

# TURN OFF THE LIGHTS!

by Sonja H. Johnson

And San Diego Gas & Electric said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. They saw that the light was good, but only for a while and then they insisted it be removed and the site returned to its original darkness.

The old SDG&E building on Kettner and Broadway (circa. 1911) was the installation site for a work by San Diego artist, David Beck Brown, during the recent inSITE '94 project. Titled *A Measure of Illumination*, the nearly 12-foot high installation was a romantic monument created from steel rods, wood, mylar, plexi, brass tubes, florescent lighting, faux finish, gold leaf and a cast iron gas lamp base found in Pacific Beach back in 1980. A combination of old and new elements, the work artistically evolved over the years as Brown pondered exactly how to use the old gas lamp base. One evening while he listened to Bach by candlelight, the concept came together in Brown's mind. Encouraged by the classical movements of Bach, he envisioned classical proportions manifested in similar design; hence, Corinthian columns and pink marble. The candlelight brought mental reflections of pre-electric life, thus, the gas lamp. The Euro-Western design, intentional in its contradiction to inSITE's multi-cultural agenda between Mexico

and the US, attracted him because it seemed "politically incorrect." Brown's use of faux finishing, as a falsification to achieve classicism, goes against artistic correctness in his opinion and, therefore, furthered his exploit of contradiction. Finally, the challenge enticed Brown because the installation was created for use by a corporation that doesn't historically support the arts.

A challenge it was. In meeting the inSITE requirement that sponsorship must come from a non-profit organization, Brown had a tough time until he found name sponsorship in Grossmont College's Hyde Gallery. But name sponsorship meant he didn't get any financial backing and had to pay for everything himself—materials, labor costs for four assistants to meet the schedule, city permits, weekly fees, building safety requirements (orange plastic fencing and all), and \$1 million worth of insurance. SDG&E required Brown to pay union wages to the electricians for hooking up to their power source. SDG&E required a written contract which they wouldn't sign until he had insurance and he couldn't get insurance until he had a written contract. Because of this run-around and unsure



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Continued from front page  
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Brown would be ready in time, inSITE removed Brown's listing from the official catalog, so then he had to pay for his own advertising flyers. Luckily, inSITE used these as inserts to their catalog. Thousands of dollars later ..... Except for artistic disappointment, *if he were a rich man*, having to take the whole thing down wouldn't be such a big deal. Actually, SDG&E requested Brown to keep the installation up beyond the end of inSITE, October 30, 1994, until the holidays were over. They wanted to photograph the piece for use in corporate reports. There is a positive outcome for Brown's artistic dedication and investment, after all this. San Diego Power and Cooling, located directly across the street from



the installation site, at 636 West 'E' on Kettner, actually provided electricity and rooftop space to spotlight Brown's work for the remaining dark hours after SDG&E's nightly curfew of 11 p.m., imposed due to potential liability. Impressed with Brown, San Diego Power and Cooling invited him to submit a proposal to do

a sculpture for their building. If all goes well, the whole process will be completed in about a year. This one will remain intact — artfully and appreciatively so. Brown's design for this commission sounds environmentally harmonious, playful and red. Remaining details are left a surprise. Brown says "it's great that SDG&E allowed me to do the project since they've never worked with artists before. I hope this experience has opened the door for them to continue promoting the arts from now on." Brown is an enthusiast about motivating corporations and big business to support the arts through commissions, events and financial contributions. He is also quite an activist for reinstating "Art in Public Places" and is supportive of the San Diego Port Authority's new chairwoman, whom he believes will perform miracles for this program. Brown had a nine-year affiliation with the now defunct Public Arts Advisory Council of San Diego. He was a freelance writer/critic for ArtScene, California Magazine and Artweek. He currently gives of his time to support the California Corrections prisoner arts program. Brown is represented by the Patricia Correia Gallery in Santa Monica and has many private commissions at various locations throughout the Los Angeles area. On a more local note, he recently finished a commission for which he created two 12-foot high monochrome sculptures that sit atop a new customized home in Mission Hills.





