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CORNELL HOSTS VILLAREAL INSTALLATION
ARTIST'S ARRAY BRINGS TIMES SQUARE TO THE JOHNSON MUSEUM

ITHACA — How many artists does it take to change a light bulb? How about 12,000 light bulbs? For two years, a crew of engineers, technicians, fabricators and other workers have been collaborating with artist Leo Villareal to build one of his site-specific light installations at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. Located on the ceiling of the museum's outdoor Maillin Sculpture Court, and consisting of 11,880 light-emitting diodes (LEDs) wired in a grid, Villareal's work will be visible not only from Cornell's campus, but from various parts of West Hill and downtown. Each LED on the installation is individually wired and programmed with custom software, so when it's activated, the lights flash in sequence, creating a seemingly endless number of shapes and designs that constantly morph into new configurations that manage to feel both abstract and wholly organic.

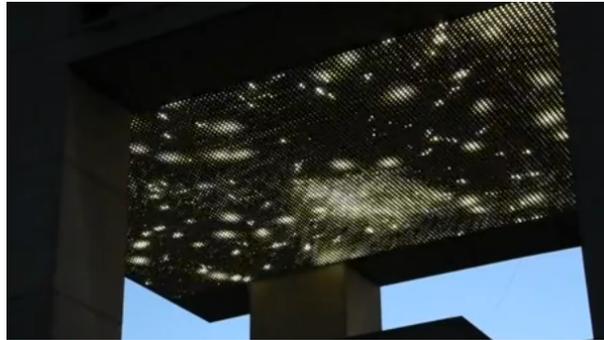
"There's a universal quality to the work. Anyone can look at it and engage with it. People like light in general. It's seductive material," says Villareal. "But it's also very open-ended. There's no message you're supposed to get because I'm dealing with abstraction. There's no beginning, middle or end, so you didn't miss anything. You can jump in and it's highly subjective. But before you know it, you're involved." Funding for the project was provided by Cornell alumni Lisa and Richard Baker. Two years ago, they brought Villareal to the museum and, soon after, he made a simulation of the projected work using computer models. Preliminary installation began in August. Villareal and his team created a modular frame system in New York City that they moved to the museum, where they erected a large scaffold for mounting the lights.

"We wanted something very integrated that worked with the architecture and wouldn't have any adverse effect," said Villareal. "We were able to anchor the piece using the existing light sockets without adding any perforations to the building." The resulting work is titled "Cosmos," both an apt description of the lights' ephemeral nature and a sly nod to the late Cornell astronomer Carl Sagan. Villareal, who has created installations for the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Brooklyn Academy of Music, is at work on a piece that will illuminate the west span of the San Francisco Bay Bridge. While Villareal utilizes the latest technology for his projects, and says he grew up as a "geeky kid with an Apple II Plus computer" before discovering art, he considers himself to be first and foremost a sculptor.

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