

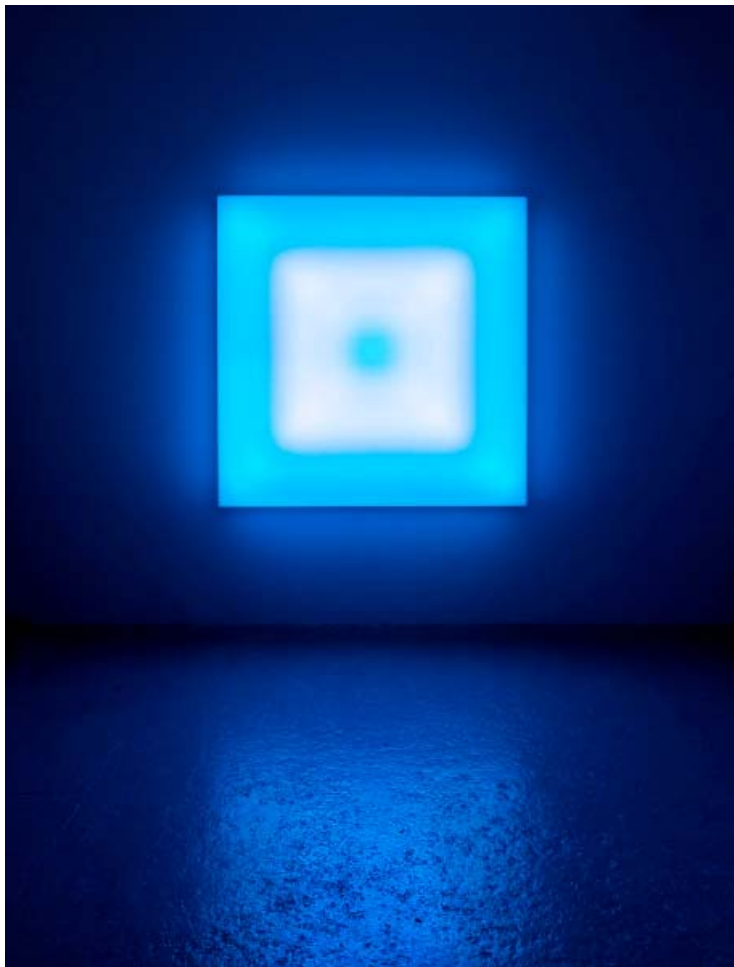
EAST CITY ART



What (e)merge Means for the DC Fine Art Marketplace

By Eric Hope, September 24, 2012

As regular East City Art readers know, the opening of the (e)merge art fair is fast upon us. Now in its second year at the Capital Skyline Hotel, (e)merge is a yet another example of the Washington, DC region's growing clout in the international arts arena. Not only does the fair host galleries from North America and Europe, it also showcases rising talent right here at home. The event is spearheaded by Leigh Conner and Jamie Smith of [CONNERSMITH](#) (the new name for Conner Contemporary Art), and I recently had a chance to speak with them about the importance of art fairs to a gallery's bottom line and what hosting an art fair like (e)merge means for the greater Washington arts community.

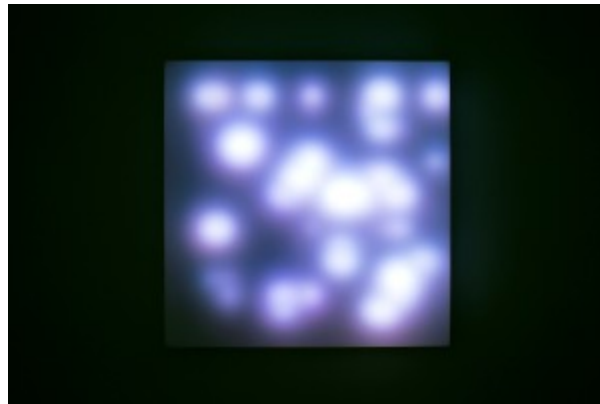


LEO VILLAREAL Scramble (installation view) 2011, light emitting diodes, mac mini, custom software, circuitry, wood, plexiglas, 60 x 60 inches Copyright Leo Villareal, courtesy CONNERSMITH.

I regularly receive email updates about CONNERSMITH's participation at art fairs, and wondered why it was important to undertake the time and expense to exhibit at them. Smith notes that art fairs have been an important force since the time the art market formed during the fifteenth century in Early Modern Europe. As “gallerists with a programme grounded in art history,” she has recognized all along that the dynamics of participating in a vetted, international art fair are essential to a gallery's success, as it allows galleries a chance to proactively connect with new audiences for their artists' works.

A recent example of this success is the gallery's recent sale to [The Phillips Collection](#) of a new [Leo Villareal](#) work, which happened as a result of the gallery's entry at the Pulse Miami fair last winter. This is the second sale brokered by CONNERSMITH between the artist and a major Washington arts institution (the other being [Multiverse](#) at the National Gallery of Art). [Dr. Klaus Ottman](#), Curator-at-large and the Director of the Center for the Study of Modern Art at The Phillips Collection spoke to me about the significance of the work and why working with a local gallery in particular was a benefit to his institution.

CONNERSMITH has represented Mr. Villareal since 2002. What initially captivated Conner was the “new way to paint” that the artist was developing along with a code system of light that engages with the practice of such twentieth century artists as Ken Noland, Sol LeWitt and Frank Stella. Ironically, Dr. Ottmann's first meeting of Leo Villareal took place last summer at The Phillips Collection when he moderated a panel discussion that included both Mr. Villareal and Frank Stella. Conner encouraged him to visit the gallery's booth at Pulse Miami last December and upon entering the exhibition space, he immediately saw *Scramble* and was entranced. Conner filled him in on the work's origins- apparently Villareal was inspired by his meeting with Stella earlier that year and created *Scramble* as an homage to the artist himself. According to Ottmann, “Dorothy Kosinski, the Phillips' Director] and I knew right then we had to have that piece.” Within a month, they started discussing the piece and presented a proposal to the Collection's board of directors in early 2012. Ottmann believes this work carries on Duncan Phillips' goal of showcasing the art of our time, stating “a painting doesn't have to be on canvas, or [composed of] oil. *Scramble* is a digital version of a Colorfield painting. It has the same kind of abstract and visual qualities as a [Mark] Rothko or Morris Lewis”. As such, it continues to build upon and investigate the same artistic concerns of “Modernist” art from decades ago



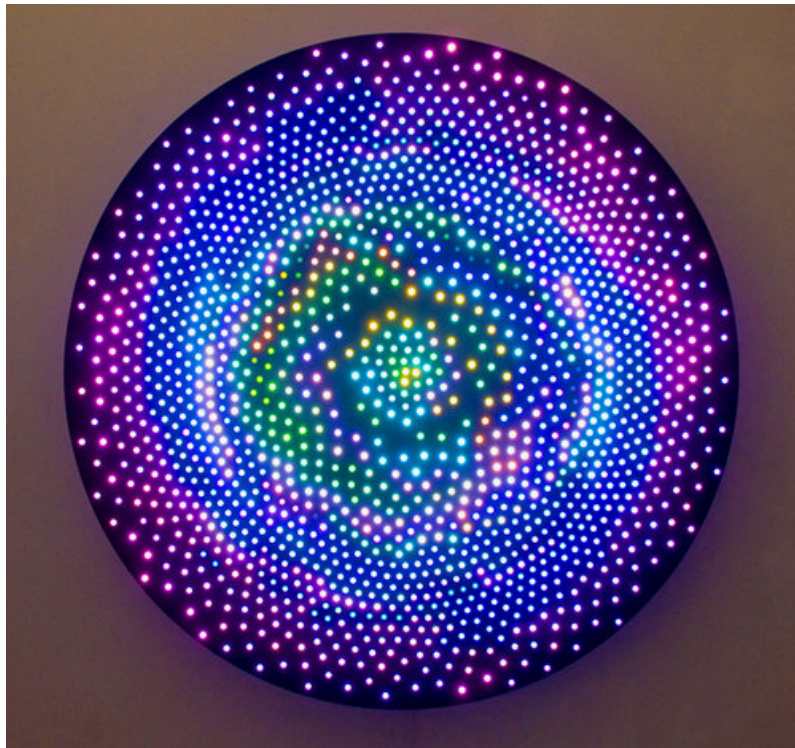
LEO VILLAREAL Invisible hand 2012, light emitting diodes, mac mini, custom software, circuitry, wood, plexiglas, 34 x 34 x 6 inches Copyright Leo Villareal, courtesy CONNERSMITH.

Since relationship-building is crucial in the contemporary art market, I asked each of them if there are any benefits to being located in Washington, DC rather than an art world “capital” like New York or Paris. Conner reiterates that the level of personalized attention they give to clients (for example, learning about their clients' specific collections and goals for future acquisitions) is not always available in higher-density

markets. While Villareal also has a New York representative, Ottmann explained that they chose to pursue the deal solely through Conner due to the personal connection, stating, “it is nice to be able to support local galleries when [we] are able.” In this instance, being located in the same city is extremely beneficial for The Phillips Collection, because if there is ever a computer malfunction or other issue with the piece’s electronics, CONNERSMITH is a phone call away.

Both parties also weighed in on what makes the DC arts scene unique. While contemporary galleries in the District operate the same as their counterparts in larger cities, Ottmann notes, “there are a lot of artists here but not many galleries.” In a prescient observation echoing Conner and Smith, he notes part of the issue has to do with the increasing role international art fairs have on the contemporary market. Rather than visit galleries, many collectors now use these fairs as points of contact with dealers, who in turn are often reserving their most important works for fairs rather than gallery shows. Ottmann believes Washington, DC is beginning garner the art world’s attention with fairs like (e)merge, which he calls “a good start” to tap into this phenomenon.

While the local arts community is beginning to attract this national attention, it is changing in subtle ways as well. The District is beginning to attract arts professionals from around the country (and the world) to relocate here for work. Ottmann points to the likes of Adam Budak (the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden’s new Contemporary Art curator) who recently arrived here from Austria, as an example of the caliber of arts professional relocating to our region. Ottmann feels these types of appointments could cast a more modern, “cutting-edge” feel to museum exhibitions we see in the future, which in turn may encourage more risk-taking within the local art marketplace.



Leo Villareal Big Bang, 2008 (A.P., ed. 3) LEDs, aluminum, custom software, and electrical hardware 59 x 59 x 8 inches.
Copyright Leo Villareal; Courtesy CONNERSMITH, Washington, DC Photograph by James Ewing Photography

For her part, Smith has the benefit of long-term hindsight, having witnessed the maturing of our art scene during their fourteen years in business. She notes one of the characteristics of Washington, DC's art identity is the integration of all kinds of enterprises into an amazingly cohesive art community. In Smith's eyes, "art is flourishing in an extensive network that includes artist-run projects, galleries, non-profits, museums, foundations, and public art... all across the city, from Georgetown to Anacostia." (e)merge represents a unique opportunity to proudly display that local network to a global audience, and for local art enthusiasts it's a great way to sample the energy of an international art fair right here at home!

The (e)merge art fair runs October 4 -7 at the Capitol Skyline Hotel. For directions and event details, visit their website www.emergeartfair.com.