

Allan McCollum: Mt. Signal and its Sand Spikes

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October 14, 2020

New York artist Allan McCollum was having a run of bad luck. He'd been stiffed by a dealer, lost his studio and racked up his credit cards. Fed up with the commerce of art, he put everything in storage and took a road trip to Florida. Breezing through a little town, he passed a sign: Gillespie Museum of Minerals. The sign might as well have said *Museum of Miracles*, for the effect it would have on the artist.



Maricela Alvarado painting of Mt. Signal. Reto Realizado.

“I had to stop,” he said in a Smithsonian Archives of American Art oral history interview.

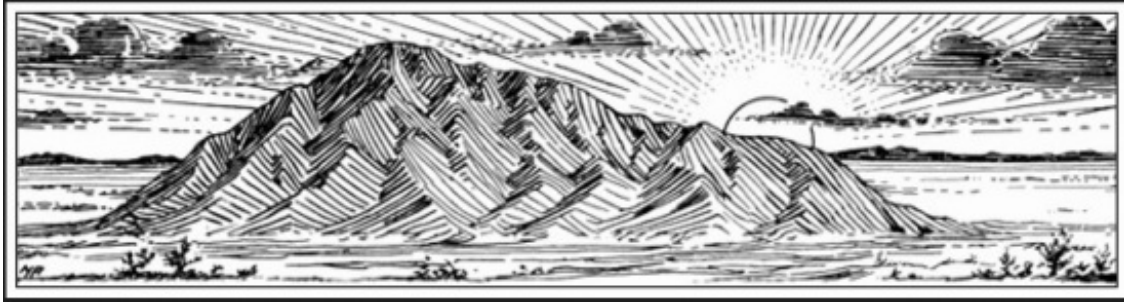
Inside he came face to face with a geological oddity called a sand spike. The cartoonish sandstone object has a ball-like end and a tapering protuberance. “It looked like something made by a person but it was made by nature,” McCollum marveled. It was this vaguely lewd talisman that would open the door to the California desert for him. Following the trail of the spike led him to Mt. Signal in the Imperial Valley, where the blobby wonders were dug from the sand by collectors in the 1940s and ’50s.



Leo Hetzel, Sand Spikes

This year marks the 20th anniversary of McCollum’s epic *Mount Signal and its Sand Spikes* project, possibly the greatest desert art project ever invented. (You can still view much of it [online](#)). Since I first saw parts of the show 20 years ago, I’ve never forgotten the sand spikes or Mt. Signal. McCollum permanently affixed these two coordinates on my mental map.

We’re revisiting the project now as the influential artist has a retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, through January 17, 2021—so if you’re in Florida, you can see our desert sand spikes on display. With Desert X, the art biennial, set to return to the Coachella Valley in February, 2021, McCollum’s story serves as a How To for visiting artists: How to invest a place with meaning. How to involve the locals. How to be a good guest.



Norton Allen drawing of Mt. Signal, 1945, for a Calexico Chamber of Commerce brochure.

McCollum was born in Los Angeles and visited San Diego as a young man but—like so many Californians—he’d never spent time in the Imperial Valley and knew little about it. Though a neighbor to the affluent Coachella Valley, Imperial County is poor, claiming one of the highest unemployment rates in the US. It has little draw for tourists. Mt. Signal, and a slice of the Salton Sea, are its sole landmarks. At only 2,300 feet, the mountain is modest by San Jacinto standards but it’s the lone vertical beacon in the region and can be seen for miles above the desert and agricultural fields.

Most of the mountain is actually in Mexico, yet it’s been an Imperial Valley landmark for decades, guiding pioneers and explorers, Indians and artists. Juan Bautista de Anza had trouble getting there and so called it *The Impossible Mountain*. In Mexico it is *El Centinela*. “The irony of Mount Signal being the main symbol of the Imperial Valley, when it is all in Mexico!” McCollum said recently in an e-mail. “It’s exactly this kind of thing that interests me as an artist—how communities come up with symbols to represent themselves.”



Richard Steinheimer photo of Mt. Signal, 1953. Courtesy of Shirley Burman Steinheimer.

At the Pioneers' Museum in Imperial (one of the venues for the 2000 show) a remnant 16-foot sand spike stands sentry right outside the office—the “roadside attraction” McCollum envisioned 20 years ago. Another remnant—the giant model of Mt. Signal—has vanished but the staff can still look outside and see the real thing. “We loved it,” a Pioneers' Museum founder, Ginger Ryerson, said recently of McCollum's project. “Allan was a professional and he knew how to put this all together. It spurred artists to get out and paint the mountain.”

When I asked McCollum about his Imperial Valley days, he said: “The project was one of the first ‘regional projects’ I pursued, following my projects about the lightning-made fulgurites in central Florida and the dinosaur tracks from the coal mines of central Utah. I'm not from the desert, and I'm not a geologist or a geographer, but I became fascinated with the beautiful, interesting ‘collectibles’ produced by nature. And the desert areas are home to so many things like this.”



Allan McCollum with a model of Mt. Signal.

The exhibition was a sprawling cross-border extravaganza with a cast of dozens of locals. It took in the Imperial Valley and the Valle de Mexicali in Baja, and four venues on both sides of the border: Stepling Art Gallery at San Diego State University in Calexico, the University Art Gallery at San Diego State University, Pioneers' Museum and the Museo de la Universidad Autonoma de Baja California.

The centerpiece was the mammoth steel-and-concrete replica sand spike and a large model of Mt. Signal, along with 2,000 smaller 3-D souvenir versions of spikes and mountains. Painters and photographers in two countries contributed their respective views of the mountain. Andrea Zittel's grandmother, Opal Eshelman (an Imperial Valley pioneer), was one of the artists featured. Zittel is a well-known contemporary artist based in Joshua Tree.



Opal Eshelman. View of Mt. Signal from the Eshelman Ranch, 1974. Eshelman is the grandmother of Joshua Tree artist Andrea Zittel.

The 101 Views of Mt. Signal portion of the show included historic images by Imperial Valley postcard photographer, Leo Hetzel, Dorothea Lange, railroad photographer Richard Steinheimer and Desert Magazine cartographer Norton Allen along with myriad commercial views of the mountain—everything from crate labels to the official Imperial County seal.

The 101 Views were accompanied by a collection of poems, stories and essays including a nod to the native occupants, by Anastasia Vellas.

There's smoke along Mt. Signal

Have the Kumeyaay come home

To spend the winter along the Yuha

In the Valley among their own?

After first setting eyes on a sand spike on his Florida road trip in the mid-90s, McCollum went at his quest like a man obsessed. By joining a “rocks and fossils” *listserv*, he discovered the objects of his affection were a subset of geological formations called

concretions and were found almost exclusively at the base of Mt. Signal, west of Calexico.

No one really knows how the sand spikes formed but there are lots of theories: they are petrified gopher holes, fossilized turnips. Desert Magazine writer Harold Weight called them “one of the strangest attractions in nature’s mineralogical sideshow.”



Bowling with sand spikes. Charles W. Herbert, 1957.

We know that Mt. Signal was once an island in an inland sea and that the spikes likely formed underwater. Collectors who combed the area found them buried several feet under the sand, almost always pointing west. One of McCollum’s ongoing themes has been his interest in objects: How objects like sand spikes come to be associated with a place, and the practice—common to tourists and artists—of reproducing and mass producing those objects.

To enlist recruits, McCollum joined the Imperial Valley Gem and Mineral Society, and spoke at Kiwanis. He likened his task to planning a small town parade. His process was inspired by the legendary installation artist Christo, who believed in engaging local residents in his efforts. McCollum paraphrases Christo: “The art isn’t the final object. The art is getting all the permission from all the different townships to do what we do. That’s where the art is.”

Soon after embarking on his mission, McCollum was at a dinner in Berlin—where he was having a show—seated next to a young artist named Andrea Zittel. McCollum began talking about the mythical mountain, Mt. Signal, and the mysterious sand spikes. Zittel then said

her mother's family helped found the Imperial Valley and her grandmother was an artist who painted many paintings of Mt. Signal. Such blinding serendipity told McCollum he was on the right track.



Early construction of the All American canal, with Mt. Signal in the background.

All along, he wasn't thinking about public art or site-specific art or how his concept would play on Instagram and in art magazines. He was thinking about the sand spikes and the mountain.

A friend in New York led him to Ivo Mesquita, a curator for InSITE—a public art collaboration between San Diego and Tijuana. In McCollum's proposal to the group, he said he wanted to create interest in the overlooked Imperial Valley border region: "It is interesting to me that people from San Diego often know much more about their neighbors in Tijuana than they know about their neighbors in Imperial Valley." InSITE, still in operation today, applauded the goal and helped to fund the project.

McCollum purchased dozens of sand spikes from collectors, and enlisted local historians along with Sheila Dollente, a poet and artist from Calexico, and the writer Anastasia "Stacy" Vellas from Brawley—her parents worked on farms there in the 1940s. "Sheila was wonderful, and Stacy a dream come true," McCollum said recently. (Both women have since passed away.)

The local hero of the saga is the little Pioneers' Museum. By visiting local museums and historical societies, McCollum quickly learned the difference between well-funded art museums and historical museums, which are perpetually broke. He introduced himself to

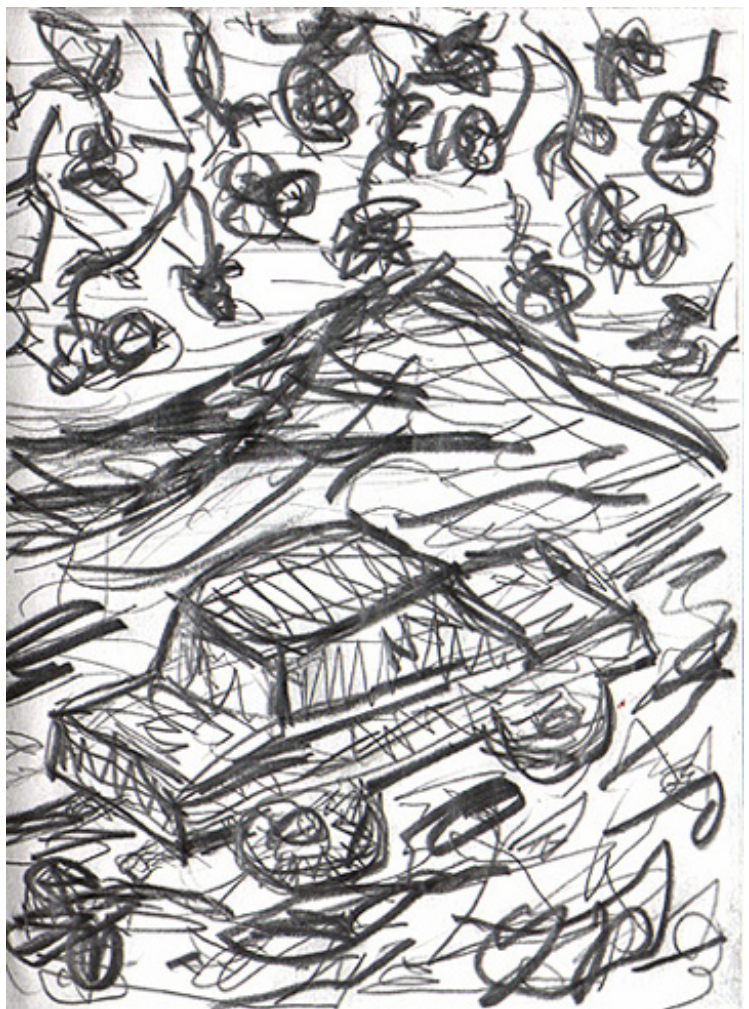
Museum volunteer Ginger Ryerson. Her husband had helped build the Imperial Valley irrigation canals and Ryerson herself was an artist who had painted Mt. Signal many times. Enthused by McCollum's vision, Ryerson offered to enlist local painters.

"We had very little in common except we loved the mountain and we liked each other a lot," McCollum said in the Smithsonian interview. He was always aware that he was a visitor, relying on the grace of locals. "People who visit from New York are not automatically loved by all," he said.

Sheila Dollente introduced him to a young artist, Bibiana Padilla Maltos, who recruited artists from Mexicali. Ryerson led him to JoAnn Dutton, an installation artist who did the Village WaTuTu displays for the Living Desert. Dutton made the huge model of the sand spike. The table-sized Mount Signal model was built by staff at El Museo Universitario de la Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, in Mexicali, Mexico. Souvenir makers in Tijuana made 1,000 small copies of a sand spike, and another 1,000 small Mt. Signals, with the mountain's Mexican name on one side and its California name on the other.



Ruben Garcia Benavides, El Centinela



Julio Ruiz drawing of Mt. Signal. McCollum says Ruiz drew this on a napkin when the two were having lunch.



A view of the exhibition at San Diego State University. InSite Archives.

To add authenticity to the sand spike models, McCollum and Maltos traveled to the base of Mt. Signal to collect sand. “Bibi and I scooped up a big bucket of sand at the foot of the mountain, to use for gluing to the sand spike casts,” McCollum recalls. “While we were there, two border guards snuck up on us. They appeared coming from two different directions, with their guns drawn. They thought we were doing something suspicious! Burying a dead body? When they realized it was all OK, we all laughed and we showed them some of the models of the mountain we had in the car. They were very nice.”

If the cast of characters sounds exhausting, consider one of McCollum’s admirable goals: “I’m going to do everything so that I have as many people to thank as possible when the thing is over.”



Allan McCollum’s panoramic photo of Mt. Signal.

In the years since 2000, the prolific artist has gone on to many more mad quests and considerable professional acclaim. His work is included in more than 90 museums worldwide. But when you ask him about the sand spikes, it's fresh in his mind. He talks about Ginger, Bibi, Ivo, Andrea and the others as cherished old friends. As are the sand spikes. In fact, he still has a few scattered around his New York apartment.

The Mt. Signal spikes are mostly extinct now. They were collected rapaciously—some crushed by bulldozers—and as a result are now seldom seen except on eBay. But the desert is always moving and now and then the wind shifts to uncover strange objects pointed west.

Ginger Ryerson tells me she still finds a newly uncovered spike on occasion, and she painted eight new scenes of Mt. Signal just this summer. While the border fence has physically severed Mt. Signal from the Imperial Valley, nothing can sever the bond between this mountain and this place. Ryerson says: “Absolutely we consider it our mountain.”

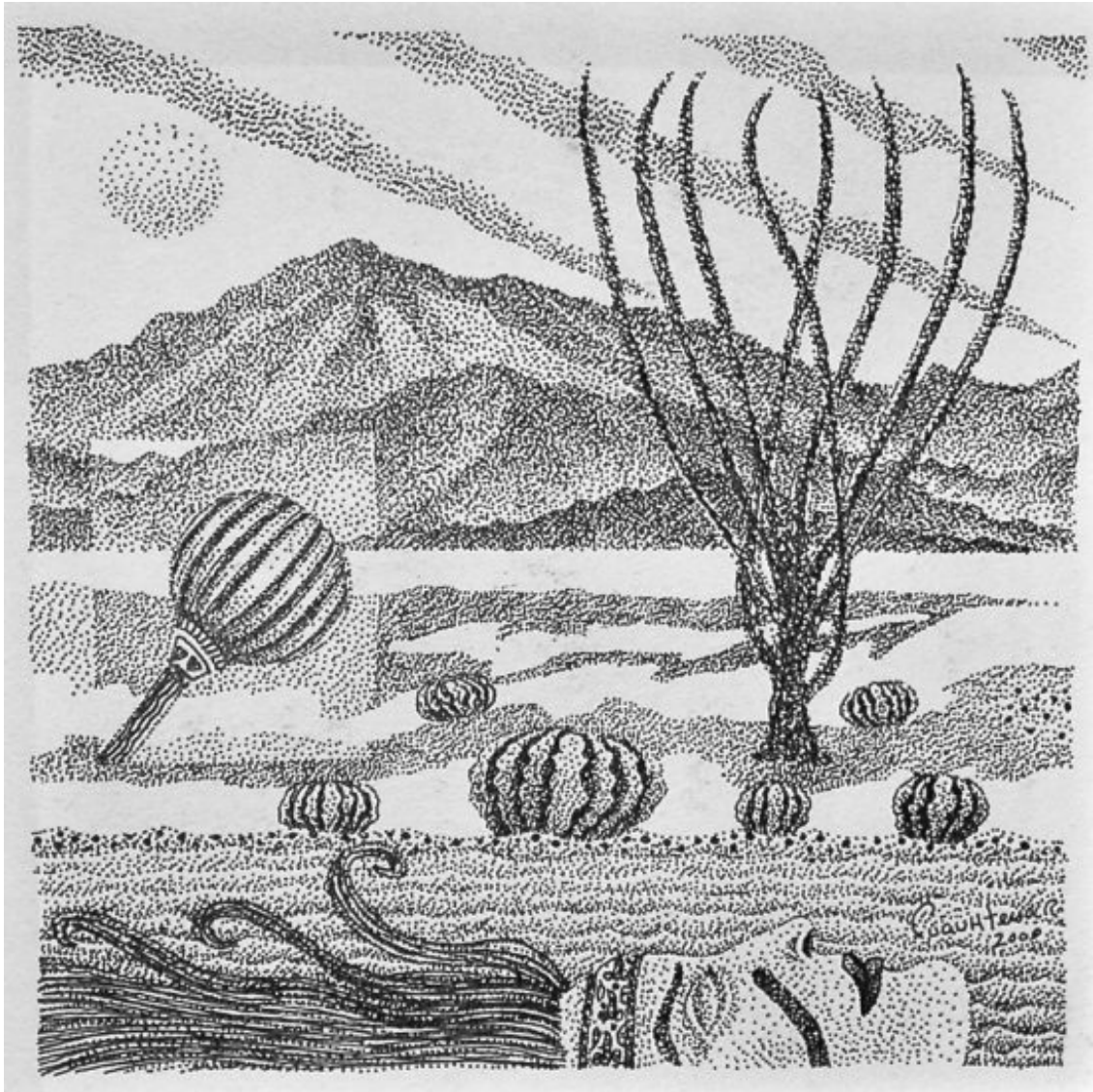
Exhibition title page:

<http://www.allanmccollum.net/allanmcnyc/mtsignaltitlepage.html>

101 Images of Mt. Signal: <http://allanmccollum.net/amcimages/mtsignalimages.html>

ICA Miami Retrospective of Allan McCollum's career:

<https://icamiami.org/exhibition/allan-mccollum/>



Cuauhtemoc Rodriguez, India ink drawing of Mt. Signal.