

At Conner, Shining Examples

 [washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2002/11/28/at-conner-shining-examples/e337d44d-f502-4b97-84cb-805c3abc31f7](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2002/11/28/at-conner-shining-examples/e337d44d-f502-4b97-84cb-805c3abc31f7)

By Jessica Dawson

November 28, 2002

Human beings are drawn to light shows in much the same way we're attracted to car wrecks. We can't look away. It doesn't matter whether the photons are coming from Fourth of July fireworks, meteor showers or a Pink Floyd concert. Why is it so darn hard to take our eyes off flashing, blinking colored lights?

New York multimedia artist Leo Villareal taps our inner child's infatuation with silly pyrotechnics. In his exhibition of six installations and sculptures at Conner Contemporary, the artist programs bulbs or LEDs to blink in non-repeating configurations that possess just enough interior logic to titillate our mind's pattern-recognition software. Like any light show, the exhibition entrances. It also conveys surprisingly little real meaning. Still, I keep going back for more.

Heir to light-art elder statesman James Turrell, Villareal immerses viewers in environments starring blips and flashes. Whereas the older artist plays intricate games involving spatial relationships, Villareal sticks closer to glorious entertainment. More sophisticated and more subtle, perhaps, than the extravaganzas of Disney or Las Vegas, Villareal's works retain a kinship with other multimedia surroundings.

The Villareal show begins at 5 p.m. daily, when the gallery switches on "Strobe Matrix," 45 strobe lights installed behind a white scrim in the gallery's second-floor window. Insinuating itself into the colorful Connecticut Avenue electric signs that advertise carpet stores and restaurants, the piece's flashing lights suggest a disco. But on a recent Monday night, most passersby didn't even notice it. The few who did reacted predictably -- one woman gasped, "Cool, lights!" -- and quickly moved on.

That "Strobe Matrix" participates, however subtly, in D.C. street life sits nicely with Villareal's influences. The artist's strongest works take their cues from signs of the Las Vegas, look-at-me variety. Three sculptures on view at Conner use bulbs of the type you have at home, albeit of lower wattage, set to turn on and off at various intervals. The large, round "Sunburst" contains 80 bulbs alternating between agitated blinks and a marching pace. Begging for attention like a casino, the piece celebrates consumer culture of the '60s and the pop art movement that embraced it. The translucent white plexiglass encasing the bulbs nods to

minimalism's dedication to slick finishes. Even Villareal's colors -- the aquamarine plexi encasing "Bulbox 2.0" or the amber bulbs illuminating both "Sunburst" and "Bulbox 1.0" -- seem borrowed from decades past.

Villareal engages a far broader palette using LEDs. Red, green and blue diodes, when combined, form a limitless variety of color and pattern and allow extremely subtle shifts in both. In his two LED pieces at Conner, Villareal installed the diodes behind a white scrim or milky plexi to diffuse their light into a soft-focus haze. Like his other works, these are controlled by computer programs of the artist's design. The grand, 11-foot-wide "Lightscape," incorporating more than 3,200 diodes, is a kind of monster TV screen broadcasting configurations of crosses, grids, dashes and dots. Sit close enough and the picture dominates your vision.

At Conner, Villareal installed "Lightscape" against a wall like a large-scale painting. (Earlier this year, the piece was installed in the ceiling of the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art.) When the piece is showing pastel pinks or blues and purples, it looks a little like the work of Tom Downing, the Washington color field painter who had a recent show at Conner Contemporary. Villareal's work is one of many recent electronic takes on the art of painting. It is a cousin, perhaps, of New York artist Jeremy Blake's videos that resemble time-based color field paintings or shifting stained glass.

But the artistic connections "Lightscape" suggests remain somehow beside the point. First and always, the piece is groovy. And as if its gentle rhythm of blips weren't enough, the work is accompanied by a soundtrack of molasses-slow electronic music by sound artists James Healy and Jhno, who collaborated with Villareal for this project. The artist also installed comfy beanbag chairs that encourage extended visits. You could spend all day here lying back and relaxing, as if taking in a new-age music video.

"Lightscape" acts a lot like anti-anxiety meds -- you'll enjoy woozy bliss while you're on it, but once it wears off you're back to where you started. It offers temporary relief without long-term gain, and it may be addictive. Move over, Xanax -- art may be the latest psycho-pharmaceutical.

Ami Wilber at DCAC

In her sculpture show at DCAC, 29-year-old District artist Ami Martin Wilber mingles materials sensual and clinical -- sweet-smelling wax, human hair, stainless steel and medical supplies -- in works that bring sadomasochism into the science lab. Nearly every piece connotes either unnatural urges or power plays -- sometimes both. Her ritualized, methodical displays evoke obsessions. This is a well-trod path. It was mined famously by Mona Hatoum, whose work explores fetishes and anxiety, and Eva Hesse, whose sculptures employ contradictory forms to embody inner conflicts. But Wilber's work carries a distinctive charge.

Wilber's fetishlike presentation of nine ponytails dangling from tiny boxes filled with wax and mounted in a row on the wall call to mind a collection of cat-o'-nine-tails. "Stasis," 27 test tubes affixed to the wall and containing locks of hair, refers to sinister experiments and the relationship between experts and guinea pigs. Elsewhere, Wilber extends her power metaphor to women's beauty regimens. "Addicted" presents nine test tubes in stainless steel cases, each filled with shampoo, face cream, wax or body gel. In this show, Wilber has depicted a world ensnared by erotic and consumer ritual.

Leo Villareal at Conner Contemporary Art, 1730 Connecticut Ave. NW, Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m.; "Strobe Matrix" daily, 5 p.m.-midnight, closed today and tomorrow, 202-588-8750, through Dec. 14.

Ami Martin Wilber at DCAC, 2438 18th St. NW, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday, 2 p.m.-7 p.m.; Friday and Saturday 2 p.m.-10 p.m., 202-462-7833, through Dec. 8.

Leo Villareal's wall-size "Lightscape" and "Sunburst" can be enjoyed from a beanbag chair. Tails, you win: Ami Martin Wilber's "Intentional" at DCAC.