

ARTS

What are Those Weird Images on Top of the Salesforce Tower?



Rendering of Jim Campbell's 'Day for Night,' 2018; Image by Steelblue. (Courtesy of the artist and Boston Properties)

The top of the Salesforce Tower has some weird things going on—you might have noticed. Here, I preempt some of the questions you might have about San Francisco-based artist [Jim Campbell](#)'s installation atop the building, which begins its illuminated life Tuesday night, May 22.

What is going on?

Okay, so there's this thing called the internet. It facilitates this other thing called cloud computing. And Salesforce is one of the biggest cloud computing companies in the U.S.; the author of a customer relationship management (CRM) product that inspires fervent fandom. If you don't work in the world of

CRM-facilitated customer relationships, you may know them better for their annual impact upon San Francisco's hotel bookings: Dreamforce, [the conference that filled a thousand ships](#).

No, what's going on with the lights on the tower?

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I was getting there. Patience. On April 11, 2014, Salesforce signed a lease for roughly half of the 1.4 million square feet in what was previously known as the Transbay Tower, thereby attaching their name to the tallest building in San Francisco. The structure's top nine floors are unoccupied by people, but the upper six are covered in art; Jim Campbell's *Day for Night*, made up of over 100 aluminum panels and 11,000 LEDs, is a 100-foot-tall circular screen.



Rendering of Jim Campbell's 'Day for Night,' 2018; Image by Steelblue. *(Courtesy of the artist and Boston Properties)*

Okay, so what will I see?

I'm so glad you asked. Initial tests and interviews with Campbell point to an ever-changing video diary of life in San Francisco. At night, daily footage culled from video cameras placed throughout the city (at Ocean Beach, Golden Gate Park, Market Street, Embarcadero, maybe even the dump) encircle the tower and project softly into the night. Some educated guesses at the imagery: bodies in motion (swimming, running, dancing), puffy clouds, flapping birds, crashing waves and waving leaves.

Is it out of focus?

Yes, but it's supposed to be. Campbell's known for reducing images down to their constituent parts: pixels. He has a longtime interest in what can be gleaned from the smallest amount of information possible.

“If you take away all of the details of an image, is there anything useful from an experience of looking at something that's low resolution?” he said in a [2015 interview with KQED Arts](#). “Is there some sort of essence that can be found in taking an image and getting rid of most of the information?” I call it hi-tech lo-res.

In *Day for Night*, the thousands of LEDs point back towards the building itself, to be reflected out into the city (and visible for up to 20 miles) via the perforated aluminum panels that cover the tower's crown. Instead of a high resolution bombardment you might find in Hong Kong, Times Square or *Blade Runner 2049*, Campbell aims for a subtle and more meditative report on the daily movements of people, wind and waves.



Sounds cool. How can I see more Jim Campbell up close?

By happy coincidence (there's no such thing as coincidences), the seventh floor of SFMOMA currently boasts the Campbell installation [Tilted Plane](#), a truly disorienting grid of suspended lightbulbs. As your eyes adjust to the array, you may be able to discern a moving image amid the flickering bulbs—that of birds in flight. May I suggest, for those not squeamish about such things, laying on the carpeted floor to look up at the art.

How long will the tower thingy be up?

It's permanent. So... as long as the Salesforce Tower stands.

Who paid for it?

Long story short: the Salesforce Tower developers, companies called Hines and Boston Properties.

San Francisco has a "[1%-for-art program](#)" which requires large downtown projects to display or commission public art in an amount that equals at least one percent of the total construction cost.

Developers can handle the process of buying or commissioning works themselves (like the [Sol LeWitt at the corner of 10th and Mission](#)), or dedicate a portion of their one percent to the city's Public Art Trust, which directs those funds to projects like temporary public art

programming (say, a dance festival) or maintaining the Civic Art Collection.

Boston Properties and Hines selected *Day for Night* on their own (with help from a curatorial panel), without involving the San Francisco Public Art Commission (SFAC), which means Campbell didn't go through a public review or any of the many steps involved in making new work for the SFAC. The piece did, however, appear before the San Francisco Planning Commission as courtesy.

[Documents submitted to the commission](#) state Boston Properties spent, as of April 2017, approximately \$4.5 million on the art installation, with another \$1 million expected to complete the project, equaling about 1.66 percent of the total construction cost.



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How long before someone finds the hidden cameras around the city and ruins this for everyone?

Since Campbell's studio plans to be involved in collecting and editing the video for the first year of the installation, fine-tuning what works when, chances are they're not going to let people hijack the imagery.

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Will I like it?

How should I know? Art is subjective. But at least you're not in the dark anymore (with regards to what's going on up there).