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Illuminating Community

Inspired by art, and in the name of community, downtown Isla Vista will be filled with light for three consecutive nights beginning Thursday, May 19.

The first-ever “LightWorks: Isla Vista” showcases contemporary artworks, with light-emitting technologies as the medium. These temporary sculptural installations will transform the central parks of downtown Isla Vista into illuminated spaces for art, performance and community engagement.

The brainchild of Kim Yasuda, professor of art at UC Santa Barbara, the exhibition is part of UCSB’s Visual + Public Art program and is supported by a California Arts Council Creative Communities Grant in partnership with the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission. “This is an opportunity to showcase some of our local and California-based artists who utilize light and projection, while also helping our community to imagine what our parks could be like if they were properly lit at night,” said Yasuda, a resident of Isla Vista for more than a decade.

The artistic director behind LightWorks, Yasuda also part of a group of faculty and students responsible for the 2015 lighting of Pardall Tunnel and the “Blunite” illumination events, organized to commemorate the first anniversary of the Isla Vista tragedy. She envisions LightWorks as an extension of that project, with the dual goals of remembrance and of hope for healing. It is also a continued exploration of the query that initially inspired her to get involved: “How could we mobilize the resources, talent and intellectual capital of UCSB to directly benefit the immediate neighboring community of Isla Vista?”

For Yasuda, who raised her daughter in Isla Vista, curating the festival and ensuring its legacy bridges the personal and professional areas of her life. “I have personally witnessed the segregation that happens in Isla Vista,” she noted. “The student population doesn’t overlap with the permanent residential population. I think the more positive and engaging opportunities we can create, the greater a sense of connection we will share as a community.”

To that end, the entire community is invited to attend the LightWorks opening reception Thursday, May 19, at 7 p.m. in Perfect Park. Many of the contributing artists will be present for the event, which will include remarks by UCSB professors, refreshments and an artist-led walk-through of the temporary works. The path between each piece will be marked by a line of small blue LED lights, guiding visitors through the parks of Isla Vista.

LightWorks features commissioned media works, selected by a panel of jurors as well as local submissions from Santa Barbara and UCSB artists. Many of the pieces invite viewer interaction. For example, the UCSB students and faculty in Art 122PC, a digital design and programming course, are contributing a piece called “Luminaria,” which will illuminate the pedestrian bridge in Anisq’O’yo Park with LED motion sensor lights that work by detecting weight on the bridge’s wooden planks.

Another piece, “Playground,” by Southern California artist Danial Nord, consists of a light box placed over the existing swing set in Anisq’O’yo Park. Nord has invited aerialists, vocalists, musicians and other performers to use the work as a platform throughout the exhibition, triggering different light patterns through sound and movement.

LightWorks will encourage the entire Isla Vista community to interact at night, transforming previously under-illuminated parks into well-lit areas for conversation and congregation. “There’s a literal meaning behind the show’s title,” explained Yasuda. “Light does work. Lighting our spaces allows us to experience the benefits of a safe and engaging social life after dark. Traditionally, communities share a central plaza or space where people go to gather, walk, eat and enjoy their evenings. In I.V., the public space is underutilized, while the private residential sector is densely overcrowded, without the amenities that would be available in most public spaces.”

Yasuda and the other organizers of LightWorks (many of them volunteers) hope to expand the event in years to come. “I’d like to see this festival become an annual illumination event someday,” said Yasuda. “There is none between Oregon and Santa Monica, so we have an opportunity to create something special here that would draw the community to Isla Vista every year.”

She also hopes to remind everyone that lighting public spaces at night can serve aesthetic and practical purposes equally. “Lighting can be utilitarian and safe while also providing a creative and beautiful solution to our public safety concerns,” Yasuda said. “The economic challenges facing most downtown businesses in Isla Vista, primarily restaurants, would benefit from well-lit public spaces at night that could function as a place for residents to participate in and enjoy the benefits of a shared public life.”

More information about the performances, artists and events associated with LightWorks is available at https://www.arts.ucsb.edu/news-events/lightworks-isla-vista-illuminates-a-vibrant-community/

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