

ARTFORUM

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Leo Villareal

CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART

Leo Villareal's sumptuous and transporting light sculptures are firmly rooted in the artist's interest in underlying structures and rules, particularly the systems-based theories of mathematician John Conway. For more than a decade, the Yale-trained sculptor has been developing a rich visual vocabulary based on the use of multicolored incandescent, strobe, neon, and LED bulbs. His preferred format is a light-studded circular, square, or rectangular wall-mounted structure fronted with translucent Plexiglas that diffuses the changing patterns of the illumination beneath. The effect is part '60s psychedelia, part '70s disco.

Origin, 2006, the sole work in Villareal's latest show, represents a significant step forward for the artist. A rich, visually complex work of densely sequenced overlapping patterns, it resembles an old theater marquee, with 1,600 equally spaced LEDs on a large base. Inspired by the theories of Isaac Newton as well as those of Conway, Villareal developed a pair of computer codes that cause the lights to flash, fade, or glow. The matrix is programmed to create nonrepeating patterns that suggest stars in the heavens, microscopic cellular activity, the heaving of the ocean, and dense urban grids.

The genesis of *Origin*, and of the artist's work with light in general, dates back to the 1997 Burning Man festival in

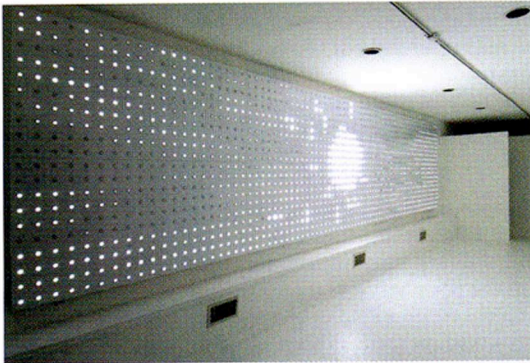
Nevada's Black Rock Desert (he returns to the event annually). The artist needed a way for himself and other members of his Disorient Tribe to locate their base camp amid the thousands of revelers on the featureless expanse of desert. The result was a work fashioned from sixteen strobe lights visible from up to two miles away. The random patterns generated by the device ultimately sparked Villareal's exploration of rule-based cellular automata programs, particularly Conway's Game of Life (the artist has said that his works are portraits of Conway's rules).

Villareal has used LEDs before, but the scale of *Origin* makes it feel more visually aggressive than viewers who know his work might expect. Additionally, he has succeeded in using his medium to define space (recalling the oeuvres of Dan Flavin and Fred Sandback), but the kinetic narrative patterning of this work goes further and actually *invades* space. When a single light appears to course up and down the darkened work before stopping in the center and exploding (think of using an ultrasophisticated version of Lite-Brite to illustrate the Big Bang), for example, it floods the adjacent walls.

Villareal likes to play with our urge to find patterns in randomness and synthesize fragments of information into a manageable whole. At one moment, the work appears to be a black-and-white version of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942–43; then the lights scatter, only to regroup and swarm like insects or swim like sperm. At other times, the artist conjures images of blinking lights on nuclear power plant control panels and early computers, manipulating density by programming the lights to fade gradually in and out. Villareal is

adept at seducing eye and mind with works that have a beauty underpinned by intellectual exploration. By stripping away color and amplifying scale and complexity, *Origin* introduces a welcome tension, a visual sparring with the viewer that is by turns soothing and jarring, hypnotic and disorienting.

—Nord Wennerstrom



Leo Villareal, *Origin*, 2006, LEDs, circuitry, microcontrollers, aluminum, and wood, 6' 8" x 26' 8" x 3".