

# Sculpture

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### Leo Villareal

#### Conner Contemporary Art

Response to Leo Villareal's digital light sculptures focuses on their trippy, techno, and rave chic qualities, finding little meaning or content. While it is true that he partially draws on the hawking effects of Las Vegas and pop culture, his "hipnotic" sequences of colored light bulbs and LEDs transcend their gee-wiz impact and lounge aesthetic. His pieces induce trance-like reveries that spin on a cosmic groove, even as they celebrate the ephemeral beauty emanating from the union of math, technology, and art.

The edge between new media and sculpture owes much to Thomas Wilfred (1889–1968), the Danish-born artist who after moving to the U.S., radicalized the notion of color music in the first half of the 20th century. He created what he termed a *clavilux*, an organ that played "lumia" or kinetic, color-music projections. Some 50 years later, Villareal and others of his generation use a computer to program their displays. When considered through Kandinsky's research into the relation of color and music, as well as Dan Flavin's Minimalist fluorescent sculptures, Bruce Nauman's conceptual neon works, and James Turrell's spatial light environments, Villareal's digital light sculptures distinguish themselves by their painterly effects and their acknowledged affinity to the biologically and heavenly suggestive compositions of Ross Bleckner.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer was instantly aware of the dimmed lights, the overstuffed beanbag chairs, and the spacey, electronic music by James Healy and Jhno—all intended to maximize the ambient potential of Villareal's sculptures. If anything the music was too much, and we may hope that in future projects, Villareal, who has composed his own sound installations, will write his own compositions. Out of this environment, the pulsating flashes and fluid transformations of colored light gradually work their magic.

*Sunburst*, the most complex work using bulbs, measures five feet in diameter and is encased in a white Plexiglas cylinder over a translucent, stretched vinyl surface. Featuring 80 orange low-wattage bulbs arranged in four concentric rings according to the first four multiples of eight, the piece triggers a broad range of associations—fireflies flirting, a roulette wheel spinning, search lights probing in a fog, or some unknown code tapping itself out in desperate need to communicate—against an engaging, abstract backdrop of off-and-on blinking in which the negative space and cast shadows often carry as much presence as the lights.

The two LED-based compositions stole the show, giving a sense of infinite possibilities, both of metaphor and of pacing. In *Hex3*, a circular shell measuring three feet in diameter, Villareal configures six strips of LEDs into a hexagon and arranges another six into spokes. The combination produces an axonometric projection of a cube. Changes in color and sequencing yield myriad shapes and symbols, including a peace sign, a starfish, and an asterisk, with a nod to Sol LeWitt's transmutations of an open cube. The more monumental *Lightscape* takes on the proportions of a mural-size painting by Morris Louis or Tom Downing. Using a palette of red, green, and blue LEDs over a translucent scrim, Villareal creates a mesmerizing display of geometric patterns and fluid transformations, which seem to hover over their framing confines the way the aurora floats in the polar skies. Hints of Joseph Albers's brightly colored nested squares modulate into fuzzy organic veins of earthy hues reminiscent of a Mark Rothko painting. The sequence is remarkable in that the permutations never repeat, allowing for a full surrender and stream of consciousness on the part of the viewer.

Villareal first does a layout based on the number of lights he is using and the anticipated size of the finished work. After some rapid sketches that he later develops in Photoshop, he translates the design, to scale, in a CAD program. He typically follows by isolating sets and their sequencing. Patterns begin with simple on-and-off motion and become increasingly complex through variations in dimming. Then using Macromedia's Director, he generates software simulations, which allow him to work out the intricacies of patterns and sequences. The key to this multi-part process is the difference between what appears on the screen and what happens in real space with actual lights—the unpredictable effects that surprise the artist and whomever else experiences the work.

Recalling earlier artistic experiments informed by theosophy and the fourth dimension, Villareal's sculptures speak of the transcendental potential of light, color, and movement. Just as they represent collaboration between man and machine, they enlist our willingness to project, believe, and find meaning in their high-tech patterns. At times organic and at others decidedly artificial, their shifting visual sensations engage us in an elusive struggle between chaos and order. Still, we never forget they are devices. Upon leaving their space, we are torn between knowing the gulf that separates us from our mechanical creations and remembering the materialized vibrations of our bodies recently merging with the cosmic vibratory force that his sculptures suggest.

—Sarah Tanguy