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JAMES EWING/GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

Leo Villareal's "Cylinder" at the Gering & López Gallery.

Leo Villareal

'Volume'

*Gering & López Gallery
730 Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street,
Manhattan
Through Aug. 19*

There should be benches. You just want to sit and gaze in blissful stupefaction at "Volume," which features a single kinetic light sculpture by Leo Villareal.

Whether it amounts to more than a high-tech lava lamp is debatable, but it certainly offers more complex effects. The sculpture, "Cylinder," consists of 160 12-foot lengths of shiny, stainless steel, each with 140 light-emitting diodes along one edge, hanging in five concentric circles to create a volume nine feet in diameter.

Controlled by a computer program, the thousands of lights go on and off, generating all kinds of patterns. At different times you get impressions of falling snow, fireworks, swarming fireflies, a Las Vegas light fountain and stars in the night sky moving according to some divine choreography. Rings rise and fall; clustered forms swirl; dark rectangles framed by light expand over and over; circles grow into great moonlike spheres. Different patterns happen simultaneously, and the computer shuffles the subprograms so that no one sequence ever repeats. It is hard to tear away. You keep watching to see what will happen next. (A video on the gallery Web site gives an idea of what it is like.)

If you were meditating on a mountaintop and found yourself suddenly enveloped by such a luminous display, you would suppose you were having a mystical experience. Here in the gallery, a more suspicious critic could see in it the balefully hypnotic effects of machine-driven spectacle. Either way, it is a thing of fascinating beauty.

KEN JOHNSON