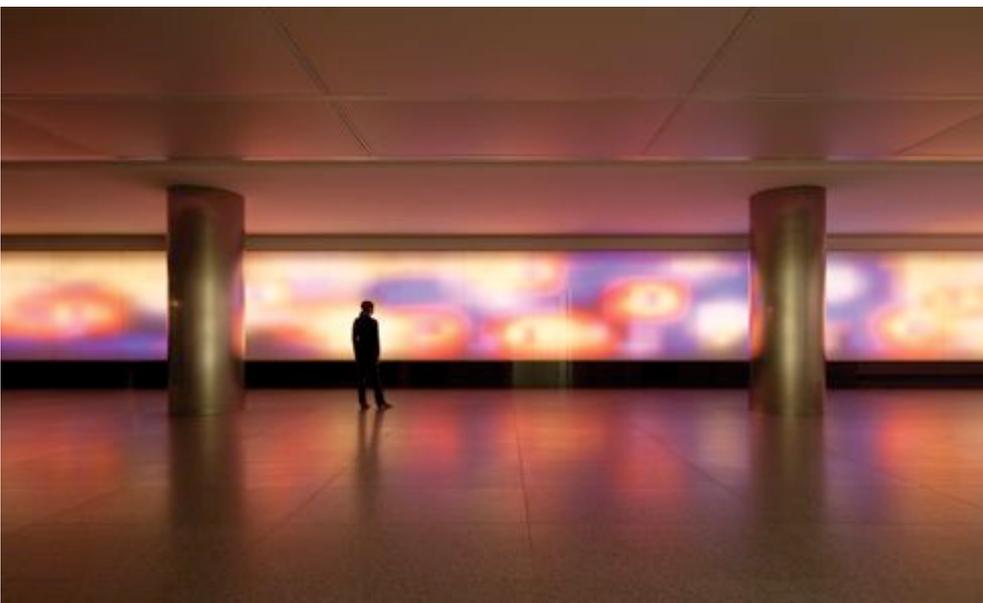


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ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

PAINTING ARCHITECTURE WITH LIGHT, AN ARTIST PROGRAMS THE NEXT WAVE OF ABSTRACT ART
WORDS: TIM MCKEOUGH, IMAGES: JAMES EWING

With the opening of the Tampa Museum of Art, Floridians gain not just a new cultural center, but also an ethereal digital sunset courtesy of New York artist Leo Villareal. With a series of multicolored LED fixtures tucked between two layers of perforated aluminum panels in the museum's facade, Villareal's installation, named "Sky (Tampa)," transforms the building at night into a 300-foot-long, 45-foot-high ribbon of pulsating, colored light.

Albuquerque-born Villareal, 43, is fast becoming the art world's most accomplished magician of large-scale light fields. In 2008, he created "Multiverse," a wall and ceiling installation involving 41,000 computer-controlled LEDs at Washington DC's National Gallery of Art, where a 200-foot-long hallway billows with illuminated data clouds. In 2007, he completed "Microcosm" for the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas -- a 12,000 LED pixelated kaleidoscope that hangs above the museum's entrance. The San Jose Museum of Art will exhibit a survey of Villareal's rapidly expanding portfolio this August, and he's also at work on what is sure to be an enlightening installation for New York's Broadway-Lafayette subway station.

Villareal, a graduate of New York University's brainy Interactive Telecommunications Program, dabbled in virtual reality technology before finding art. He derives the patterns that play out across his architectural installations from custom software and patient experimentation. "I started out working with rules, different structures and code," he says. "Then I started thinking about patterns you'd find in nature, like waves, and boiling them down to their essence." He also pulls freely from math and science, exploring everything from mathematician John Conway's Game of Life to Sir Isaac Newton's law of universal gravitation to create patterns that appear to come from Mother Nature.

"Leo's work is not just the sum of the lights that are used," says Leigh Conner, owner of Washington DC's Conner Contemporary Art gallery, which represents Villareal. "The actual artwork is the digital code." And even though bits and bytes represent a distinct departure from paintbrush and palette, Conner knew she was witnessing something important the first time she saw Villareal's creations in 2002: "I thought, 'This is it -- this is the new way of abstract painting.'" Only this time, the compositions refuse to sit still. villareal.net

McKeough, Tim. "On The Bright Side: Painting Architecture With Light, An Artist Programs The Next Wave of Abstract Art." Surface Magazine, Issue 82. 6 May 2010.