

Leo Villareal, the real painter of light

By Kriston Capps • June 1, 2012



"Scramble" (2011)

Of course the Phillips Collection bought a Leo Villareal. "Scramble," the piece the museum grabbed from the artist's current show at Conner Contemporary Art, is a perfect fit: Villareal was inspired after participating in a panel last June on Frank Stella's own Scramble series, moderated by Phillips curator Klaus Ottmann. When Villareal's piece eventually hangs alongside Stella at the Phillips, the museum will have placed the New York artist's eye candy in its proper context.

The Phillips isn't the first D.C. museum to go all in on one of Villareal's bright, chameleonic light displays. In 2008, the National Gallery of Art commissioned him to illuminate the 200-foot moving walkway between its east and west buildings. Villareal's spacey "Multiverse" comprises 40,000 blinking white LEDs, the backdrop to dozens of tourist phone-cam shots every day of the week. That piece builds on another high-profile Villareal project, a series of roundels that graced the large windows along the façade of the Brooklyn Academy of Music for the 25th anniversary of the popular Next Wave Festival.

But Villareal's show at Conner demonstrates he's only sort of a light artist. He doesn't fit easily into any obvious camps, at least. He's no moody Minimalist like Dan Flavin. He's certainly not a Light and Space artist like Robert Irwin. About all he has in common with Olafur Eliasson is light bulbs. Take "Scramble": It's a 5-by-5-foot square panel made with LEDs, a Mac mini, and Villareal's custom software, within a wood frame and Plexiglas. The concentric-squares format looks like Stella, no question. But it also works like Stella—a kind of painting that evolves from simple rules. In a Stella, it's the width and regulation of each square stripe. In a Villareal, it's lines of programming code.

Perhaps that's what sets Villareal apart. He's not dealing with the ways light defines a space depending on the viewer's perspective, a concern that motivates many of his light-bending contemporaries. Villareal is concerned with authorial constraints, color synthesis, surface versus depth—in other words, modernist,

post-painterly interests. At Conner, "Coded Spectrum" is a pulsing Ellsworth Kelly panel. "Target 2" is a fluid Kenneth Noland roundel. Villareal brings more than animation to the ideas of his forebears. He's instilling his own sense of attenuated rhythm.

"Invisible Hand" is the most dynamic, and simplest, work here. The LEDs don't fade or change colors. They blink, blurred through Plexiglass to appear like moving blobs of light. It's viscerally satisfying, like watching glare on a pool's surface—and an extension of the ideas in Villareal's other modernist homages.

It's not especially challenging, of course, to float beneath a *Star Trek*-y corridor of blinking lights. Villareal's art may be fun in public, but it works hard when placed in context. Hanging at the Phillips, "Scramble" should continue a conversation the museum's viewers have come to understand—even if they don't expect it to take the form of blinky lights.