

Light Fantastic

NEW YORK — Whoever said artists use only the right side of their brains never met Leo Villareal.

The New Media artist, whose medium is measured in wattage, uses materials such as light bulbs, strobe lights and LEDs to create temporal abstractions the beauty of which is as fleeting as it is changeable.

Before making art, Villareal was a virtual reality researcher at Paul Allen's think tank, Interval Research. But he's not your typical computer nerd. During his time in Palo Alto, he was formulating ideas on ways of bringing art and technology together.

"Chasing Rainbows," Villareal's installation now on view at the Sandra Gering Gallery at 534 West 22nd Street, consists of 60 tubes of light arranged in three groups of 20.

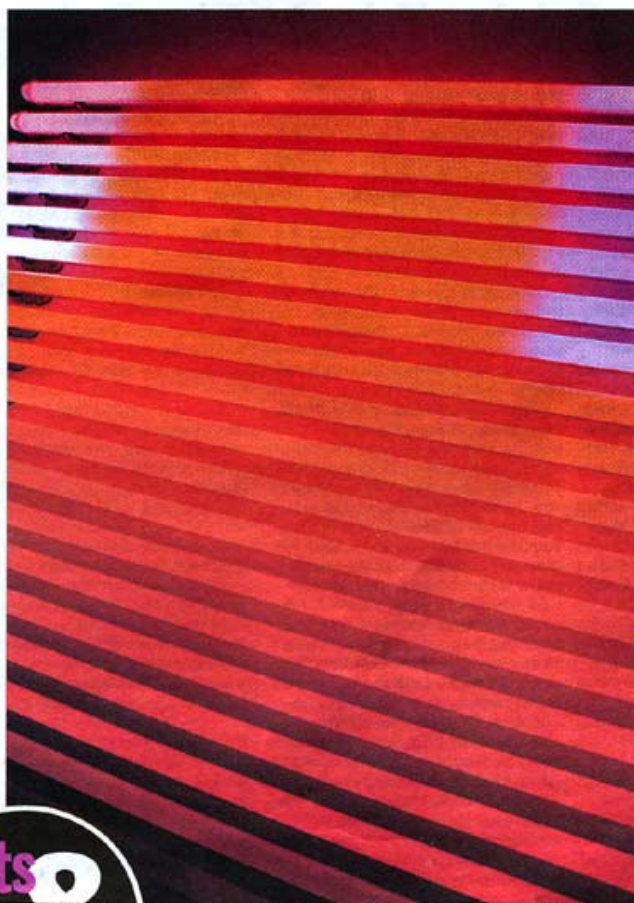
"The fixtures resemble fluorescent tubes but have LED technology," said Villareal, who is 37. "They can produce 16 million different colors."

Sitting on a bench recently in Gering's tiny 600-square-foot showcase space, Villareal could hardly take his eyes off his work, which is transfixing. "This is one of my favorite sequences," he said as pale color patterns coursed through the sculpture.

"It's all programming," he explained. "Many base sequences are triggered in a random order. They last a random amount of time. You'll never see the exact same progression twice."

Villareal, who learned programming and fractal geometry to make his art, has always been interested in numbers. He said he was inspired by mathematician John Conway's "Game of Life," a program that simulates the birth, death and mutation of organisms based on certain rules.

His first light sculpture made 10 years ago for the Burning Man festival, held annually in the desert north of Reno, Nev., was a simple af-



Above and below: Two panels from Leo Villareal's "Chasing Rainbows," 2004, LEDs and circuitry.

Arts
&
People



Yvonne Force-Villareal and Leo Villareal

fair with 16 strobe lights.

Since then, he's done other site-specific installations. In June, for example, "Supercluster," a 120-foot-wide, 45-foot-high piece, went up, covering one side of P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City. Patterns of shimmering lights are visible from the Long Island Expressway.

"Star," an 18-foot-high sculpture that radiates kaleidoscopic patterns in the shape of flowers, was part of a series of light-based installations at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens in November. Another version was installed on a barge between two medieval bridges in Toulouse, France.

Villareal is working on a commission for the Federal Court House that's being designed by architect Antoine Predock in El Paso, Tex. He has two solo gallery shows in Spain and Washington, D.C., this year and his work will be included in "Visual Music 1905-2004" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

Financial success hasn't eluded him. Gering sold six pieces from Villareal's latest show at prices ranging from \$28,000 to \$150,000.

Villareal is married to Yvonne Force, founder of the Art Production Fund, a nonprofit organization that helps artists bring their most ambitious work to fruition. Together, they're a ubiquitous presence on the art circuit.

Force's next APF project, a large-scale painting by Rudolf Stingel in the form of wall-to-wall carpet, will be shown at Grand Central Terminal here and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in July. The sponsor is Yves Saint Laurent.

Her insider status has no doubt helped her husband's career, but she tries not to take advantage of her position. "I try to separate my role as an artist's wife from the rest of my life," she said. "I'm so enthusiastic about his work I could spend the rest of my life promoting it."

— Sharon Edelson