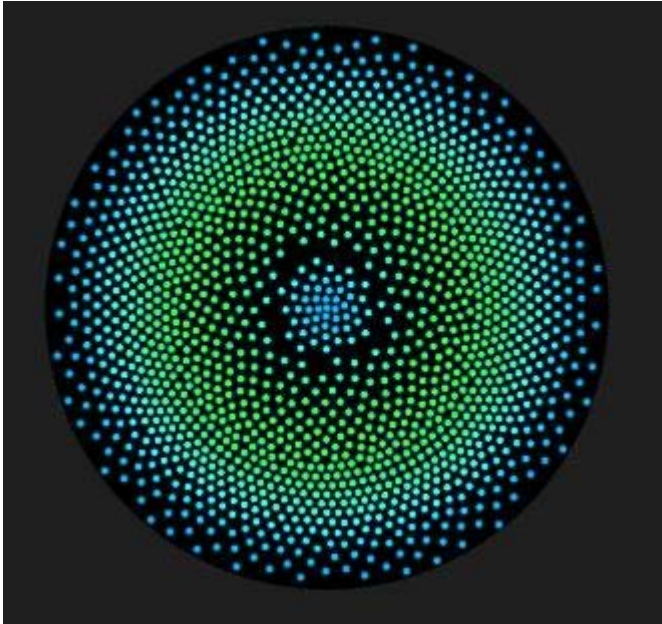




September 23, 2008

Interview: Leo Villareal



[Leo Villareal](#), 41, is a New York-based artist who works with light. He debuts new work in Washington this month: *Leo Villareal: New Work* opens on Friday at [Conner Contemporary Art](#) and his installation in the concourse walkway between the East and West Buildings of the [National Gallery of Art](#) is already underway and expected to be complete by late fall. The NGA installation will be on view for a year, and consists of approximately 42,000 computer-programmed LED nodes that run through the hallway.

What drew you to working with light?

I was working with technology and programming doing virtual reality research and I had this moment when I realized that I could make an interesting work of art with a small amount of information. Light allowed me to visually manifest the code I was writing and I wouldn't have to work on a screen — there was no computer screen or projector.

Have you ever worked in other media?

I worked with sound and did some experimentation with other things, but light is what I'm most attracted to.

What are some of the ideas and themes that your work engages with?

I'm very interested in rules and underlying structures, which all tie in with the code I'm writing. There are things in nature that inspire me, like wave patterns or natural systems that at first glance appear to be very complex, but when I study them further there are simple rules that govern them. That's what I try to get at in my code — building simple rules that refer to some of these ideas. Laws are another thing I've been working on lately. I'm not a physicist, but I use rules to create software and in the software I'm able to play with parameters like gravity, velocity, friction. I'm able to use these parameters and access them as an artist and see what compelling things result.

How long does it take to make a typical piece?

It really varies, since the code I'm working on is always evolving. I start with one thing, and one thing leads to the next, so sometimes some pieces take years and years to make, particularly large scale installations.

How do the upcoming show at Conner Contemporary and the installation at the National Gallery fit together?

They're separate. One is a gallery show with some discrete pieces that hang on the wall and the piece at the National Gallery is a site-specific piece that's custom made for the building and on a much larger scale. They're very different things, but I would say that one thing that ties them together is the software and some of the sequencing tools, and you could find some connections there.

Who are some of your artistic inspirations?

Certainly major light artists like Dan Flavin and James Turrell, along with other systems artist who deal with rules, like Sol Le Witt. These are not necessarily artists using technology, but it's more about technology's underlying organizational principles.

How long have you been making art?

I finished college in 1990 and got into technology, so it was probably 1991 when I started making the work I'm doing now. It was a very long process of learning about the many options of technology, and it took many years to find the right tools.

What do you see down the road artistically?

I've been exploring the grid, and I have lots of grid pieces of all different scales. What I'm also exploring now are new tools that allow me to create more random patterning. One of the pieces on display at Conner is called *Big Bang* (above) and I wrote a computer program that helped me lay out 1,600 points in a 5-foot diameter circle, with certain rules governing it — but not a regular radio pattern. I'm also exploring other organizational structures and frameworks.

*Big Bang (study) – 2008 - computer drawing for new digital light sculpture
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