

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

The New York Times

BRIGHT IDEA



Last September, in a private dining room on the waterfront overlooking San Francisco's Bay Bridge, the official announcement was made. Every last permit was in hand, and \$5.5 million of the \$8 million in private money needed had been largely raised. The Bay Lights — the artist Leo Villareal's installation of almost 25,000 individual white lights along the suspension cables of the bridge connecting San Francisco to Oakland via Treasure Island — would shine by next March. Villareal's canvas would be nearly two miles long, and an estimated 50 million people would see it in person after it flickers to life. Ostensibly the Bay Lights is a celebration of the Bay Bridge's 75th birthday. When it first opened in November 1936, the bridge was hailed as an engineering wonder — but only for about six months, when it was overshadowed by the opening of the more glamorous Golden Gate Bridge. Yet the Bay Bridge is longer, stronger and carries more traffic than its more famous sister.

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“We are Cinderella and we have ashes on our cheeks and we work really really hard,” Ben Davis, the man behind the Bay Lights, told me. “Wouldn’t it be nice just for a moment to put on a gown and be the belle of the ball?”

Davis, an elegant 52-year-old man who was overseeing the event, ushered a parade of dignitaries up to the podium, eloquent speeches in hand. The former Mayor of San Francisco (and current Lieutenant Governor of California) Gavin Newsom exulted: “Paris, eat your heart out. I love the Eiffel Tower, but we have the Bay Bridge, and it ain’t so bad!” Volleys of thank-yous ricocheted between representatives from an alphabet soup of agencies. The room was thick with self-congratulatory bouts of applause. They had dealt with the issues and the questions had been asked and answered: Will those driving over the bridge be distracted by the lights and cause accidents? No, the lights face outward, and won’t be visible to drivers. Will the migration of birds and sea life be affected? Not according to the environmental impact report. Will traffic be disrupted? No, the installation of the lights will all be done late at night. The engineers ticked off facts and figures: The lights will require 100,000 linear feet of specially armored cabling for the power, networking and communications. The installation will take 8 to 10 electricians working the night shift for five rainy

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months. They'll be shinnying up every suspension cable on the north side of the western span, affixing individual L.E.D. lights at a spacing of 1 every 12 inches. They will, in essence, hand-wire nearly 25,000 individual pixels, and the entire thing will be lashed to the bridge with 60,000 zip ties. You could think of it as the world's largest Jumbotron.



When Villareal got up to explain how he'll program the display, he was understated, even slightly vague. The lights will be sequenced "based on complex algorithms inspired by all the systems surrounding the bridge," including the water and traffic, he said. The end result will be "a mirror of the activity around it." There will be no color, no text, no images, no YouTube videos, nothing but abstraction. "I am the sensor," he said, unusually insistent in response to suggestions that the piece be interactive and open-source. "It's a piece of fine art, not a light show, so in that way it's very pure. But there is a lot of sophistication in the software that generates all the sequences."

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Finally, the former Mayor Willie Brown jumped before the crowd and said, “I can see it now!” He was looking forward to a triumphant 2013, a bright Frisco future where Larry Ellison again wins the America’s Cup, this time with the Bay Lights as the backdrop. He deadpanned: “It makes you say, O.K., 49ers, go. Go on down to San Jose — we don’t give a damn!” Like most of the crazier ideas that come out of San Francisco these days, the Bay Lights owes its genesis to Burning Man, the end-of-summer bacchanal on the Black Rock Desert playa where overworked Silicon Valleyites and underworked counterculturalists gather to stay up all night, party and cross-pollinate. Davis is a longtime regular at the festival and says that for him it conveys “a sense of spectacle, a sense of wonder and awe, a sense of generosity and shared experience.” But he was growing frustrated with the annual ritual and becoming aware of a fundamental disconnect between the magic on the playa and the drudgery of daily life. How could he bring the beauty he saw every year at Burning Man back home? For Davis, the founder of a branding and P.R. agency that represents infrastructure mega-projects like the Transbay Transit Center, the answer came as soon as he got back to his desk. What Cinderella really needed for her 75th was a bit of that Black Rock magic: a sparkling light-encrusted glass slipper. Soon afterward, he came across the work of Leo Villareal, a New York-based artist who specializes in programming just the kind of light matrix that Davis had envisioned for the bridge. Not only that, but Villareal was also a longtime Burning Man enthusiast. “You practically have to blow the playa dust off of it,” Davis said of the Bay Lights idea.

Villareal, 45, grew up in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso. He was the introverted son of a wealthy Mexican-American family, more interested in programming his Apple II than the provincial pursuits of football, rodeo and tequila. At 16 he was sent to an East Coast boarding school where he discovered an affinity for art history and set design. At Yale, he decided to be an artist and spent most of his time hanging out with future art stars — Matthew Barney, Michael Joaquin Grey, Yukinori Yanagi.

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Graduate school was at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program, a groundbreaking art- and engineering-school hybrid that was an early pioneer of the concept of "new media." After that he headed to the West Coast to work at Interval Research in Palo Alto, Calif., a Paul Allen-funded think tank modeled on Xerox PARC and Bell Labs, and the hippest place to be in Silicon Valley during the early Internet euphoria. In 1994, Villareal attended his first Burning Man. (He's now on the board of directors.) At Interval, Villareal was spending a lot of time exploring the various 3-D environments and programming languages associated with cyberspace, then a new idea, and he realized that on the playa of the Black Rock Desert, he was in that same type of space: a vast featureless landscape. The big difference was he had others with him, so he was not lonely, he said, and he "got over" the idea of virtual reality right then. His Burning Man epiphany came one year when he put up an irregular grid of 16 blinking lights above his encampment to act as a beacon. He didn't think of it as a piece of art, but when he was using it to get home after a long night out on the playa, he felt like it was talking to him, and that it had its own personality and language. Until then, his own attempts at making art had always foundered on a need for more pixels, more sensors, more hardware of all kinds. But hypnotized by his beacon, "I realized that I didn't need any of that," he said. The art-making both on and off the playa evolved from there.

For his gallery shows, Villareal began constructing custom displays that could hang on a wall like a painting. Some were severe grids of L.E.D.'s mounted like rhinestones on a mirrored surface; other times the L.E.D.'s were hidden behind frosted plexiglass. Some of the displays were full color; others black and white; and still others were outright sculptures made out of what looked like fluorescent tubes (but were actually L.E.D.-filled). All of them Villareal programmed by hand to blink and morph in abstract patterns that ranged from jarringly alien to downright soothing. Villareal's work is now in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and commissions range from a

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monumental light sculpture in Madison Square Park to a 200-foot-long installation at the National Gallery of Art. All of which came together, Villareal said, when “what I was doing at Burning Man suddenly I started doing all year long.” The morning after the press event, I found myself with Villareal in the back of a windowless Caltrans work truck, parked behind a traffic-cone fence in the fast lane of the bridge’s eastern span. Villareal had invited me to check out the view from the top of the western-most tower, but getting up there would be no easy feat. There was no elevator, no set of stairs, no door at the foot of the tower. We were going to climb. The first step was the longest. After double-checking the straps on our safety harnesses and hard hats, we swung our legs over the safety rail and contemplated the water below like jumpers. There was a scaffold clamped on to the side of the deck, a rickety structure of pipes and planks. Between the bay and the plank that I eased myself onto was 220 feet of solid vertigo.



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I averted my gaze and followed Villareal up two metal ladders. The first was indistinguishable from a New York fire escape. The second was an aluminum Home Depot special, lashed to the side of the bridge with rope. Soon we were hoisting ourselves over the top of the main suspension cable, where it nearly touched the upper deck of the roadway. It's the cable that does the heavy lifting in a suspension bridge, hanging in an almost perfectly parabolic arc between the towers. This was the cable that we would have to climb, as if walking a balance beam, to get to the top. It took a good half an hour of brisk walking to get to a point where the slope was such that it really felt like a climb, and as the cable bent upward the view just got more exhilarating. The city was in front of us, yet we were looking down at it. Directly below were the cars heading into town, but they were Matchbox size, insignificant compared to the vast expanse of the bay. Above us was a scattering of clouds, sheltering us from the full force of the sun. The slanting rays of midmorning played across the reflective surface of the water below. There were incredible vistas in every direction. In comparison, the bridge we were standing on seemed a mere filigree.

Struck by the beauty, Villareal loosened up and began to talk. He confessed astonishment that the Bay Lights was really happening. As we neared the top of our climb, the cable steepened to an angle that required us to stop and catch our breath every couple dozen steps. Soon we arrived at the small platform at the top of the tower, and while we were up there the wind whipped up even more, swirling the clouds into dramatic shapes that shadowed and dappled the water below, as if with a giant brush. Villareal had a breakthrough: he'd channel the pattern on the water's surface, the marks and trails and especially the shadows. And to re-create the wind on the water, he'd build a custom physics engine — something like the software used in virtual reality simulators — and then start tweaking the parameters, a process Villareal likened to “tuning a musical instrument.”

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From a fine art perspective, Villareal's medium is not light but physics. But he aspires to impress more than just the art establishment. "You won't have to be schooled in the history of art to appreciate and like it," he said. "My goal is to make it feel alive as possible, as alive as a sequence of numbers can be." He wants to make it "something that people can really have a connection with in the same way that they have a connection with clouds, or the sunset." It's hard for an artist to compete with the sunset, I suggested. "Right," he said, "but it's also hard not to really be into it."

