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Artist Jim Campbell Takes Over an S.F. Gallery With Fluttering LEDs

By Jonathan Curiel Wednesday, Jan 1 2014

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When it was featured above SFMOMA's atrium in 2011 and 2012, Jim Campbell's "Exploded Views" was such a hit that people would crowd onto the facing stairwell and jockey for the best viewing spot. (Yes, elbows would occasionally fly.) Campbell's work used a cascade of light-emitting diodes, or LEDs, to portray the quick, shadowy movement of mostly human forms. Since then, Campbell has cemented his reputation as one of the world's most acclaimed LED artists, exhibiting his art in China, Australia, and England, and completing big commissions from the San Diego International Airport and the Dallas Cowboys' AT&T Stadium. Among Campbell's current commissions is one for San Francisco's Central Subway, which will feature Campbell's work in the Union Square/Market Street Station.

To say Campbell's career is "red hot" is an understatement — which is why a new Campbell exhibit at Hosfelt Gallery is so welcome. "Tilted Plane" occupies an intimate space that, on the afternoon I went, held just a smattering of other art-goers. It's Campbell in a room of one's own — and what a room. First of all, it's dark. Very dark. And it's fronted by dark black mesh. Inside are rows of dimly lit bulbs hanging from the ceiling at different heights, creating the illusion of a downward-sloping plane. The bulbs contain LEDs, and every few seconds, a new section of lit bulbs quickly goes dark in random, repeating patterns that suggest things are flying overhead. I imagined bats. It was actually pigeons, Campbell says, that were his model for "Tilted Plane." Because the exhibit lets art-goers wander inside the room and practically touch the bulbs, the movement overhead is intensified — as if you're in the chamber of a mad scientist. Whether you're outside the mesh looking in or inside the room looking out, the experience is unique.

"When you look at it right when you walk in, maybe 20 feet before the mesh, there's more of a chance of understanding that it's birds flying," Campbell says. "Then, when you're inside, it's more about your peripheral vision, and it's more about feeling the birds flying around you. That's where the movement comes in. You feel the fluttering of the wings, for example."

Campbell's work can be compared to that of James Turrell, the MacArthur laureate and "light artist" whose exhibits are also about the complex relationship between space and light. (Turrell has a retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through April 6 that's well worth visiting.) Like Turrell, Campbell wants to mesmerize people and prompt them to reconsider basic assumptions about their surroundings. But unlike Turrell, Campbell pinpoints assumptions about physical abilities. His earlier artworks were often film-based, and included one that asked art-goers to imagine themselves on fire, as if they were suffering from mental illness. Another

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project recorded art-goers passing by the camera and then played the image seconds later, as if the viewers had little control of their walking selves and were forced to "appear" in a delayed



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Courtesy of Jim Campbell

Location Info



photographer **Jim Campbell**, showcasing his dancers in images that — like "Exploded Views" at SF MOMA — feature graceful explosions of color and white light.

"I compare my work a lot with James Turrell." ©2014 SF Weekly, LP. All rights reserved. Campbell says "In a funny way, James Turrell



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