

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

# San Francisco Chronicle

## LED DISPLAY PUTS BAY BRIDGE IN NEW LIGHT

The Bay Bridge will never win a beauty contest against the Golden Gate, but for the next two years, it gets to set aside its inferiority complex for several hours each night while it's lit by the glow of 25,000 twinkling LED lights. Rain decided to get in on the act Tuesday night and made the bridge look a bit hazy when organizers of the \$8 million "Bay Lights" sculpture flipped the switch on the project to trip the lights fantastic along the cables of the western span. That didn't stop thousands of people from showing up to see fish-like shadows roll across the cables, then transform into what looked like raindrops running downstream. "To me it looks more like emotions," Elise Richieri, 25, of San Francisco said of the ebb and flow of the lights. "It's a very interesting expression of your mind." But not everyone saw artistic depth. "Shine the bat signal," someone yelled as the lights started to flicker across the bridge. Each night between dusk and 2 a.m., the lights will appear to move along the north-side cables of the 1.8-mile span in patterns and sequences generated by artist Leo Villareal via programmed computers located in the central anchor of the bridge. It is a work of public art, funded without taxpayer dollars, a "gift of light," Villareal said. "You don't have to buy a ticket," he said. "You don't have to go into a building." City officials expect 50 million people to visit the area to see the lights.



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Bars and restaurants along the waterfront were packed full, and the sidewalks along the Embarcadero were filled with people who mostly took a quick look and then dashed out of the rain, knowing that the show will go on for two years. For the past several months, crews worked from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. to string LEDs on cables 525 feet above the water, installing about 500 lights per shift. So far, organizers have raised about \$6 million to cover the costs, which include a little over \$15 per night in electricity. The project was the brainchild of Ben Davis, a creative consultant, who pitched the idea as a gift to the community, and organized by Illuminate the Arts, a San Francisco nonprofit that promotes public art programs. The effort required a wide range of permits and cooperation from Caltrans, the Coast Guard and even the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "When, typically, the system is designed to say no, people found a way to say yes," Davis said. The finished piece is a "work of contemporary art unparalleled in art history." The lights can be seen from the northern side of the bridge, along the waterfront or from a boat on the bay, but not from the decks of the bridge, where they might otherwise distract drivers.

Along with oohs and aahs, the project is expected to generate nearly \$100 million in additional revenue for the city from visitors eager to see the lights and spend money while doing so, San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee said. But it wasn't just about economics, Lee said. "Art has always been an inspiration to me - you can imagine anything you want in these lights," the mustachioed mayor said, adding that in prior tests, he has seen a mustache every time. "It will be for the child in us to celebrate." At Hotel Vitale, on Mission Street just off the Embarcadero, four terraces on top of the building will offer perfect views of the lights, "a huge selling point" for weddings and parties, said Jill Plemons, director of sales and marketing. Imagine a bride and groom dancing with "Bay Lights" in the background. "It gives me the chills," Plemons said. Like other businesses along the waterfront, the hotel will be promoting various packages in the coming weeks and months that combine a hotel stay, a dinner or a bay cruise featuring the lights. Villareal has a two-year permit to operate the art installation on the bridge. Lee, however, predicted a longer life for the lights on what has long been the second-fiddle span.

It turns "infrastructure into art," Lee said. "This is a beacon for our arts community." "Growing up in the Bay Area, the Golden Gate has always been the famous bridge, the beautiful lady," said Laurie Pfeiffer, 34, of San Francisco. But the Bay Bridge has been a much bigger part of her life, as she used to live in Oakland and cross it daily. "Just to have the Bay Bridge as a work of art is special to me."