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LEO VILLAREAL'S LED SWARMS AT THE NORTON MUSEUM, GERING & LOPEZ AND MORE

It's often easiest to describe artist Leo Villareal's LED displays in astronomical terms. In "Firmament II," now showing at the Norton Museum of Art, the precisely-timed, color-coordinated lights appear to explode from nothingness like the big bang, orbit busily around one another, or go dim and meander to a halt like a dying star.

Much of Villareal's work has tapped into the wide emotional range of such subjects; if given enough attention, the big bangs can be exhilarating and the star deaths can even feel sad. In "Multiverse," a permanent installation at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, sometimes a lone particle breaks off from the main swarm, and watching it in the seconds before its disappearance can be surprisingly affecting. We audiences are fortunate indeed that the universe is in the public domain.

But Villareal is not a science fiction artist. His role is more like that of the translator, working to render the novas and black holes that exist on unfathomable scale into a form humans can understand. Events that may take thousands of years in some faraway galaxy or milliseconds in a culture of bacteria are fitted to compelling, almost narrative time scales in his works. As with literature, however, the particular tastes and tendencies of the translator in presenting the material are often a great source of enjoyment in themselves. Villareal has a keen eye for tempo and tension, and his universes are probably much more human than the real thing. "Firmament II" shows through July 17, as part of "Altered States: Jose Alvarez, Yayoi Kusama, Fred Tomaselli and Leo Villareal" at the Norton Museum of Art, 1451 S. Olive Avenue, West Palm Beach, FL 33401.

