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LIGHTS, ACTION COME TO THE BAY BRIDGE

Leo Villareal is the artist behind 25,000 lights. That's how many LED bulbs the 46-year-old is using for "The Bay Lights," an art installation that will illuminate the western span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge for the two years, starting March 5. The installation, which organizers say is seven times the scale of the Eiffel Tower, was inspired by the 75th anniversary of the Bay Bridge in 2011. Mr. Villareal is known for his work with lights. His recent exhibitions include "Cosmos," which is made of nearly 12,000 LEDs and is at Cornell University's Johnson Museum's Mallin Sculpture Court, and "Multiverse," with about 41,000 LED lights on display in the concourse of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The original idea for "The Bay Lights" came from Ben Davis, founder of the Words Pictures Ideas creative agency in San Francisco, which has helped brand the Bay Bridge as it builds its new eastern span. Mr. Davis, who knew of Mr. Villareal's previous work in Silicon Valley, says he invited the artist to take his broad concept and run with it. Mr. Villareal did just that, coming up with the design, overseeing the installation and programming the sequencing of lights. Mr. Villareal recently discussed the scale and impact of the project, which organizers say will change the skyline of San Francisco. Edited excerpts:

WSJ: Why is light an interesting medium to work with?

Mr. Villareal: I spend a lot of time making sequences, dealing with a particular area of the spectrum, which is pretty different from all of the high-definition we see all the time. It's very universal and powerful, the way a campfire has this hypnotic power and people are attracted to it. You also see the way we decorate our buildings and these commercial environments have a lot of use of light...we have a deep attraction to it.

WSJ: What were some of the challenges of doing something of the scale of "The Bay Lights"?

Mr. Villareal: Getting all of the agencies that control and run the bridge to rally around it and support this project has been key. Caltrans [the state agency responsible for highway, bridge and rail transportation planning, construction and maintenance] is the main organization we've been dealing with, which is not known for being artist-friendly and open to doing large-scale collaborations. But they've been incredibly responsive and see the value and merit of this project as a gift to the city and a way of activating this bridge and highlighting something they work with all the time. It's been a major fundraising effort [no taxpayers funds are being used]. This is an \$8 million project. The bulk of that is labor. We're dealing with a massive piece of infrastructure, and to install anything involves lane closures at night. We've had teams up there installing for six months. We had about 120 days of lane closures scheduled.

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WSJ: What will the light sequences look like?

Mr. Villareal: The inspiration for my pieces comes from everything that surrounds them. I'm looking for motion. Obviously, this is an incredibly fertile site. There's so much happening with the flow of traffic, the very dramatic weather, the interaction with the sky and the water. It's really just ever-changing, so there's endless inspiration here. The intention is for it to feel very appropriate, and to just fit and look right, and augment what's already here. It's not meant to be this megalomaniacal artist thing where 'here's my project' and using the bridge as some sort of pedestal. The sequences are presented in a random order for a random amount of time. So, you're not seeing a loop that repeats all the time. So the pieces end up being very livable. You can have this relationship with them. Depending on where you are, what time of day, what the weather conditions are, it's always going to be new and different. I'm interested in people having this accumulation of experiences with the piece. I wouldn't really call what I'm doing as an image, it's more of a...maybe an impression.

WSJ: Your team has projected a \$97 million benefit to the San Francisco economy from "The Bay Lights." How will that happen?

Mr. Villareal: These things really can create a lot of tourism activity in unexpected ways. So I think we're entering this phase where art can become something that adds to a city, that creates identity, that's iconic, and it can really be this engine for economic activity.

WSJ: If, say, the San Francisco Giants win the World Series again, would you program a congratulatory message up there?

Mr. Villareal: It's possible to display text, though it might be hard to perceive text, but we fought really hard to keep this firmly rooted as an art work, and that's been difficult, with the fundraising. But part of the reason we got the permits to do this piece is because it had this purity of being an artwork and being abstract. If there were any kind of logos or images, I think immediately, it just wouldn't be happening.

