

Art in America

June 2004

Leo Villareal at Sandra Gering

Leo Villareal has designed light shows for techno-musician Moby and an enormous strobe-laden scaffolding for P.S. 1, but for his second solo show at the gallery, he created an intimate, minimal environment.

Three walls each held 20 horizontal light tubes arranged in 5-by-8-foot rectangular formations and linked with loops of black electrical cables at both ends. Housed within the tubes are thousands of red, green and blue LEDs. By modulating the lights individually, the artist can generate some 16-million different colors, so that the title, "Chasing Rainbows," takes on an exponentially spectral quality. Unlike Dan Flavin, who employed commercially available fluorescent glass tubes, Villareal uses plastic ones as the vessels for the newest LED bulbs.

The artist has written a series of computer programs that combine the three colors, eliciting a dizzying array of hues and patterns. At times, warm, undulating tones of pale pink, magenta, purple and orange hypnotically pulse through the cylinders. The sequences are determined through software inspired by the Game of Life, created by mathematician John Conway in 1970. Known as a "cellular automaton," the referenced framework is based on a matrix broken up into individual units or cells that interact with each other to create varying results. Such a subtle reference, however, was lost on the average visitor unless he or she read the accompanying statement.

The installation reads like a trio

of ever-changing, candy-colored, striated canvases. The patterns and layers created by this sequencing range from Albersian squares and color studies to more randomly occurring, digitized bits and blips, sometimes clearly delineated, sometimes smudgy.

Though manipulated colored light remains the driving force, this work is less disco-decorative than previous ones by the artist. Furthermore, Villareal has discarded the more sculptural, circular drums he's used in past projects for these spartan, exposed tubes that let the computer-driven kaleidoscope work its magic. "Chasing Rainbows" masks its complex, computer-savvy bones with a lean, linear facade that mesmerizes the viewer.

—Tracey Hummer

Leo Villareal: *Chasing Rainbow*, 2004, LED tubes, sequencer, hardware, 5 by 8 feet; at Sandra Gering.

