

Art atop Salesforce Tower changing soon — and could feature a blurry you

Melia Russell

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Figures dance across the crown of Salesforce Tower on Thursday, May 17, 2018, in San Francisco, as part of a light installation by artist Jim Campbell.

Photo: Noah Berger / Special to The Chronicle

If you gaze at Salesforce Tower on a clear night — and really, how can you avoid it — you may wonder how Salesforce decides what electronic image to display on the tower's top each evening.

The answer may surprise you: No one at Salesforce has any sway.

That authority lies with artist Jim Campbell, whose White Light studio was commissioned by the building's developer and owner, Boston Properties, to create a light show.

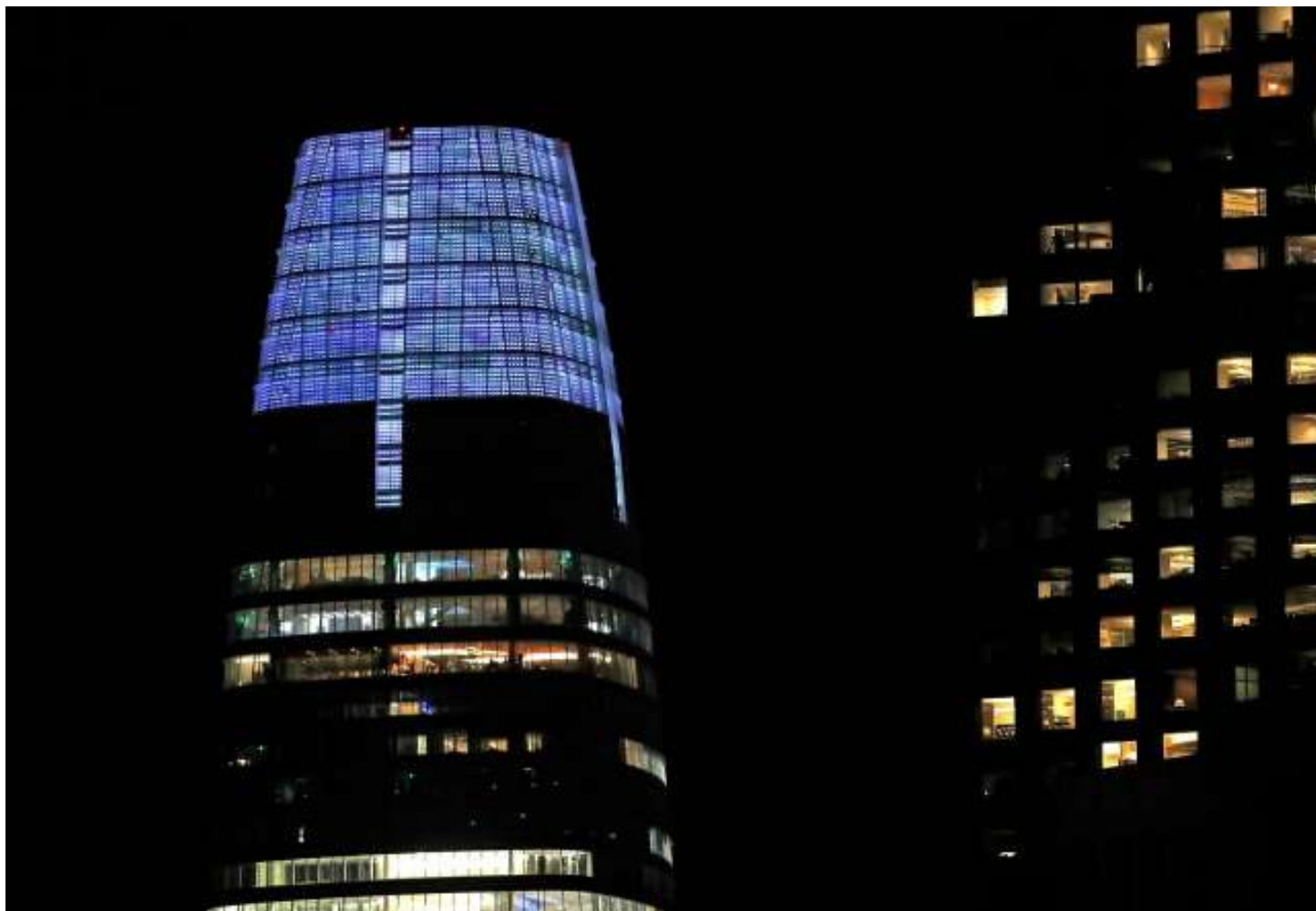
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Most nights, the artist plays a series of recorded moving images on repeat. Clouds, ocean waves, dancers, birds and rippling water in the bay appear in that order. The sequence lasts about 45 minutes. But Campbell's team says new images are coming early this fall, collected from cameras set up around San Francisco.

"I don't know that I'd want you to print this, but I've had so many people say, 'I'm sick of it,'" Campbell said. He hears most often from residents in his neighborhood of Potrero Hill, which has sweeping views of the downtown skyline. They want Campbell to shake things up.



Most nights, a sequence of clouds, ocean waves, dancers, birds and rippling water in the Bay appears on the top of Salesforce Tower.

Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle

The tower top will soon show video snippets of city life that are recorded by cameras planted in San Francisco, from the Cliff House to the top of the Exploratorium, overlooking the bay. In the beginning, Campbell will edit a sequence made from new footage each day, but after some testing, he plans to outsource the work to software that will identify clips with lots of movement and color. A computer on the 62nd floor of Salesforce Tower receives the images and turns on the light show.



The nightly sequence of runners and other images on Salesforce Tower's crown will be replaced this fall with blurred video snippets of life captured by cameras around San Francisco.

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle 2018

One camera, on a plaza at the base of Salesforce Tower, will show blurry images of pedestrians. Campbell says the low resolution means onlookers won't be able to make out individuals' faces.

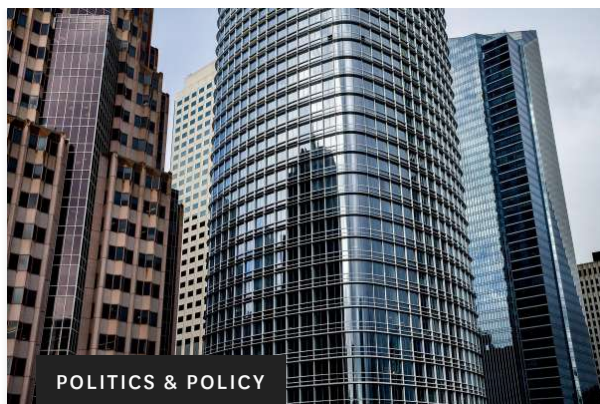
Still, there are obvious privacy concerns, said Ashkan Soltani, a privacy researcher and former chief technologist for the Federal Trade Commission.

“In general, taking otherwise ephemeral imagery and amplifying it for mass exposure does have some privacy implications,” he said in an email. “For example, even in a blurred image, it’ll likely be possible to ascertain the skin color or size of a subject, which could potentially have implications if someone was investigating a matter of public interest.”

Asked about this concern, Campbell — who has exhibited works on themes of surveillance and the body for decades — said the imagery will be more abstract, with pedestrians represented as moving figures with “a little color there and the beginnings of shape.”

With its headquarters and more than 8,600 employees in San Francisco, Salesforce leases about two-thirds of the tower that bears its name from Boston Properties. The software company pays about \$50 million a year in rent for its 882,000 square feet, as well as the tower’s naming rights, it said in a 2018 federal filing.

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But its logo is not atop the city’s tallest building, which opened in January 2018.

“Jim Campbell’s art atop Salesforce Tower has become an icon of the San Francisco skyline,” Elizabeth Pinkham, executive vice president of global real estate at Salesforce,

said in an email. “We’re proud to have such a dynamic piece integrated into our global headquarters visible for all to enjoy.”

San Francisco’s planning code requires new buildings downtown to include a public art component, using at least 1% of construction costs. Alternatively, developers can pay a fee to the city’s Public Art Trust, which may be used for programming including art shows and sculpture installations.

In 2012, Boston Properties got a proposal from Campbell that so impressed the developer, it committed \$4.5 million for the installation. The budget includes the materials and the data infrastructure to make it work and develop a companion artwork at ground level. Campbell said he waived \$200,000 in artist fees originally included in the budget.

Campbell, an electrical engineer who designed chips for tech firms before becoming a full-time artist, had the idea to dress the tower top in aluminum panels that dazzled with 11,000 LED lights. They would project fuzzy moving images, both recorded and collected from a dozen live cameras.

“Jim has complete control, and Boston Properties has kind of right of refusal,” said Russell Zeidner, a project manager for Campbell’s public art. The building owner can also make suggestions, as many others do.

“Some of them are not so crazy, but I just can’t do them,” said Campbell, adding that someone asked to propose to his girlfriend on the side of the building.

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Jim Campbell, the artist who puts on the nightly light show, marvels at the “power to change the entire skyline with a single button.”

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle 2018

The artist is exploring how to handle events such as holidays and festivals. Helen Han, a spokeswoman for Boston Properties, said it asked him to do something special for San Francisco Pride last month. The tower depicted rainbow flags blowing in the wind, as well as an undulating kaleidoscope of colors.

“The last thing, needless to say, that I would ever want to do is red and green at Christmastime,” Campbell said. The artist has also sworn off sports team colors and anything resembling advertising.

Some nights at Salesforce Tower are more special than others. In May, videos created by master’s of fine arts students at the California College of the Arts took over the tower for graduation weekend. The tower glowed jungle green last year during a major climate change conference sponsored by Salesforce, among others. The company requested new artwork for the event, but Zeidner said it had no effect on the artist’s decision.

“It seemed like the right thing to do,” he said.

The artist toyed with fire imagery in previous works and used it in early renderings of the tower, but he and the developer agreed that it wasn't a good idea to make the building look like it was burning.

The artist got a pass to set Salesforce Tower digitally ablaze on Halloween night. He was encouraged by an online petition urging Salesforce to feature the giant fiery Eye of Sauron, the fantasy antagonist from J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" novels. It racked up 11,000 signatures in the weeks before.

On Oct. 31, the tower top came alive with the evil eye. The moving image was an "interpretation" created by Campbell, not actual footage from the film adaptation, to avoid a lawsuit. It used a backdrop that Campbell recorded almost 30 years ago: a piece of plywood that he set on fire in his backyard.

"All of my neighbors called the Fire Department," he said.

Campbell's contract with the developer has no expiration date, and the building will maintain the art long after Campbell moves on to other projects, Han said. He's no longer being paid for his time working on the tower art, though he still gets reimbursed for materials and infrastructure.

Someday, he imagines he might hand off the controls to students or professors of fine arts, pending a conversation with the building owner. He's working in the meantime to create an advisory group, made up of professors and representatives from the city and the developer, to help guide his decisions on new art for special events. He's still getting accustomed to the power.

About a year ago, Campbell was sitting in a bar on Potrero Hill looking out the window and across town at Salesforce Tower. He was preparing to test the light show before its premiere.

"My daughter came over to me as we were setting up and and said, 'Hey Daddy, can you make it green?'" he said. "The power to change the entire skyline with a single button — it was that moment that I said, 'Holy s—, that is a lot of responsibility.' ... It's made me realize it's bigger than me."

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