

# Palm Beach Daily News

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## Interactive Contemporary Art

By Christine Davis

Normally, it's not a good thing when you have to ask people to leave. But there are times when it's gratifying, says Michael Rush, director of the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art in Lake Worth.

Case in point is "Lightscape," New York City artist Leo Villareal's installation on exhibit at the museum through August 25. It's part of "Sculpture Now," which also includes the works of Thomas Hirschhorn, Jaume Plensa, Xavier Veilhan, Robert Taplin, Cathy de Monchaux and Boynton Beach-based artist Sally Ordile.

"'Lightscape' is all about eliminating," Villareal says, "and controlling what stimuli is in the environment. I'm taking away the distractions and adding a very specific selection of certain things."

The space Villareal created is enclosed in a small windowless room. The walls are lined with black acoustic foam. The viewer lies on a couch made out of the same material to watch a display of LEDs (light emitting diodes – e.g. the type of lighting in alarm clocks, digital watches, stereos, etc.) while listening to atmospheric sounds.

"The whole purpose is to have a certain experience – that's my interest – to create an experience for the viewer/listener."

"'Lightscape' refers to having a relationship with landscape," Villareal explains.

It's quite comfy, fun to watch, and meditatively relaxing. Hence people are sometimes asked to move on to give others a chance to experience the environment.

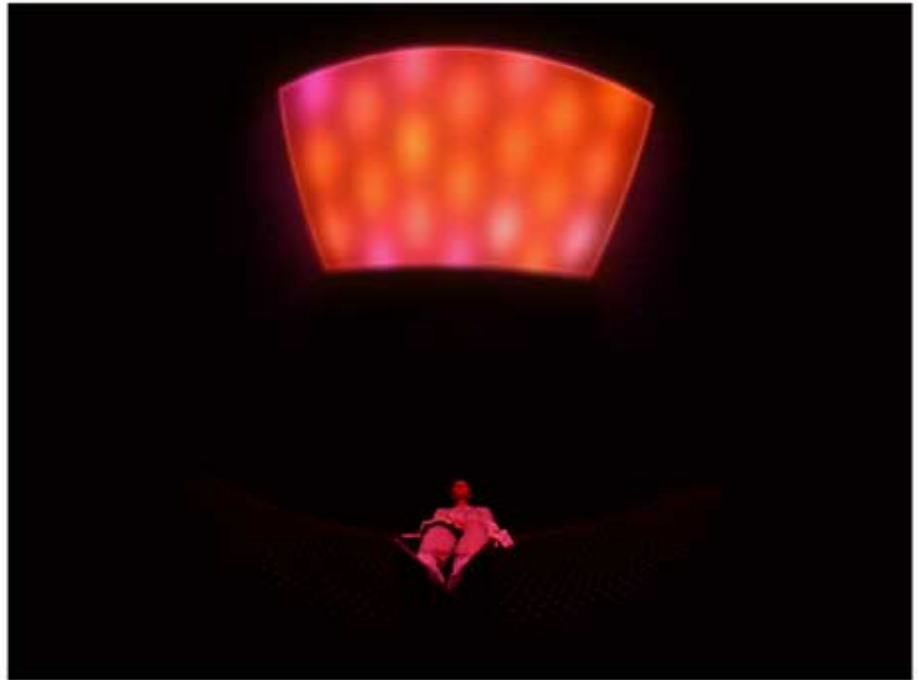
The couch uses the zero gravity position, which equally distributes one's body weight. "I got involved with virtual reality and this chair – the position was used in experiments at NASA," Villareal says. "You almost forget about everything external and focus on projecting yourself into something. I'm not interested in simulating reality. But I am interested in creating special experiences by using light and sound. For me, this is an optimal viewing position. Usually you are standing in front of something, but I like making a place for the viewer."

Villareal says he enjoys the feel of acoustic foam. "It's physically undulating and suggests a kind of landscape and terrain. Everything reinforces a certain aesthetic. The way the lights undulate, the curve of the couch, it's a continuous experience. The lights never flash, there are no jarring shifts, it's soft in every way – visually, the feel, the atmospheric sound." James Healy worked with Villareal on the sound. "It's more like a tone than music. It's airy and atmospheric," Villareal says.

The focal point – the lights – make use of LED technology. "You can combine the red, green and blue to create 16 million different colors. The range is pretty



Leo Villareal



### Interactive Art Exhibited in Lake Worth

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incredible. I have arranged the lights in a matrix and I'm using a defusing material that blends all the lights together to mix them to different shades – all sequenced by the computer. I'm an artist and a programmer," he explains.

What happens when art becomes united with technology? The traditional viewer of art becomes a participant, says institute director Rush. "In the late 1980s, artists broke away from hanging art on the wall

and putting sculpture in the garden. They invited the viewers into the work of art in a physical way, so the viewer can walk around it and experience it from different vantage points. In certain cases, you walk in, and, you the viewer, trip gadgets. It's not simply something you passively observe – you participate with it in a way. You step into it.

"This is not something that we always need to do, but to have people interact with it is wonderful," Rush says. "It's fun to do this from time to time."

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