

PEOPLE
ARE
TALKING
ABOUT

ART



TUNNEL VISION

THE ARTIST WITH HIS WIFE, YVONNE (IN A GUCCI DRESS), AND THEIR SON, CUATRO, IN FRONT OF HIS INSTALLATION AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

3,000 miles. It was very good preparation for navigating new things. So I was pretty

undaunted when it came to jumping into technology.”

There were frequent visits to Marfa, Texas—an art-world outpost thanks to Donald Judd—where his mother’s family has owned a ranch for generations. (In fact, Villareal, his wife, public art impresario Yvonne Force Villareal, and their five-year-old son, Cuatro, are heading there later in the week.) His father was a collector—sculpture by Camille Claudel, paintings by Latin American masters—and Villareal, an art major at Yale, introduced him to contemporary work, including pieces by his classmate Matthew Barney. While knocking around Europe, Villareal visited the Panza collection in Italy—skyspaces by James Turrell, light sculptures by Dan Flavin—which proved a revelation.

Following graduate work in art and technology at New York University, Villareal spent three years at a think tank in Silicon Valley but longed to show his work to the wider world. Returning to New York, he made his first sculpture with blinking lights, and realized he’d found his medium.

Molly Donovan, a curator at the National Gallery, saw his permanent installation at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, where lights dance across a classic modernist facade by architect Gordon Bunshaft. Her invitation led to the dazzling, quasi-mystical intricacies of *Multiverse*.

“I’m not overtly trying to make something with a spiritual dimension,” Villareal says. “I’m dealing with rules and structures, working with geometry, for instance, as another way of understanding what is driving the form. Certain proportions and certain ratios somehow equal beauty, and that’s been very interesting.”

—LESLIE CAMHI

light fantastic

Leo Villareal finds the perfect medium for transforming a landmark space.

dominating Leo Villareal’s Chelsea studio is a fifteen-by-ten-foot panel of pulsating white lights whose constantly shifting arrangements suggest fast-breaking clouds or swarms of insects. “I was looking at a lot of videos dealing with fertility, generation—that moment of life when one thing meets another and something happens,” the 42-year-old artist says of *Diamond Sea*, but he might well be talking about *Multiverse*, his monumental new installation of more than 40,000 LEDs (light-emitting diodes) at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Multiverse’s finely tuned, computer-generated cosmologies unfold in a futuristic, I. M. Pei–designed passageway linking the architect’s modern art–filled East Building with the more traditional

West Building. Thousands of visitors pass there daily. “It’s fascinating to watch people respond to it,” says the museum’s director, Earl A. “Rusty” Powell III. “One of the early architects who worked on the building with Pei came through and said, ‘This has simply been waiting to happen.’”

Bridging worlds is one of Villareal’s specialties. The bilingual son of a Mexican father and a Texan mother, he grew up between Juárez and El Paso. “It was an amazing place to be a child,” the artist recalls, “because you go across the Rio Grande, which is not so big, and everything is different. It’s as if you’ve traveled