

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY HUBBARD, JR.

SAN DIEGO WEEKLY Reader

Calendar

Imperial Sand

Geological Curiosities

'Many Californians don't know about the Imperial Valley," says artist Allan McCollum. "It's out of the way of the coastal cities." He hadn't known about it, either, until he was in his 50s. "Being from L.A., I never even took Highway 8 anywhere, although I have relatives in San Diego and spent a lot of time down here."

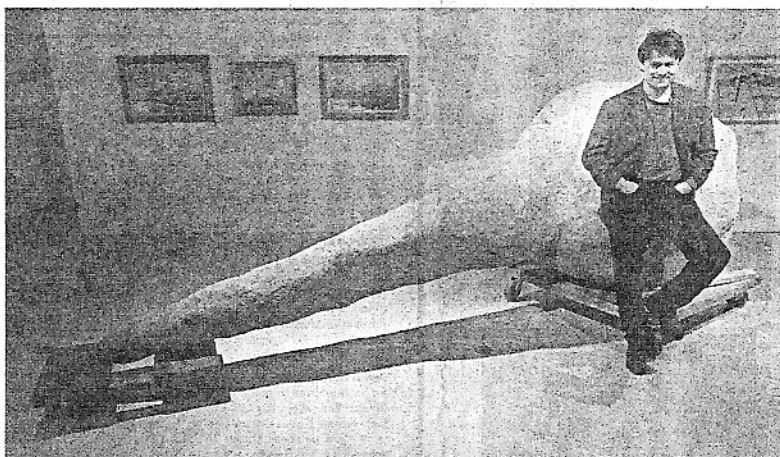
Then, one day in 1996, he heard about Imperial Valley's sand spikes, and they interested him so much he decided to do a project about them and their unique source at the base of

Mount Signal. Of these geological curiosities, he says, "I realized the sand spikes

had more meaning if you understood the context they came from."

Sand spikes are concretions — sand formations cemented together with crystalline calcite. Some resemble their "spike" namesake, of course, but they also occur as spheres, in sizes ranging from bowling balls to marbles. Other sand spikes call to mind fanciful vegetables, strange little animals, even strange little people.

Don't expect to find any yourself. They are virtually gone from Imperial Valley, having either been bulldozed in the early 20th Century or gathered up in armloads by collectors and tourists, some of whom mistook them for extra-terrestrial debris, dinosaur bones, or human artifacts. They are seen only in museums and private collections today. When McCollum saw his first



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY HUBBARD, JR.

Allan McCollum with concrete sand spike

ones — at a museum in Florida — what especially intrigued him was that they looked manmade, with "some artistic intention." His work is often about distinctions to be made (or not) between art objects and natural objects that resemble art.

When he finally traveled to Imperial Valley, he became fascinated by the whole landscape, including the metamorphoses it has experienced over eons. As he describes it to friends and associates back in New York, where he now lives, "It once was a desert, and before that was a sea. And it's got a fabulous irrigation system that's been controversial over the years but that has brought farming to the area. And it never gets cold."

He was particularly captivated by the mountain, which in prehistoric times was an island, experts say. "It's a serious feature in the landscape. There's nothing else vertical except it." Straddling the U.S. Mexican border, it's called El Centinela on the other side.

The result of his years-long investigation is an exhibit opening this weekend at San Diego State University. Parts of the project have previously been shown in Mexicali and Calexico and at the Pioneers Museum of the Imperial County Historical Society, in Imperial.

One of its main features is an outsized replica of a sand spike. "They have a couple at the Pioneers Museum, and they lent me one to copy," says

McCollum. "It looks like an onion or a pumpkin or a gourd, with a spike stuck in it." It's 5½ by 14 by 5½ feet, made of concrete and steel.

He also made a miniature replica (8 by 3 by 4 feet) of the mountain, in foam and plaster, using topographical data from the Mexican government.

Visitors to the exhibit will see other replicas of each, souvenir-size, made of plaster. In fact, souvenirs are exactly what they're meant to be. McCollum had them made by a man and his family who fabricate souvenirs for a living in Tijuana. There are about 1000 of them in total.

McCollum acted as a curator, too, selecting 60 artworks by local artists. They include numerous views of the mountain from both sides. "I spent time in Mexicali, El Centro, all the outlying places. The work is mostly by amateur artists, as well as a few professionals and educators. A pair of paintings done by someone who I don't think had ever done a painting before are actually two of my favorites."

Imperial Valley postcards and ephemera have found their way into the show, too. He bought them on eBay and at local antique shops.

As for the aggregate meaning of these representations of geology and iconography, McCollum leaves that to viewers to decide.

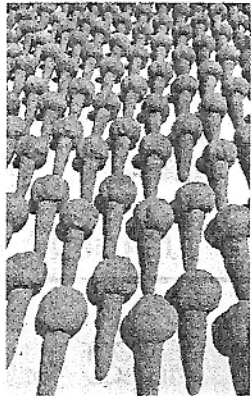
When the show closes, the large sand spike replica will be permanently installed as an outdoor sculpture at the

Pioneers Museum. That part of the project has personal meaning for McCollum. "There were landmarks that I remember forever, from when I was a kid. The giant lemon? Where's that? You know, they're roadside attractions." Maybe I don't remember too much about my childhood, but I do remember them. So I wanted to leave behind something like that."

He denies he's any sort of local hero. "The local paper wouldn't even print a picture of my work," he says, speaking of the large sand spike, "because they thought it looked too phallic. Some people get upset about it. Some people laugh. Some don't even notice. I've had people say, 'Oh, it looks like a big ice cream cone.' Others say, 'Oh, it's a tadpole.' 'Phallic symbol' isn't everybody's first reaction — only those who studied Freud in college."

— Jeanne Schinto

"Signs of the Imperial Valley: Sand Spikes from Mount Signal" An InSITE2000 Project by Allan McCollum
Opening reception
Saturday, January 20,
4:00 to 6:00 p.m.
Through Saturday, March 3,
University Art Gallery
San Diego State University
5500 Campanile Drive
Free
Info: 619-594-5171 or
www.sdsu.edu/artgallery



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