from?' And he said, 'Well, it's just a collection, a collage.' And he had a lot of books in his studio that had strange pictures," she remembers.

"I understand that he didn't have free rein on those things," Christopher continues. "He was given an outline of what was supposed to be in the murals. And I tried to talk to him about what I thought, and he wasn't buying it at all. Evidently he was bought and paid for, because there was no talking to him. And his mind was totally shut down to what he was depicting."

Christopher, on the other hand, was open to hearing anything. A man called her and said he had found an elevator at DIA that led to a corridor that led all the way down into a military base that also contained alien-operated concentration camps. She detailed this theory in her next book, *Pandora's Box II*, and in 1996 was a guest on an esoteric California radio show hosted by Dave Alan. There she outlined her theory that the British secretly control the United States, as shown in the "secret society" symbolism of the Tanguma murals.

But then Phil Schneider turned up dead — officials determined it was a suicide, but conspiracy theorists recognized it as an assassination, and he has since become a martyr for underground-base believers. Christopher became fearful for her life and her children's safety. "And so for them, I shut up and disappeared and decided to see if somebody would take the material and let it take on a life of its own so that their focus would be somewhere else," she says.

And Christopher has tried to stay hidden, which has led to even more conspiracies. "Everybody thinks I'm dead or they think I'm a man," she says. "My daughter and I have a real good chuckle over it." But she's grown tired of how "notorious" her KSCO interview has become, as others pick apart and misquote her work to serve their own conspiracy-theory agendas.

She's now working on an updated version of her books, which she says may even include a DVD containing photographic proof of DIA's underground labyrinth.

While the Tanguma murals appear in all DIA conspiracies, the pieces themselves are not the root of the airport obsession. Every good conspiracy theory needs a foundation of fact or a pre-existing controversy as its framework. And in this case, the theories all build off the origins of DIA, which seem bizarre enough on their own: an airport built absurdly far off into the prairie, on a massive piece of land, billions of dollars over budget, years late, with a high-tech baggage system that never worked. An airport that critics say was never needed in the first place.

Since it first opened in 1929 as Denver Municipal Airport in the northeast corner of the city, Stapleton Airport had steadily grown in both size and capacity. But commercial and residential development around the airport made new construction so cramped that jets were forced to taxi through underpasses built below I-70 to access certain runways. Talk of building a new airport at a different location started as early as the 1960s and continued through the mayoral administration of Bill McNichols, who commissioned a study of new sites. When Federico Peña took over as mayor in 1983, he thought that expanding Stapleton onto the adjacent Rocky Mountain Arsenal might be a better alternative. But the costs of cleaning up the contaminated site and opposition from Adams County sunk that idea. Meanwhile, Park Hill residents were growing increasingly angry over airport noise and pollution and even filed a lawsuit in hopes of prompting a relocation.

Peña knew that building a new airport would not be easy. But with the support of then-governor Roy Romer and other high-profile boosters from the civic and business world, Peña was able to work out a complicated deal that would allow the annexation of a large swath of farmland northeast of Denver. Despite a strong opposition campaign, the arrangement was approved by both Adams County and Denver voters in the late '80s.

From the beginning, plans for DIA were ambitious. Peña, who now works in the local office of an international investment company, says he wanted the airport to make a "bold statement across the world" that would put Colorado on the global map. And the scale of DIA reflected this desire: It was to be the largest, most modern airport in the world. But almost as soon as ground was broken in 1989, problems cropped up. The massive public-works project was encumbered by design changes, difficult airline negotiations, allegations of cronyism in the contracting process, rumors of mismanagement and real troubles with the $700 million (and eventually abandoned) automated baggage system. Peña's successor, Wellington Webb, was forced to push back the 1993 opening date three times. By the time DIA finally opened in February 1995, the original $1.5 billion cost had grown to $5.2 billion. Three months after that opening, the Congressional Subcommittee on Aviation held a special hearing on DIA in which one member said the Denver airport represented the "worst in government inefficiency, political behind-the-scenes deal-making, and financial mismanagement." But Peña, who by then was serving as the Secretary of Transportation for President Bill Clinton, testified that despite the project's shortcomings, more cities would need to construct world-class airports in the future.

And what looked like a gamble in 1995 seems to have paid off for Denver. Today, DIA is considered one of the world's most efficient, spacious and technologically advanced airports. It is the fifth-busiest in the nation and tenth-busiest in the world, serving some 50 million passengers in 2006.

Peña knows all about the statistics — but he hadn't heard about any of the DIA conspiracies. They "have no basis in fact," he asserts, but still manages to put them in a positive light, suggesting that it's a compliment that Denver International Airport has attracted so much interest. "If it were a boring architectural structure, if it were a minor cog in the complex system of aviation traffic around the world, it probably wouldn't get very much attention from anybody," he says. "So in a way, I would think of this as a somewhat interesting observation that people make of DIA, which means that people give it a lot of importance, which it deserves. So I think it's good in that sense."

DIA spokesman Chuck Cannon has heard all about the DIA conspiracies. He's been getting questions about the underground bases and the airport's connection to the New World Order since before DIA opened, at a rate of about one a month. And his response hasn't changed over the years. With all of the intense public and media scrutiny of the airport project, he asks, how could these supposed underground facilities have been built without somebody seeing them or reporting them?

"Sometimes these conspiracies are fun to read about, but they're hokum; they just don't hold water," Cannon says. "And the people who say they've been out here and worked on the project and saw all of this stuff being built are smoking something stronger than what they can buy at their local supermarket."

The strangest theories he's heard are that the capstone in the main hall is a beacon for the mothership, and that underneath the basement is a camp for political prisoners. "When I tell them it's bunk, they say, 'Well, of course you'd say that. You work there. You're part of the conspiracy, too!'" he says. "Well, if they think that's true, why did they bother calling me?"

No one has bothered to call Charles Ansbacher, now the conductor of the Boston Landmarks Orchestra, which gives free classical concerts at public landmarks around the Boston area. But as the co-chair of the now-defunct New World Airport Commission, which orchestrated DIA's opening festivities, Ansbacher would be a prime candidate for the conspiracists' Illuminati puppet master. Back in 1990, the longtime arts advocate was living in Denver and working as an aesthetic design-policy advisor for DIA when he decided to start a not-for-profit organization that would help promote the new airport to the people of Denver, and enlisted big-name corporate and civic names to serve on the board.

Ansbacher can't quite remember how he came up with the name for the organization, but he guesses it might have come from Dvorák's *New World Symphony*. The New World Airport Commission name emphasized that DIA was the newest airport in the world, and the first new airport built in this country since Dallas/Fort Worth in 1973, he says; it did not symbolize that DIA was a monument to the New World Order. "The idea that there is anything secretive about this is totally preposterous," Ansbacher says.

The group's main function was to plan both an air show and a public gala in 1993, which went on despite the fact that the airport was delayed. He was there the day the capstone, which is also a time capsule, was dedicated. The Masonic symbol was placed on the stone because it was provided by a local Masonic lodge. "One of the remaining things they do is provide time capsules," he points out.

Ansbacher was also a force behind the plan to make art a pervasive part of the new airport. With a budget of more than $7 million, DIA's art program grew into the largest single-facility public-art program in the nation. "We are definitely not a Greyhound bus depot," says Colleen Fanning, DIA art program manager. "We're not just a bland environment. We have a transitory public that oftentimes has a little bit of time to spend as they make their way through security. We definitely want to enhance and humanize our spaces here at the airport and just beautify the experience."

From the beginning of the design process, an effort was made to infuse art into the architecture, with 39 artists chosen to create original work for the project. These artists were selected by a committee of public officials, community members and working artists. There was a major cultural component to pieces chosen, and the committee was careful to include work by black, Native American and Hispanic artists. Still, there was no specific slot for a Mayan artist — which Jay Weidner insists Tanguma is.

Fanning has gotten calls about Tanguma's art, including one last year from a person who accused the airport of changing portions of his murals to cover up secret meanings. "They basically scream at me and ask me why we have taken those murals down, but they've never been changed or been taken down," she says. "Those murals will be there for a while. They're not coming down."

In fact, DIA will soon be getting more art. The airport will undergo $1.2 billion in infrastructure improvements over the next ten years, and under the city's one-percent-for-art program that requires all capital improvement projects to allocate that percentage of the budget to art, Fanning's program should get a significant boost.

And so the conspiracy calls will keep coming. "And really, there is nothing controversial here at all," Fanning insists. "I really don't give credence to any of the thinking that goes behind these theories."

Weidner does. He visited DIA while working on his documentary and checked out the Tanguma murals. "I don't know where he is," Weidner says of the artist. "Last I heard, he was in Chicago; that's all I could find out. I know he was commissioned to do the murals, and I know he was told pretty much what to paint. And that's all I know. He's pretty much just gone away."

Leo Tanguma, a quiet man with a gray goatee, hasn't moved from Colorado since DIA opened. Right now he's standing in front of "The Children of the World Dream of Peace," describing his work while travelers scurry past.

"This is my daughter's friend," he says, pointing to the children's faces. "That's my niece. Here's my other niece. This is my granddaughter, Sandiana. This is my other granddaughter." Other faces belong to friends of the family, neighbors, relatives. Some were victims of gang violence. "This little boy was at the zoo with his parents. At the zoo! And somebody was having a war in the neighborhood, and one of those bullets came in the air and paralyzed him," Tanguma says. "It took him one year to die. So when I met the parents, I went to their home, and they gave me his photographs."

The children represent a wide assortment of nationalities: "Panama. Brazil. Greece. Arabia. Sweden. Czech Republic." The mural is about kids dreaming of a world without violence, he explains, with the dream turning into a rainbow that leads to children of all nations putting down their weapons by beating swords into plowshares.

The soldier in the mural could be any soldier. "That's why I put a mask on him," Tanguma explains. "I didn't want to make him white or black. I wanted to make him villainous to give that aspect of something vile, something real, something mean."

Tanguma grew up in a small town in Texas, where Latinos were in the minority. He created his first mural when he was in the fifth grade and the local sheriff shot and killed three of his cousins in a questionable incident. He got up and went to the blackboard to draw what he liked to draw: horses, lions and tigers. "But this kid, somebody, said, 'Draw me killing the sheriff.' We were totally helpless in those days." So he drew the kid stabbing the sheriff. And then the teacher walked in. He got a few licks for his depiction.

"But somebody asked me to do that art," he remembers. "And in my life, I always felt that the community needed somebody to express its feelings."

He only finished school through the sixth grade. Later, he joined the military. While overseas, he got his GED and took a cartooning correspondence course. Once out of the service, Tanguma went to Texas Southern University in 1972, where he'd paint community-center walls or street murals for small commissions. His murals can now be found on the walls of elementary schools, college campuses, housing projects, churches and art museums across the western U.S.

Tanguma moved to Colorado in 1983 because he thought there would be more opportunity here. The first piece he did in town was a mural in response to gang violence, paid for with small donations from churches and neighbors.

In 1993, Tanguma got a $100,000 commission for DIA. Initially, it was for one mural — but as he started painting, he decided to do more. "I wanted it to live up to how I felt about Denver, for the opportunity," he says. He insists that he was given no guidelines for what to paint, and it took him three years to finish the work. "I tried to paint according to my conscience. Because I told the committee I tried not to paint just for decoration. It has to have a meaning."

But meaning is created by the viewer as much as the artist. And it's not just conspiracy theorists who find unintended meaning in the murals. Tanguma remembers how passersby would question his work even while he was finishing it on the walls at DIA. One man complained that the Scottish boy's shawl had the crest of an enemy of his clan, so Tanguma included the man's family crest on the shawl. Others wondered why the multi-racial murals didn't have more black people, or white people, or why one country's flag seemed to be covering another's.

No matter how big the murals, no matter how inclusive the content, viewers always seem able to find a subtext, a code that explains the chaos now common in the new world.

Tanguma's murals have even traveled from the world of fictional fact into outright fiction. In *Forever Conceal, Never Reveal*, a novel published online in 2005, Washington-based author Dawn Meier wrote about a character who got sucked into the Masonic underworld and traveled to DIA in one scene:

*"How on earth did the city of Denver approve of such horrific murals in their airport?" Aaron asked.*

*"They really didn't have anything to say about it. Freedom of speech; freedom of expression in art; all the freedom arguments allowed the Masons to influence all the murals you see. Here is another one." They moved on to the next one.*

*"Oh, Gordon. How horrible. I can't believe my eyes; a dark green giant monster wearing what looks like a gas mask, destroying a city. And what are these? It looks like women carrying dead babies. What sick person drew all these?"*

*"It doesn't matter who drew them, Aaron. This is the future."*

Tanguma says he would like to "have a chance to meet with those folks and explain to them what I meant by this. I'm not part of any conspiracy whatsoever. I mean, it's weird to be saying that. In general, this is about humanity. What could they find bad about this?"