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Big video at Fort Point's 'International Orange'

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by Sam Whiting



Big ships are the focus of Doug Hall's installation for "International Orange," a group show at Fort Point to mark the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge. Photo: Doug Hall

Like any tourist, Doug Hall pedals a rental bicycle onto the [Golden Gate Bridge](#) while carrying a camera in a backpack. Unlike any tourist, Hall is assured that his pictures will be seen.

Seen continuously, in fact, by every visitor to Fort Point National Historic Site from Memorial Day to Halloween. Hall's 30-minute video loop is central to "International Orange," a group show that opens May 24 to provide artistic context to the 75th anniversary celebration of the landmark bridge. Sixteen select artists will install commissioned pieces in the brick fort, which will remain open and free as always.

Anybody who meanders up to the second tier will be drawn to a dark brick archway that was once a gun emplacement. For "Chrysopylae," as Hall's piece is called, the archway will be spanned by two huge screens. Projected from behind, the video will give the viewer an enormous panorama of a day on the bay as people, ships, weather, time, and, most prominently, giant steel container ships all pass through the gate.

"The installation is trying to situate itself within the architecture of the fort and the context of the environment that surrounds it," says Hall, who is well-known as a media artist interested in natural and man-made monuments.

He's chased tornadoes and witnessed winter storms on the Bering Sea. But he's never done anything big on the biggest tourist site in the city where he was born and lives.

"I have flirted with the bridge," he says, "but as a focal point for a project, it intimidated me."

He would probably be avoiding it still if he hadn't been wandering around the Haines Gallery at the exact moment Cheryl Haines was conceiving of the show. It is sponsored by the For-Site Foundation, which organized "Presidio Habitats," a yearlong show scattered around Fort Scott and visited by thousands.



San Francisco media artist Doug Hall's twin cameras atop Fort Point, above, follow container ship traffic, right, through the Golden Gate. Photo: Doug Hall

'Visceral experience'

The Fort Point project is trickier because it is within walls and needs a grabber, such as mesmerizing up-close video footage.

"I thought he could contribute something really important to the project," Haines says. "There is such a visceral experience when one encounters the bridge, and I wanted someone who could capture that and share his vision in a unique way."

What started with a chat at the Haines Gallery front desk ended in a commission large enough for Hall to hire five collaborators.

From the start, Hall's vision has been to center it on the container ships, he says. "These huge machines which come plowing beneath the bridge are the pivot around which the work revolves."

He bought two \$1,500 Panasonic video cameras and had photography director Stephen Buckingham design a platform so the cameras could sit side by side on a tripod, the whole rig portable. Then Hall downloaded an app that gives two-day notice on ship traffic, and devised a strategy to film the ships from land, bridge and sea.

Any day that looked busy, he'd load up his van and drive to the bridge from his home/studio in Noe Valley.

To get the ships on approach, he needed the west side of the span, which is the side restricted to bicyclists only. Hall didn't have a bicycle, so his first stop was the Sports Basement adjacent to Crissy Field for a rental that immediately labels one a tourist. The video cameras have a built-in stabilizer that defeats the vibration of the [cars](#) on the span. The two cameras working in synch defeat the length of the containers, which can run to four football fields.

View from the water

To film the ships while on steady footing was obvious. "Anybody can shoot from the bridge," he says. But not anybody can shoot from the water, and that is where Hall's own heritage helped.

He is a descendant of a 19th century bar pilot named Melville Erskine, and to drop a seagoing name like that is an immediate letter of introduction. But it wouldn't have been enough if he hadn't attended a going-away party for his

son. One of the guests was a San Francisco Bar Pilot named Zachary Kellerman, a pretty good seagoing name itself. Soon enough, Hall was allowed to go out with the bar pilots, who by law must board and steer any commercial ship that comes through the Gate.

Six times, Hall and his producer, Starr Sutherland, have been on the chase boat as it has gone out to deliver a pilot to a ship, and followed it back in.

"I'm too old for this," says Hall, 68. "There were times when we were literally 10 feet away and moving at 12 knots behind a rudder that is the size of a car. It's the only way you can get a sense of the scale and the force behind these things."

In the end, 40 hours of material will be snipped down to 30 minutes. An original soundtrack, with noise of the bay enhanced by cellist Jean Jenrenaud, formerly of the Kronos Quartet, will lend to an atmosphere that is more abstract than documentary.

"Rather than treating the bridge as an alien thing on the landscape, I treat it as part of the landscape," Hall says. "It's almost like the bridge is part of nature."

International Orange: The free art installation at Fort Point to honor the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge opens May 25 and runs through October. www.for-site.org.



Hall, who has chased tornadoes and seen winter storms on the Bering Sea, sets up his cameras on top of San Francisco's Fort Point to capture a panorama of the bay. Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle



San Francisco media artist Doug Hall's twin cameras atop Fort Point, above, follow container ship traffic, right, through the Golden Gate. Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle



Videographer Doug Hall makes his way through Fort Point after another day of shooting container ship traffic through the Golden Gate. Hall is one of fifteen artists involved in a major installation at Fort Point that will celebrate the 75th anniversary of Golden Gate Bridge. Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle



Videographer Doug Hall is one of the artists involved in a major installation at Fort Point that will commemorate the 75th anniversary of Golden Gate Bridge Saturday. Hall has been filming container ship traffic through the Golden Gate using twin video cameras mounted side by side on a tripod. He has been shooting from the bridge span and riding out with bar pilot's boats to shoot the ships from the water. Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle



Videographer Doug Hall is one of 15 artists involved in a major installation at San Francisco's Fort Point that will open for 75th anniversary of Golden Gate Bridge. Hall has been filming container ship traffic through the Golden Gate using twin video cameras mounted side by side on a tripod. Photo: Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

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