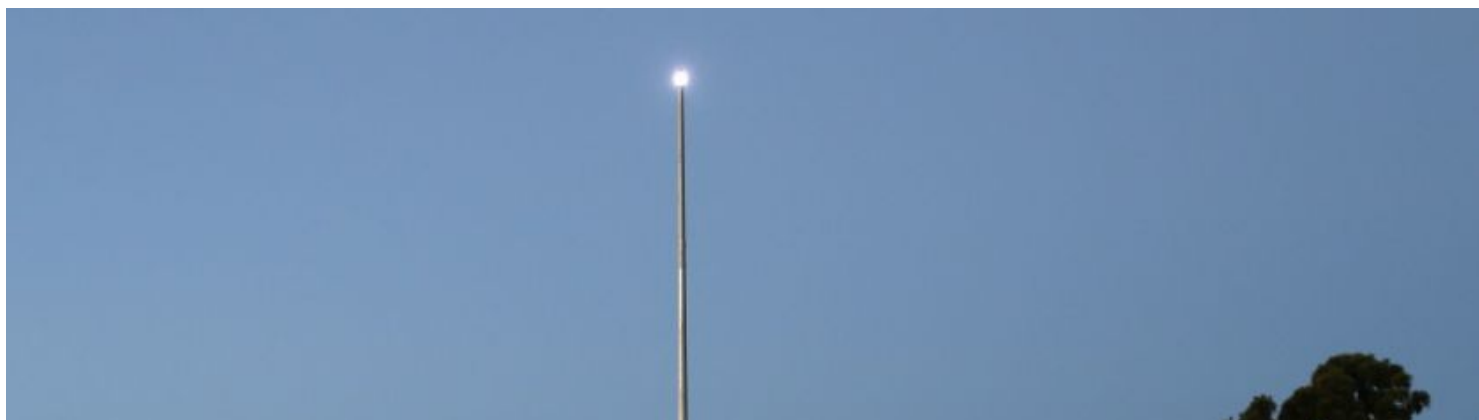


ADVERTISEMENT

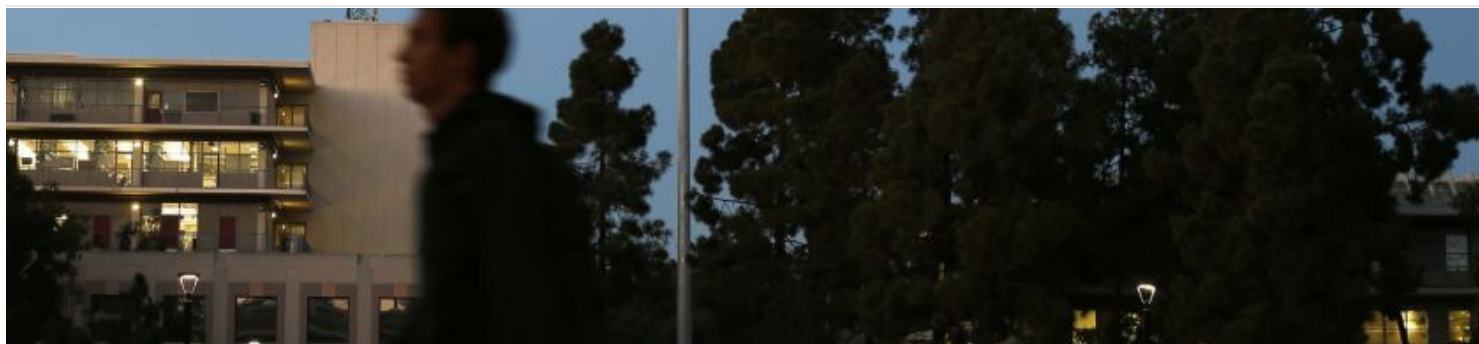


VISUAL ARTS

Towering achievement: Morse code-inspired sculpture lights up the sky at UCSD



The San Diego Union-Tribune



At UC San Diego, Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford created a 195-foot pole topped with a blinking lamp that transmits in Morse code the first message ever sent by telegraph: "What hath God wrought." (K.C. Alfred / San Diego Union-Tribune)

By G. JAMES DAICHENDT

DEC. 9, 2018 | 4 AM



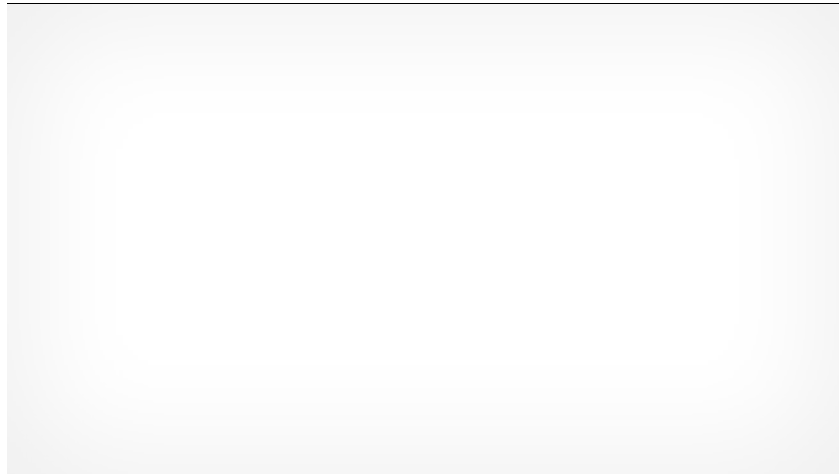
The tallest structure on the UC San Diego campus is not a building. In fact, it's a new 195-foot tall sculpture by Los Angeles-based artist Mark Bradford. Located in Urey Plaza, it's the 20th addition to the Stuart Collection, the university's impressive public art program, and Bradford's second public work in the area (his 2015 "Sexy Cash" is part of Murals of La Jolla).

The new sculpture at UCSD is a monumental form that resembles an oversized flag pole stretching high into the sky. The pole is capped with a barely distinguishable red lighthouse structure that emits a bright, strobing light that can be seen across campus.

Bradford is revered for his mixed-media abstract paintings, where the surface of the work displays evidence of additive and subtractive processes that resemble geological-like excavations. Considered one of the most expensive living artists, he was selected as the 2017 United States representative for the Venice Biennale. The artist often turns scavenged materials into mixed media works: "I love to repurpose things in life and use them for art." He employed this strategy at UCSD by utilizing the technology and equipment reserved for radio masts and repurposing them into a witty and reflective experience.

The long and short bursts of light emitting from Bradford's piece is Morse code and replicates the first telegraph message sent on May 24, 1844, by Samuel F. B. Morse and his partner Alfred Vail, "What hath God wrought." A phrase from the bible — Numbers 23:23 — it also serves as the work's title that appears to be warning about the role technology has had on society.

ADVERTISING



Bradford has a spirited interest in Morse, nicknamed Lightning Man, who was both an artist and inventor. Commissioned to build the first telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore, Morse utilized his concept of a single-wire telegraph to deliver a message faster than anything in history. By 1866, a telegraph line connecting the United States to Europe was laid across the Atlantic. Morse's telegraph system forever changed communication methods and paved the way for modern technologies like telephones, fax machines, and the internet.

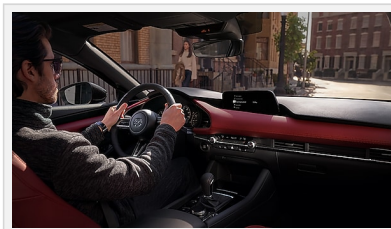
Bradford's structure looms over the UCSD campus and initially appears to be an acknowledgment of this significant historical event. Though public monuments often celebrate the positive, Bradford's work is cold and stiff, almost

turning its back on us despite its prominent location in the center of the plaza. The sculpture's strength is in its resilience, communicating without sympathy for its surroundings, consistently blinking and impossible to ignore. Bradford acknowledges that the piece "... started with what have we done with communication but has gone far beyond that." The wide base and height are like a strong-willed student raising their hand in the front of class, determined to be acknowledged.

The trees on campus hug the structure on either side, juxtaposing the industrial consistency of the steel structure with organic forms. The engineering aesthetic is functional, and its beauty comes through its execution and consistency. Pushing the limits of air space, it required Federal Aviation Administration approval before it could be installed. Bradford shares: "I wanted to reach as high as I could go." The size of the pole and the brightness of the light were incredibly important elements for Bradford: "I wanted a feeling of urgency. Almost so that it felt like an SOS, but it had to be white light ... and if I could get it up high enough, the support system would fall away."

Bradford's interest in communication turned political through the process of creating the work: "I was feeling shifts in the world that I was uncomfortable with. ... I want it to feel like an SOS to the world." Essentially a cry of rage, the height and brightness are intended to be seen as far as possible.

ADVERTISEMENT



SPONSORED CONTENT

Drive Safe, Look Good Doing It: Discover the Mazda3 Hatchback [↗](#)

By Mazda

Find out why the Mazda3 5-Door is turning heads for all the right reasons.

The troubling difficulties on the U.S./Mexico border are a continuing issue of concern for Bradford. He reflects on his observations of how families have communicated across and despite the border wall.

"I was thinking in my mind's eye that I wanted to be able to see it across the border," he said.

Once you notice the 300 blinking LED lights from across UCSD's campus, it's difficult to not see them. Reflecting on the final installation, Bradford exclaims: "When I look at it now, it pulsates a sense of emergency, to help us. ... That's why it has to be so bright."

The location of Bradford's sculpture was inspired by a 1961 plaque commemorating the university's founding. This became the genesis for communication on the campus and an ideal conceptual home for a work that addresses advanced communication and a concern with what we do with it. Reflecting on the incredible advances in telecommunications that Samuel F. B. Morse could not have imagined, Bradford laughs.

ADVERTISEMENT

"What have we done with communication? Don't put it on God."

Mark Bradford: “What Hath God Wrought?”

When: On view permanently

Where: Urey Plaza, Revelle College, UC San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla

Tickets: Free

ADVERTISEMENT

Online: stuartcollection.ucsd.edu/

G. James Daichendt is dean of the colleges and professor of art history at Point Loma Nazarene University.

ADVERTISEMENT

News Videos

VISUAL ARTS



Get U-T Arts & Culture on Thursdays

A San Diego insider's look at what talented artists are bringing to the stage, screen, galleries and more.

SIGN ME UP

You may occasionally receive promotional content from the San Diego Union-Tribune.

Show Comments

Support our journalism

Send investigative tips

Report a problem with this story

MORE IN THIS SECTION