

## **Calif. art work emerges from Solyndra's bankruptcy**

TERENCE CHEA - Associated Press - Associated Press

A small building tucked in the hills of Northern California shines with an unusual green glow from hundreds of glass tubes jutting out from one side toward nearby bushes.

Inside, the dark wooden shed contains an undulating wall filled with the translucent rods, each like a 3-foot-long drinking straw, sucking in a cool breeze and the rushing sounds from a nearby waterfall.

The work of experimental architecture is called the SOL Grotto — and Republicans are making fun of it as a symbol of a \$528 million federal boondoggle, calling it the most expensive art project ever built.

The newly opened installation owes its 1,368 distinctive glass rods, and its name, to Solyndra — the failed solar company that received a hefty sum in federal loans before going bankrupt and becoming a favorite target for critics of President Barack Obama's energy policy.

When the Fremont-based solar company went under, it left behind millions of 39-inch glass tubes custom-made for its signature solar panels.

Husband and wife design partners Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello got the rods from a storage company that ended up stuck with thousands of pallets of them and created the installation in the Botanical Garden at the University of California, Berkeley.

"We thought they glowed so beautifully, we had to use them in the grotto," said San Fratello.

"These materials, instead of being disposed of, are being reused and recycled in a fantastic way," she added.

Like Solyndra, the installation has become an object of ridicule for critics, especially with the presidential election only months away.

The Republican-controlled House Energy and Commerce Committee put out a news release titled, "UC Berkeley's Solyndra Artwork Would Shatter Record for World's Most Expensive Piece."

Three years ago, the federal government made a \$528 million loan guarantee to Solyndra to promote renewable energy and create "green jobs."

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In the spring of 2010, President Obama visited the company's newly built Silicon Valley campus, praising Solyndra for "leading the way toward a brighter and more prosperous future."

Then 15 months later, it filed for bankruptcy protection.

"What we have here is a very expensive monument to failure," said Jeff Wald, a Republican Party official in Alameda County, standing outside the shuttered Solyndra building.

"It's disheartening to see the government wasting so much money," he said.

Attorneys for Solyndra did not respond to a request for comment Thursday.

Obama administration officials say the decision to give Solyndra a loan guarantee was not political. They say cheap imports from China, the collapse of the European market for solar panels and other economic changes doomed the California firm.

Last week, a federal bankruptcy judge cleared the way for creditors to begin voting on a proposed reorganization plan for Solyndra. The government is expected to recover little, if any, of its investment.

But while the company failed to draw enough interest to stay open, the grotto so far has been a success, attracting visitors such as Oakland retiree Jean Richardson.

"It's beautiful," Richardson said after stepping out of the shed.

"I was fascinated by how the light came through the tubes from the outside sunlight," she added.

The tubes came courtesy of JIT Transportation, a San Jose company that had a contract with Solyndra to store and deliver 8 million of them to a manufacturing plant.

But Solyndra went under before JIT hauled a single rod or received any payments, said Gene Ashley, the company's president.

The bankruptcy judge said the solar firm no longer wanted the tubes, and JIT was left with the job of getting rid of them.

"We kind of got stuck holding the bag," Ashley said.

"Bad deals happen, but this one was a really bad deal for a lot of people," he said. "Guys like us just get left out in the cold."

Ashley had trouble finding local recyclers willing to take the tubes because they were made of an unusual glass. He found some out-of-state companies that accepted them, but still had hundreds of thousands of the 1-inch diameter rods taking up space in his warehouse.

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So Ashley decided he'd offered them free to artists, including one who used them to make a chandelier.

When Rael and San Frantello saw the tubes, they were amazed by how they glowed. They stuck them through a cardboard box and came up with the idea for the SOL Grotto. They now hope to build a similar project on a larger scale.

Rael and San Frantello still have thousands of rods left over, but depending on how big they want to go, Ashley could probably help them out again — he still has a mountain of about 700,000 of them sitting in the parking lot of his Milpitas warehouse.

Rael, a professor of architecture at UC Berkeley, said he and his wife weren't trying to make political statement with the SOL Grotto, even if they acknowledge the name's intentional double-meaning, playing off the company's name and "S-O-L," a slang term meaning "out of luck" preceded by a vulgar word.

Rael and San Frantello say they're happy it's generating discussion and drawing visitors. He doesn't blame the Obama administration for Solyndra's bankruptcy.

"Good things come from failure," Rael said. "Companies that take risk, risk failure, but there's a tremendous amount of investment that isn't lost."

He added, "All the knowledge that was gained moves forward in some shape or form."

While the grotto isn't drawing praise from many Republicans, it has garnered uniformly positive reviews from visitors, said Paul Licht, director of the Berkeley Botanical Garden.

"If a political discourse has brought people into the garden," Licht said, "then I'd say finally politics has done something useful for us."

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