



## 'The big experiment in the sky'

Atop Salesforce Tower, one of the world's highest works of public art comes to light with grand ambitions

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By



Electronic artist Jim Campbell sat in Blooms Saloon on Potrero Hill, looking out the window and across town at Salesforce Tower. As day turned to dusk, he pressed a button on his laptop and the top 130 feet of the tower came ablaze in yellow LED light. Then the dark figure of a ballerina came dancing across the yellow light 61 stories up, and one of the world's highest works of public art was alive for the first time.

The brief ballet was only a test, but on Tuesday, at nautical twilight, the new tower's nose cone will be lighted permanently and "Day for Night," will instantly become the most prominent installation produced under the city's "1 percent for art" development tax.

“A million people are going to see it every night whether they want to or not,” Campbell said during an interview in his Dogpatch studio, which features a 6-foot lighted scale model of “Day for Night.” “I see this as the big experiment in the sky.”

And he is the big experimenter, manipulating his laptop like the Wizard of Oz. The laptop connects to a dozen cameras set up around San Francisco, from the top of the Ferry Building to the Cliff House to capture the full urban panoply.

During daylight hours, visual information will be fed into a central computer, which will transmit it back out to 11,000 LED lights affixed to the crown of the tower, —1,070 feet above Mission Street, and visible for up to 30 miles.



Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle



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The blurry image of a runner is visible on the tower's crown as part of Campbell's light sculpture.

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The light sculpture encompasses the top six floors of the tower, which are unoccupied and were built as an architectural flash point that also ensures that the tower is the tallest in the city.

Also in play are the three floors beneath the crown, which house building infrastructure. These three floors will be bathed in colored light to form a solid foundation for the moving imagery on top.

The show will begin each night with the colors of the sunset, whatever they may be— red, gold, purple or white in the fog. “Day for Night” will run from dusk to midnight and then it will show a constellation of stars until sunrise.

Let the nicknaming begin with “The Big Lava Lamp.”



“It will be controversial. Light pollution will be one argument against it,” said Campbell, who will spend the first few months trying to figure out what works. He already knows what doesn’t — a camera fixed on a street corner to show the people crossing. “It feels too much like a surveillance camera,” he said. “I’m more interested in the pulse of the city.”

Another thing that will not work is seasonal mood lighting, or colors linked to holidays or sports teams, like those that often bathe City Hall and Coit Tower. Advertising also is out of the question.

“I’m not going to do a bulletin board, ever,” he said. “I’m not going to do red-and-green Christmas lights.”

In looks and manner, Campbell evokes the comic actor Gene Wilder. But it would take a double degree in electrical engineering and mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to make this light show work, and Campbell has those. That’s where he got interested in making video art. He took this hobby with him to Silicon Valley, where in 1978 he began a 25-year career as a chip designer.

“I always thought that I needed some balance from the electrical engineering,” he said, “because electrical engineering is a nerdy kind of process, and I’m a nerd.”

He spent three years trying to interest San Francisco galleries in showing his video art. When he finally admitted failure, he rented space in the Tenderloin for two weeks in 1989 to put on his own exhibition.

Then he picked up the phone to make the only cold call of his life, to Bob Riley, the notoriously prickly media arts curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Campbell boldly asked Riley to come see his show and then waited to be rejected. Instead Riley said, “I saw a piece of yours 10 years ago as an undergraduate in a class in Boston, and I liked it, so I’ll come.”

Riley not only came to the show, he brokered a deal for Gap founder Donald Fisher to buy one of the works, called “Hallucination,” which seemed to show the person viewing it on fire. Campbell, who had never been to art school or had a show or sold a piece, now had sold one to the Bay Area’s most prominent private collectors, and it was put on display at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Fisher told Campbell that he was the only non-famous artist whose work he collected, and after its run at SFMOMA, the Campbell video was on display at Gap headquarters for 15 years.

“It’s all kind of amazing,” he said, “because I wouldn’t be doing art now if this didn’t happen.”



Figures dance atop Salesforce Tower as part of an elaborate light installation by artist Jim Campbell. | Noah Berger / Special To The Chronicle

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Soon to follow as a patron was Roselyne “Cissie” Swig, who bought a set of five TV monitors that captured people walking by, made by Campbell in 1990. She now owns three of his works, all sending out moving images to offset the traditional paintings and sculptures in her various homes.

“Jim was out there a long time before other people,” she said of his work. “Historically they have stayed very fresh. He’s got a perspective that draws you in and enriches you.”

Ten years ago, Campbell finally quit designing chips to focus full time on designing art. His studio, White Light Inc., is in an old can factory on Third Street. He’s been working on the Salesforce project for four years, and there are shelves stacked to the ceiling with boxes of lighting components.

Asked how to explain his art in the most basic of terms, Campbell answered, “it is always plugged in.” Asked to similarly explain “Day for Night,” he describes it as “the opposite of a Jumbotron.”

Boston Properties and Hines, developers/owners of the tower, paid millions of dollars for “Day for Night.” Campbell has anticipated one question about it and calculated his answer. The 11,000 LED lights, he says, use the same amount of electricity as “five toaster ovens.”

The figures in his installations always look clearer from farther away, though never clear enough to solve the mystery of exactly what you are seeing.

“When you are working with low resolution images, you can’t really analyze what you are looking at,” he said. “You just take it in. You don’t analyze it. That’s what I’m interested in. Primal perception.”



For the test of “Day for Night” at Blooms Saloon, Hosfelt Gallery hosted a party for curators and collectors who have turned Campbell’s work into a million-dollar enterprise. They waited for dusk with the anticipation of people counting the minutes to a July Fourth fireworks show.

Among those staring across town in anticipation was Jason Linetzky, director of the Anderson Collection at Stanford University. “It’s a tribute to the city of San Francisco and a reflection of, and on, the people living there and the ephemeral nature of place,” Linetzky said after watching the 10-minute demo. “I loved seeing it previewed, and I’m excited to see more.”



But you don’t have to wait until dark or look 61 stories up in the sky to see a Jim Campbell. You can see one that’s just seven stories up, on the top floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Called “Tilted Plane,” it consists of hundreds of suspended incandescent light bulbs that have had their filaments replaced by LEDs.

Another close-up Campbell is “Jacob’s Dream: A Luminous Light,” which is 47 feet tall and dangles from the ceiling at Grace Cathedral on Nob Hill. The blue LED imagery plays off the blue stained glass in the Gothic church. It seems to show a figure going up and down a ladder, but it is actually a person swimming in a pool.

“Jacob’s Dream,” a commission done in collaboration with Parisian artist Benjamin Bergery, was installed in 2016 and intended to be temporary. But it is still there, in mid-2018.

“I absolutely love the piece, and I would like us to keep it forever,” said Rebecca Nestle, director of cultural programs at Grace Cathedral. “We want this piece to be in conversation with the Salesforce piece.”

Campbell is not sure where he goes from “Day for Night,” but certainly not up.

“How can you do more?” he said. “It’s almost like too much power. It becomes a big aspect of the skyline.”

He is not a sports fan and does not know the difference between a stadium and an arena. But he knows this much: If the Golden State Warriors make the NBA Finals, a lot of important sets of corporate media eyes will see his artwork every night driving back from Oakland to the San Francisco hotels where they all stay.

When asked what he plans to do with the 6-foot scale model of “Day for Night,” Campbell said, “I’m so sick of that project after four years, I might throw it away.” But his gallery representative, Todd Hosfelt, who was within earshot, almost snapped his neck in retort.

“We are selling it,” he said.