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Conner Contemporary Art

Washington, DC

New York multimedia artist Leo Villareal continues to craft light sculptures as mesmerizing as psychopharmaceuticals. At Conner Contemporary Art, his configurations of computer-programmed bulbs or LED diodes blinked and pulsed with just enough interior logic to titillate the mind's pattern-recognition software, luring viewers in much the same way as the multimedia spectacles of Disney and Las Vegas do. Insinuating itself among the colorful electric signage along Connecticut Avenue, Villareal's *Strobe Matrix* (2002) harnessed the spirit of public entertainment. Forty-five strobes were installed behind a white scrim in the gallery's second floor window; the work's flashing lights suggested a disco. Every evening from five p.m. until midnight, *Strobe Matrix* participated, however subtly, in Washington street life, while three works inside the gallery took their cues from Las Vegas-style signage. The trio featured 11-watt incandescent bulbs reminiscent of mid-century roadside ads. The smart, gorgeous *Sunburst* (2002) contained eighty bulbs alternating between agitated blinks and a marching pace. Begging for

attention like a casino or a donut shop, the piece celebrated '60s consumer culture and the Pop Art movement that embraced it.

The translucent white Plexiglas encasing the bulbs gave a nod to Minimalism's slick finishes. Other works were about tuning out. Two pieces incorporating LED light—red, green, and blue diodes that allowed the artist to form subtle shifts in color and pattern—proved lulling. The grand, eleven-foot-wide *Lightscape* (2002), incorporating over thirty-two hundred diodes, was a kind of uber-TV screen (albeit behind a white scrim) broadcasting configurations of crosses, grids, dashes, and dots. Installed as a large-scale wall piece, it recalled Color Field painting and joined the host of recent electronic updates of pigment on canvas. References to art history aside, the exhibition was, above all, groovy. And, as if the rhythm of blips weren't enough, ambient music by sound artists James Healy and Jhno, who collaborated with the artist for this project, filled the entire gallery. Visitors lay cosseted in comfy bean bag chairs basking in Villareal's soothing, if occasionally vacant, pleasures.

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