

Villareal's Trippy Light Fantastic

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By Michael O'Sullivan

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TWO WORDS: "Moby tour."

That phrase jumped out at me while I was scanning the curriculum vitae of Leo Villareal, the young, of-the-moment artist whose trippy, light-based sculptures are on view at Conner Contemporary Art. While it doesn't refer to an exhibition per se, the reference to the light show designed for the 2001 concert tour of the purveyor of electronica and dance pop is a fitting indicator of what to expect upon entering the space.

For this exhibition, the second-floor gallery off Dupont Circle has been transformed into a kind of dimly lit mini-lounge, complete with a trio of comfortably overstuffed pillow-chairs (courtesy of the artist), suitable for extended viewing of Villareal's rave-chic light sculptures while listening to the ambient-trance background music created by DJ-composers James Healey and John Eichenseer (aka Jhno).

All is not the soothing eye-rubdown you might expect. Villareal's static yet moving sculpture, comprising microprocessor-controlled sequences of colored light bulbs and LEDs blinking on and off in seemingly endless patterns behind frosted Plexiglas, evokes abstract painting to be sure (the Washington Color School is one obvious, if unintentional, allusion). Yet the effect is just as often cinematic, suggesting such paranoia-inducing scenes as a fog-bound search party whose sweeping flashlight beams threaten to reveal your hiding place.

What does it all mean? Maybe nothing more than painter Tom Downing's dots ever did, or any art (2D or 3D) whose only god is geometry. Color and emotion have always gone hand in hand, and maybe it's enough that the moody lava-lamp world of light that Villareal's art calls forth -- a world of neon seen through the rain-streaked window of a cab at midnight, or of a supernova seen through the window of a space ship -- is filled with as much pure bliss, abject fear, sweet melancholy and awe as white, blue, lavender, green, red and yellow can conjure.

LEO VILLAREAL: DIGITAL LIGHT SCULPTURE -- Through Dec. 14 at Conner Contemporary Art, 1730 Connecticut Ave. NW. (Metro: Dupont Circle) 202-588-8750. www.connercontemporary.com. Open 11 to 6 Tuesdays through Saturdays. Open Friday until 7:30, in connection with the monthly "First Friday" gallery walk. "Strobe Matrix," an artwork in the gallery's second-floor window that is viewable from the street, comes on every day from 4 to midnight. Free.

Leo Villareal's 2002 "Lightscape," at Conner Contemporary Art.