

REACHING FOR THE LIGHT

DANIEL HAWKINS' WILD WEST DREAM OF A DESERT LIGHTHOUSE

TYLER STALLINGS

Out in San Bernardino County's high desert, north of Los Angeles, a dream stands fifty feet tall on a barren hill, purchased by Daniel Hawkins in 2011, surrounded by creosote and fortified with a chain-link fence. It is built with a steel frame interior, covered by translucent polycarbonate paneling, giving it a unique glow when lit from inside. Nearby, there is a Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) natural gas processing plant - and the ghost town of Hinkley, once bustling with four-thousand people, is now down to an estimated three hundred. The mysterious light on the hill hovering over the outskirts of town, installed five years ago, is Daniel Hawkins' incongruous and strange *Desert Lighthouse*.

Hawkins' artwork often consists of the deliberate undertaking of improbably ambitious interactions with the landscape—seen in the *Desert Lighthouse* project and his ongoing actual-size recreation of the Hoover Dam in piecemeal fragments. For him, cycles of grandiosity, failure, and rationalization are explored through sculptural, architectural, land art, and performative strategies. His work falls within the legacy of land artists, such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, yet stands, literally, outside of the art context of the white walls of a gallery and museum. The *Desert Lighthouse*, an architectural folly, and perplexing spectacle, is situated in a desolate and particularly inhospitable part of the Mojave desert. Those who encounter it by chance must wonder about its origins — was it erected by PG&E? by the military? or by a UFO cult?

But prior to the *Desert Lighthouse's* hilltop incarnation, a version did exist within a museum context when I curated the 2014 exhibition, *Desert Lighthouse Ultimatum: The Second Installation in Daniel Hawkins' Desert Lighthouse Trilogy* for the University of California Riverside's Barbara & Art Culver Center of the Arts in downtown Riverside.

Hawkins immersed us in his yet-to-be fully realized *Desert Lighthouse* vision with an array of artifacts and documents, centering on a fully functioning, 13-foot tall, top one-fifth of his lighthouse that he claimed was soon to be destined for the desert hilltop outside of Hinkley. The lighthouse sat at the center of a two-story atrium and included a rotating light. The installation at the Culver Center included the artist's beautifully painted panoramic backdrops of the actual desert hilltop where the *Desert Lighthouse* would eventually stand, a pair of oversized bulletin board compositions presenting an intricate, but non-linear, pictorial representation of the *Desert Lighthouse* saga—as this was the second iteration of the *Desert Lighthouse* after the first one was torn apart by desert scavengers.

The installation also included video animations simulating the lighthouse's eventual decay — perhaps wanting to short-circuit future disappointment if this next version could not withstand being a target of gun enthusiasts or perhaps being appropriated by the nearby military base.

Nevertheless, Hawkins' energy and belief in bringing this project to fruition were embodied in a limited-edition *Desert Lighthouse Prospectus*. It was a satirical commentary on the bureaucracy that Hawkins had to wade through with the city and county, but it was also a serious solicitation for potential investors for what Hawkins deemed an “exciting Land Art investment opportunity!”

Historically, the first lighthouses were fires along ancient shorelines to alert ships of the nearby rocky shores. The first known lighthouse ever built was the Pharos of Alexandria in ancient Egypt between 280-247 BC. The oldest existing lighthouse structure from the Roman empire still exists on the Dover coast, along with two others in Spain and Libya. A bright and long-lasting light was always the goal. Wood, charcoal, oil, and

LEFT
Daniel Hawkins reaching towards
a model of the Desert Lighthouse,
2016.

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Desert Lighthouse Ultimatum
installation view, 2014.



BERY Lighthouse



candles were some material iterations to achieve such light. The invention of the Fresnel lens in the mid-19th century reflected light through various prisms that made the brightest lights to date. The Fresnel lens, a technology still used today in operating lighthouses, allowed a relatively modest light to be projected through its intricate prisms for miles.

As a symbol, the lighthouse is liminal architecture as it stands between the past of the daylight and the future of its night. A lighthouse rests between sea and land. They are often situated on the precipice far from where most people live – the furthest point of habitability. Crashing waves are a lighthouse's opponent: lapping the land, trying to erode it, to get to the lighthouse, to extinguish the light, to let the ships crash.

The biggest population of the citizens who remain in Hinkley are the creosote bushes. The town is vacant for the most part—shuttered businesses, church, and razed school. Many of the houses and the land were bought by PG&E, after the success of Erin Brockovich's lawsuit award in 1996 of three hundred and thirty-three million dollars for the contamination of Hinkley's natural water table.

The hill on which the lighthouse stands is approximately six miles to the northwest of the still extant PG&E plant for extracting natural gas – near the precipice of the invisible but very deadly underground toxic plume. PG&E used highly toxic hexavalent chromium (Cr-6) to prevent algae and rust in the ducts of their cooling towers. When the towers were cleaned, the flushed-out water carried the toxins into unlined wastewater pools, which for decades seeped into the ground, and into people's drinking water. The plume, an ominous yet invisible entity, still lurks below the ground, changing shape, and growing.

Most people won't recognize the name of Hinkley, California when mentioned until they are reminded of Erin Brockovich. In the early 1990s, she worked as a secretarial assistant in a law firm and only learned about Hinkley's ecological disaster by chance. Brockovich was tasked with managing pro bono real estate sale paperwork for Hinkley resident Roberta Walker when she noticed concerning medical documents



associated with the property sale. After being approached, Walker revealed systemic health problems in the community.

At the time, many Hinkley residents began experiencing asthma, unusual joint aches, and concerning incidents of various cancers - many of which defied statistical probability. Fear permeated the community. Concerned parents who took their kids to the hospital emergency room for nosebleeds were often dismissed, or worse, blamed for child abuse. Until Brockovich's legal intervention, the environmental disaster affecting the community remained largely unknown.

Now, Hinkley has been nearly erased from the desert. PG&E has been busy buying up homes, demolishing them, and planting creosote bushes over the scars in the landscape, effectively erasing the memory of the once-thriving desert town. While former residents still face uncertain futures and lingering health problems, including stomach surgeries, breast surgeries, and prostate surgeries. The value of the land has plummeted, with the only buyer being PG&E. Their systematic purchasing of demolishing of homes after the lawsuit allows them to avoid future liability since most of the land was now owned by its polluter.

Since the lawsuit, PG&E has been trying to clean

ABOVE
Philip Galle
Pharos of Alexandria, 1572

RIGHT
Map of the Hexavalent Chromium (Cr-6) contamination area in proximity to the Desert Lighthouse.

up the groundwater. One process is to pump the water into alfalfa fields, where the perennial flower plants turn it into non-toxic trivalent chromium (Cr-3).

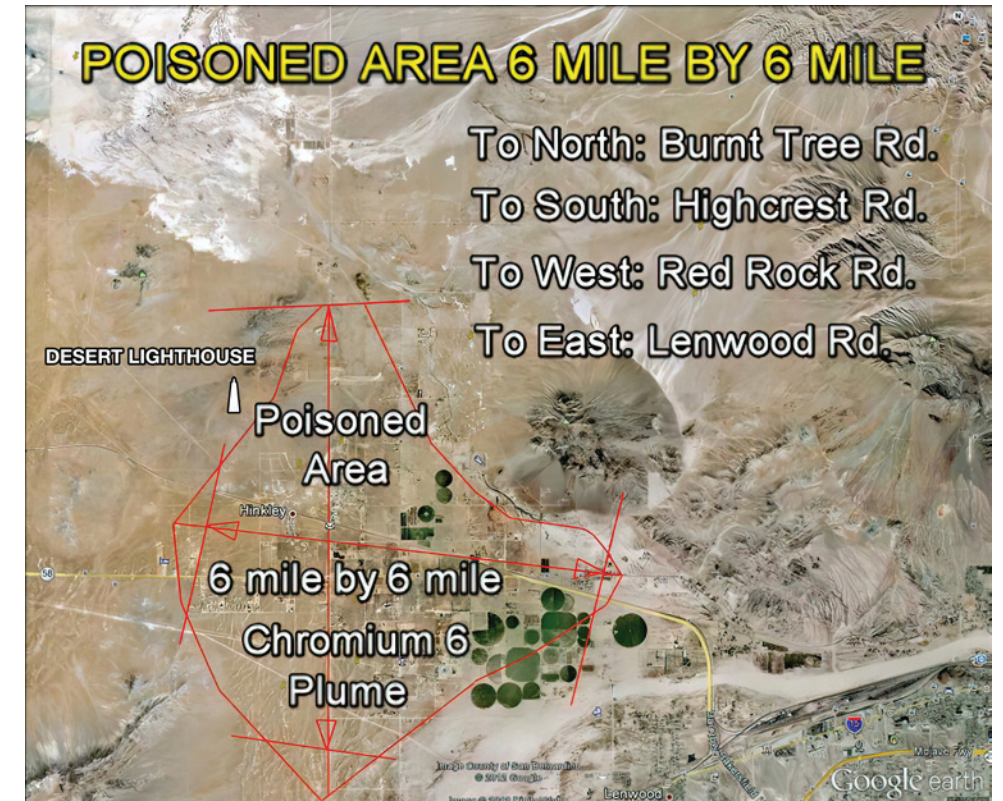
Perhaps in a turn of fate, Hawkins' *Desert Lighthouse* and the hexavalent chromium contamination could become a source for epiphanies, like the Oracle at Delphi. In ancient Greece, the gods spoke through the oracle, advising rulers and citizens with divine utterances. In the late 1990's, archaeologists proved that hairline cracks in the shrine allowed petrochemical fumes to rise to the surface, specifically ethylene, that produced euphoria and hallucinations.

There is no fog in the desert. There is no ocean either, although the Mojave desert was once under an ancient one. Lighthouses are not beacons to head towards, for the most part, but are signals of caution, a warning for a dangerous precipice. Do people seeing the *Desert Lighthouse's* glowing tower and blinking light in the night sky think that it may be a warning to stay away from a secret military outpost, to stay

away from those who will shoot, loot, or ravage anything that seems abandoned, or to stay away from the impossible to see toxic hexavalent chromium plume?

Once, when Hawkins was checking on the lighthouse, he spent the night inside. But when something seems abandoned in the desert, like the entire town of Hinkley, it usually means the "desert hyenas" are lurking just out of sight. Desert Hyenas, a locally coined term, refers to a broad group of drug users, scavengers, and armed and trigger-happy misfits. During this visit, while Daniel was inside, shots rang out. As he tells it, he blasted a fog horn to let them know that someone was inside. The gunshots stopped, and Hawkins immediately rushed to the observation deck to look for the assailants. Even with high-powered binoculars, they could not be seen. During a day break inspection of the structure, Hawkins spotted bullets lodged in the polycarbonate glass surrounding the Fresnel beacon.

What do PG&E and the remaining few hundred citizens think about the *Desert Lighthouse*?





LEFT
Bullet holes from the assault on
the lighthouse. 2018.

Perhaps, each side thinks it's a tower spying on the other, like Sauron's eye in *Lord of the Rings*, scanning the landscape. To be caught in its eye is to fall under the lighthouse's influence. During the *Desert Lighthouse's* construction, rumors started to form in town. Some residents believed it was a secretive military project to "keep an eye on the disaster of Hinkley." When the lighthouse began operating, they thought it might be a navigational light tower for the military aircraft that frequently fly overhead from nearby Edwards Air Force Base. No matter the theory or rumor, during the early development of the lighthouse the specter of suspicion was born. For the citizens, it's the eye of a governmental agency, or possibly PG&E. For the company, it's the eye watching the unraveling of one of the most famous ecological disasters in the United States, monitoring for future contamination.

Now, the *Desert Lighthouse* is beyond Hawkins' singular dream. The last lines in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, come to mind:

"And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock... his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity...."

The light in the distance becomes a symbol about our dreams being out of reach, and getting farther and farther away as time passes, even though we keep trying to grab for them. Perhaps the remaining Hinkley citizens envisage its resurrection, but it won't, as it will take decades for PG&E to clean up the contamination if it's even possible at all.

The *Desert Lighthouse's* liminality means that when encountered in its surrounding arid land, one is still in the middle of a journey, of a transition, of a rite of passage—a classic tale of seeking to fulfill dreams in a perceived wild west of America. Is it a warning light about where we are headed, or a beacon for our minds to imagine new possibilities? Or, are we just lost at sea in a desert of our own making? ■

Tyler Stallings is a writer, curator, and filmmaker living in Southern California. He curated *Desert Lighthouse Ultimatum: The Second Installation* in Daniel Hawkins' *Desert Lighthouse Trilogy* for the Culver Center of the Arts at the University of California Riverside in 2014. His curatorial work focuses on political, social, and popular culture themes through the arts. His essays about arid regions in the southwest are collected in his book, *Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States* (Blue West Books, 2014).