

Q&A: Leo Villareal, American contemporary artist

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By Sara Sanchez / El Paso Inc.

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Leo Villareal was just looking for a way to get back to his tent in the dark, arid Black Rock Desert.

It was the early 1990s, and he was at Burning Man, the month-long, leave-no-trace city/festival that has birthed countless art inspirations.

“There were a few thousand people there but no streets, no landmarks. It was very interesting to me that I could be 20-something years old and be lost,” he said.

Villareal is now an internationally known light sculpture and installation artist, marrying organic inspiration with the digital realm. He often refers to his work as a digital campfire. And it all started at Burning Man.

“By 1997, I continued to go out to Burning Man and created a beacon for myself, using 16 strobe lights, and mounted it on top of my mobile home so I could get home at night,” Villareal said. “It was the first time I had connected software and light.”

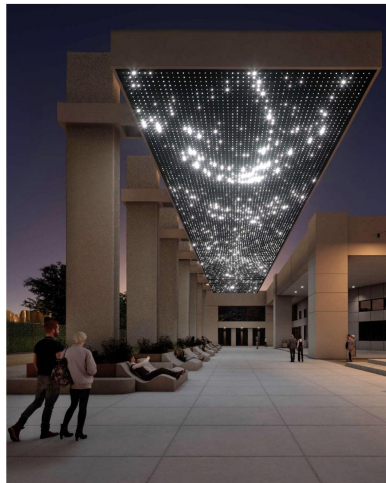
Villareal is the artist behind major installations, including along the Bay Bridge in San Francisco and across nine bridges on the River Thames in London.

He was born in Albuquerque, lived in Juárez as a child and attended El Paso and Cathedral high schools before heading to the East Coast.

“I loved growing up here,” Villareal said. “My family has been here for generations, and the place is very near and dear to my heart.”

In the coming months and years, Villareal will create an installation in front of the El Paso Museum of Art, titled “Star Ceiling.”

The El Paso Museum of Art Foundation has pledged to raise \$6 million for the piece. For more information, go to epma.art/epma-foundation/giving-opportunities.



Rendering by Leo Villareal
Studio

Q: Who are you as an artist and what’s your El Paso connection?

I was born in Albuquerque. My dad was in business school there. When I was very young, we moved to Juárez. I lived there until about 4th grade and went to a Montessori school over there. My dad’s family is from Chihuahua and has been in Northern Mexico for a very long time.

We moved to El Paso. I lived in Mission Hills and went to Mesita. I went to El Paso High for one year, went to Cathedral for two and then left for boarding school in Rhode Island.

I started going to museums in New York and Boston while I was living in Rhode Island. I ended up going to Yale as an undergraduate and studied art there.

I graduated in 1990, the year Photoshop came out.

There was all this buzz about virtual reality and I was interested in all these technological tools, so I went to grad school at NYU for two years. I got deeply involved in that, not knowing what I would do because there was no web at that point – it was very early days. The internet existed, but it wasn’t what it is today.

I spent two years going to grad school, then spent three years working at a research lab in Palo Alto. In 1998 I established my studio in New York City.



Leo Villareal
Cosima Rangel

Q: What’s your vision for the “Star Ceiling” project in front of the El Paso Museum of Art?

We’ve been discussing creating a project here at the museum for many years. Looking at the museum and the possibilities, it seemed like this area in front would be really great to activate.

We created the artwork called “Star Ceiling,” measuring approximately 20 feet wide by 120 feet long. It will be installed here, using the columns as a support and creating a welcoming gesture for people when they come to the museum. This is such an important corridor with the convention center, Hotel Paso del Norte, the Plaza, everything.

[!\[\]\(cbe2492b119e39e02a1dab2af4a4b296_img.jpg\) ‘Star Ceiling’ coming to Downtown El Paso](#)

It’s a very important place. The way I think of this is as a light sculpture. There are over 13,000 monochromatic LEDs that will be making up this light.

I’m not using any kind of imagery. There won’t be pictures or any text; it’s all sequences, and abstract. I’m very inspired by nature, and it’s obviously related to the sky and cosmos and trying to bring that down and make it more available, and to create a place for people to

enjoy and relax and contemplate.

Because it's placed on the underside of the structure, it will be visible during the day. In the evening, it will also obviously be visible.

I see it as a gift to the city. It's for everyone. My hope is that people who don't come to the museum, that this will be the gesture that says "come here."

Q: How did you first start working with light sculptures and installations?

In 1994 when I was working in Palo Alto, I ended up going out to Burning Man, in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. It's very different from the Chihuahuan Desert here, with parched earth and nothing growing for hundreds of miles.

I was intrigued by this idea of creating a sculpture. I went out there and set up my tent, it got dark and I realized I didn't know where my tent was.

I was fine and found my tent, but that idea of having to re-learn how to navigate in this new space was very intriguing to me.

I loved the idea that you could get a group of people together and build a city, which is what happens at Burning Man. It's a temporary city, and it's leave-no-trace. When you arrive there's nothing and when you leave there are no garbage cans; you can't drop anything.

By 1997, I continued to go out to Burning Man and created a beacon for myself, using 16 strobe lights, and mounted it on top of my mobile home so I could get home at night. It was the first time I had connected software and light.

I programmed that with a simple microcontroller, with basic 0 is off and 1 is on, the lowest level of binary code.

There were 16 lights, so 16 zeroes and ones. Even with that tiny bit of information, it ended up being very interesting. It felt like there was a vocabulary and language to the patterns and light, and you could see it from miles away.

It was interesting to work with scale, and a combination of software, light and space. People gathered around, and it became sort of a digital campfire, which is how I often describe my artwork.

People want to gather around it because there's this elemental quality to it. It's something like staring into a fire and that hypnotic quality that has. It's a very primal thing we're all attracted to as humans.

Q: What's your process when creating something like "Star Ceiling"?

It started with a site visit and seeing what potential there was. Then we studied it and created some mock-ups and renderings in the studio; we work a lot with 3D tools. We made a simulation of what it could look like to be able to show people.

I work with a lot of really talented people who are designers, programmers. When we make a simulation, we know what all the technical aspects are. It's all rooted in realities of what it takes to do these things.

We've had a lot of wonderful interactions here in El Paso. Judy Robison has been a real champion and has helped guide the process of how you get things done here.

It's all about communicating and saying we're all doing this together. There's a sense of communal effort, and when people feel part of it, they ask how they can help.

There's that, and then there's a lot of behind-the-scenes, like engineering, what's in these structures, what can they support. We're working with In*Situ, and they're wonderful and really capable. They have done many exciting projects here in El Paso, and their offices are just down on Texas.

It made me really happy to see them there, living right where they're working and contributing to the community in an important way.

Q: What connections do you still have to El Paso?

My grandmother here is 99, so I had a chance to see her. My mom is here, and I saw my aunt and a lot of other family. It's always a big reunion when I'm here.

My mother's family, her mom's family, is from Marfa, Texas, where they've been ranching since 1880. Recently my wife and I purchased the family home that my great-great-grandfather built in 1910, and have been restoring that in Marfa.

For me it's very interesting to be in Marfa, because of family, but also access to the art world and a lot of contemporary art. I'm hoping to establish a studio in Marfa in the next five to 10 years. As my kids get older, I'd like to spend more time here.

I see a really interesting connection between what's happening in Marfa and El Paso. A lot of people come through El Paso to go to Marfa, and now there are more amazing things to see and do.

I think there's an opportunity to harness that energy. I was thrilled to see Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's project, with the beams of light over the border. I happened to be here and was here for Thanksgiving, and we went down to Bowie High School and saw the lights.

A few nights later we were in Juárez and saw it from the other side – seeing it from both sides, and seeing the sense of wonder, and these beams of light shooting up and connecting both sides of the border.

It's really sad for me to see the division that's happened here, especially with the pandemic and not being able to cross the bridge. Juárez has always been a really vibrant place that I've loved, and I hope that it can come back and we can get back to a place where there's less division and more connection. Art is a very powerful way of doing that.



Leo Villareal
Cosima Rangel

Q: What's it like converting inspiration from organic light into a digital space?

I've always been very curious about how things work and how you break things down. The way I'm working is not with a camera, taking photographs or videos. I'm trying to recreate it with code. How does water move, is one thing I might ask when working with programmers.

I'm always trying to boil things down and recreate them with code. You can really get to some of these essences and make things that are very powerful and evoke these things in nature.

At the end of the day, I'm using these materials that are LEDs and software, and it's kind of cold in a way. But there's something else that's happening with the sequences and the connection with people, and there's this real magic that's unfolding. I think that's the connection to our humanity and this universal quality that light has.

Q: What's your perspective on AI right now?

It's interesting; it's concerning as well. It's not all amazing. Some of the abilities these things have are pretty striking, to create imagery. There's still a very important role for artists to play in all of this. There may be a way of using AI as a collaborator or assistant or something like that.

I am concerned with some of these things, like some of these AI infringing on other artists and training on their work and datasets, which doesn't seem right, to replicate other artists' work.

There needs to be a deep conversation about that and the ethics of it. I'm not really using any of those tools in my work. I'm not saying I wouldn't at any point. I might engage that if there was a way to collaborate that was interesting.

I find technology as a tool, and it depends on how we use it. But it does open up a bigger can of worms that needs a lot of thinking because it is moving very quickly.

It's an interesting time, but we'll just have to see how it unfolds. AI seems to be sort of mimicking writing and art and all these sorts of things, but it's not a replacement for what artists are doing.