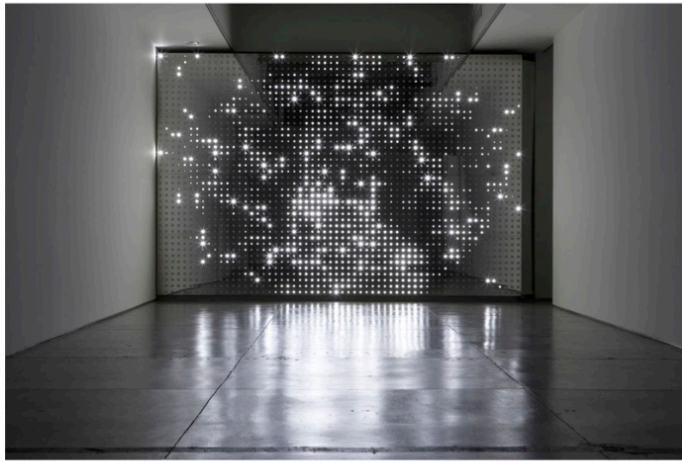


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San Jose museum sheds light on Leo Villareal



The San Jose Museum of Art scores a coup of sorts in presenting the first museum survey of work by New York light artist Leo Villareal.

The opening of his show this week puts an exclamation mark on 01SJ, San Jose's sprawling and - at first blush, chaotic - biennial three-day festival of digital arts, which opened last night.

Villareal belongs to a small but growing coterie of artists who write their own computer code to drive electronic spectacles. The earliest piece in his show grew out of a strobing beacon he contrived while at Burning Man in 1997 as a device for signaling his camper's location in the boundless desert night. "Strobe Matrix" (1997), its 16 blinding lamps muted by translucent Plexiglas, foreshadows the work that Villareal has made since: lights pulsing in nonrepeating sequences dictated by software he wrote.

"Firmament" (2001) takes these attributes to one sort of extreme. To see it, visitors enter a black room equipped with "zero gravity" seating. Overhead, 80 strobe lights arrayed in four concentric circles wink on and off in continually changing sequences, baiting the viewer's desire to discover a pattern in them and frustrating it or, conceivably, curing them of it.

"Red Life" (1999) marks a turning point in Villareal's art, broaching his interest in color and in John Horton Conway's Game of Life, the founding formulation of "artificial life." With a few simple rules governing the behavior of adjacent "cells" - lights, in Villareal's rendition - Conway enabled a computer to generate continually varying, seemingly self-reinventing patterns. For "Red Life," Villareal wrote an algorithm that makes an array of 56 lightbulbs "play" the Game of Life. Thereafter, "emergence" - the capacity of clearly defined systems to generate unpredictable outcomes - became the focus of Villareal's art. Emergence describes phenomena such as the collective intelligence of insect colonies that far supersedes that of any individual in it. The concept may even apply to the genesis of evolving life from the simplest self-replicating organic structures.

So Villareal has content by the tail to the extent that his works exemplify emergent phenomena. A wall-size piece such as "Diamond Sea" (2007) materializes the concept of emergence as a shifting field of potentialities. Limits crop up in his handling of form, or in the forms he handles. An inherent rigidity marks the physical components that make up his work, though the development of LED tubes enabled him to make color flow and change intensity moment by moment in ways possibly never seen in art before.

Several of Villareal's works with LED tubes bring to mind the fluorescent light sculpture of Dan Flavin (1933-1996), which he acknowledges as an influence. I doubt that Flavin would have liked the kinetic qualities of Villareal's art, regarding them as decorative. In the fluctuating hues of a large piece such as "Amanecer" (2010), Villareal seems to set the nuances of color field painting in motion. Again, I suspect the painters evoked would cringe.

But Villareal speaks to generations with nervous systems tuned by unnumbered hours of computer use. For most of its history, painting took for granted a world divided between the animate and inanimate, never dreaming of the engagement with hybrid realities that most of us now accept with little or no resistance.

Leo Villareal: Custom-programmed light sculpture. Through Jan. 9. San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose. (408) 271-6840. www.sanjosemuseumofart.org.