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Synthesiser's synthetic synthesis: Interview with leading New Media artist Leo Villareal

He talks to The Art Newspaper ahead of his upcoming show at White Columns

Adrian Dannatt

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In the last few years Leo Villareal has become an ubiquitous presence in the Manhattan art community, as perhaps the leading young "New Media" artist. A teacher, talker, theoretician, organiser and hands-on sculptor, Villareal is constantly trying to push the limits of innovative technology. As a result he creates beautiful, eerie and sometimes eerily beautiful individual works and installations. His first show in New York as curator opens this month.

TAN: The show you have organised at White Columns is called "Synth" and combines computer technology and inflatable architecture. Could you explain some of the ideas behind this "synthetic synthesis"?

Leo Villareal: "Synth" embodies synthesis (building a larger whole from various different parts), the synthetic (what is not real or organic) and synthesiser (one who synthesises or machines that perform such a function). Each work in "Synth" feels "active" and seemingly "alive", but in reality has been created through the use of computer technology. There will be no visible computers in "Synth", only large projections, light and sound.

TAN: Does "Synth" represent a statement of your own aesthetic interests by other means, a self-portrait of your artistic concerns?

LV: "Synth" certainly connects to my aesthetic interests. I wanted to expand and explore these ideas by inviting others to participate. I have long admired Alexander Ross's paintings and Daniel Torop's photographs. Both these artists have produced digital works for "Synth".

Ross is modifying a video game, inserting his own creations, while Torop is presenting a digital seascape that dynamically responds to viewer's input.

Dennis Delzotto, who has been creating inflatables for many years in the underground art/music scene, and Eric Liftin from Mesh Architectures are giving form to the exhibition, creating the “container”.

Sound artists such as Gregor Asch (D.J. Olive), Sontext, David Lee Myers and Keiko Uenishi (o.blaat) are contributing a dynamic acoustical element.

All of this adds up to a very layered collaborative experience. I approached the show as I would planting a garden—selecting interesting elements and putting them together in what amounts to a hyper-accelerated grow room. I think that the pieces will resonate in ways no one could have planned. My hope is that some sort of evolution occurs over the show's six-week life span.

TAN: It is only in the last few years with digital media that the notion of scientific technology has slowly come back into contemporary art parlance. Is there a risk that current digital work will age badly too?

LV: A lot of this work is very ephemeral, very much about now. I think it will be harder and harder to separate technology and contemporary art. The tools have just become accessible in the last few years and artists are starting to get their hands on them. I feel there is a huge amount of work to do, lots of uncharted territory to explore.

TAN: The show is sponsored by "SmashTV", a company that provides digital media services for the entertainment industry and "The agriculture" a record label for new electronic music. Is contemporary art in any way distinguishable from the music-film-TV-entertainment mesh?

LV: “SmashTV” and “The agriculture” are cool companies that have a lot of respect for art and the art context. Both companies work with creative people who are producing things all the time. I think they see art as a zone that is “pure”, more about experimentation and things that don't make “sense” and less subject to the pressures of the bottom line.

TAN: Your use of light and video creates an environmental "space" between interior design, club and audio-visual spectacle. Are you deliberately blurring boundaries between art and other sites and activities?

LV: I very much enjoy working outside of the traditional art context, whether it be installing sequenced lights in the windows of an industrial building, setting up a strobe sculpture in the desert or creating a video installation in a club. People notice and respond to my work because

the raw information it presents is different. It is not the same old recognisable pattern. My work is slippery. It plays with the brain's compulsion to pattern recognise, but resists resolution.

TAN: As well as complex installations, you have also produced a lightbox "Bulbox 1.0" in an edition with Sandra Gering. Would you like your work to cross over into sophisticated home-decoration and design objects?

LV: Art has a much larger role to play. Artists today are blurring the lines by exploring other forms, entertainment, toys, design. I like the idea of making a single thing that can function in totally different ways in different contexts.

Biography

Background: Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, lives in New York.

Education: Yale University, Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) at New York University, member of research staff at Interval Research, Palo Alto, adjunct professor of communications at NYU.

Currently showing: at White Columns, organised by Leo Villareal, including works by Villareal, Alexander Ross, Daniel Torop, Mesh Architectures, Dennis Delzotto, Sontext and others (until 28 July).

Selected exhibitions: 2001 "Synth", New York; "Massless medium: explorations in sensory immersion", New York;

Group exhibitions 2001: "Perfect 10" Soho, New York; Sandra Gering Gallery, New York; The Armory Show, New York; "Radial display", Henry Urbach Architecture; 2000: "Collector's choice", Exit Art, New York; "City of Lights", Comité Colbert, New York.

Light sculptures: "Bulbox 1.0", in the windows of Hermes, 62nd Street and Madison Avenue, New York; "Rooms for listening", California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco; "Building as display", Creative Time, New York.

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