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AVENUE OF THE LEDS: LEO VILLAREAL'S LIGHT INSTALLATION IS INSIDE A NEW DURST LOBBY

Sixth Avenue is a haven for corporate art, from Robert Indian's Love to Curved Cube outside the Time Life Building, to say nothing of the massive galleries spanning the entire block between 51st and 52nd streets inside the UBS Building. The Avenue of the Americas is also home to mostly older office buildings, still very splendid and class A, but many in need of updating. It has become a hub of new elevators and air conditioners and reconfigured lobbies. At 1133 Sixth Avenue, the Durst Organization is merging these two currents, popular public art and a sparkling new lobby, into a striking whole. The centerpiece of a new Gensler-designed lobby is an installation by light artist Leo Villareal, Volume (Durst). At 90-feet long, 12-feet high and 6-feet deep, the dazzling sculpture is Mr. Villareal's largest three-dimensional work yet. Floating near the top of the lobby, it not only enlivens the space but the avenue, as well, fully visible through the two-story windows facing out on the plaza between the International Center for Photography on one side and a bank on the other.

"I love the chance encounter," Mr. Villareal said at an opening reception for the lobby Tuesday night. "I love seeing people stopping in front of it, talking to their friends about, pointing." Even in the freezing cold of the past week, the sculpture, which morphs through organic shapes, was stopping people in their tracks.

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730 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK NY 10019
TEL 646 336 7183
FAX 646 336 7185
WWW.GERINGLOPEZ.COM

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Like many of his sculptures, Mr. Villareal created a custom computer program to control the play of lights through blocks and walls and circles and other forms, all inspired by early organic forms—it is digital art climbing out of the primordial soup. The program is set up so that the shapes and durations are random and will never repeat. “It’s not on a loop, which is what I think makes it art,” Mr. Villareal said.

The sculpture is comprised of 900 thin mirrored-stainless-steel blades that hang 12 feet down from the ceiling, each with 96 LEDs—86,400 in total, Mr. Villareal points out, more than he has used in any other piece. The high polish on the blades makes the piece sparkle from throughout the space, though it is truly best viewed from the street. That is where Mr. Villareal spent all weekend fine-tuning the program controlling the piece, parking his car out front as a refuge from the cold as he spent hours tweaking each strand, each form. During the opening, his laptop sat casually on the lobby’s new onyx-fronted desk, whirring away with the new program. Nearby Times Square is also an inspiration. “It’s only a block away, so I wanted it to be reminiscent of the lights and the billboards, but to also be more refined and classy,” Mr. Villareal said.

“It’s fabulous,” Douglas Durst told The Observer. “He did an incredible job and we’re thrilled with it.” Mr. Villareal, who lives in the city, has seen his profile on the rise, especially in public, in the past year. His Bucky Ball was selected as the marquee piece for Madison Square Park in 2012, and a ceiling piece caps the recently opened connection between the Lexington and Sixth Avenue lines at Blecker Street. His largest piece ever, on the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, flips the switch this spring. The artist has also done similar, though less large, corporate work at the Time Warner

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Center and a number of properties in Washington, D.C. Volume (Durst) is paired with the new lobby for the 1970s building built by Douglas' father Seymour Durst. The lobby was last refreshed in 1993, but very much in the style of the time, with dark terrazzo floors and almost blindingly polished travertine walls. Redoing the space is not unlike buying a new suit after a decade or two. The suit still looks nice, but the lapels are maybe a little big and outmoded, the hems a bit threadbare.

This being the Durst Organization, sustainability was important, so rather than rip everything out, the design team at Gensler hit upon a clever solution where they honed the travertine walls and put down a new epoxy on the floor, brightening and softening all the surfaces, creating a cleaner, smoother more modern look. Gaudy pendant lights were replaced with recessed lamps, and new elevator bays and cabs were added, trading dark wood for polished glass. "We wanted to make the lobby feel like a gallery, make it feel clean and bright," Gensler designer E.J. Lee said. And it will feature art beyond Mr. Villareal's, hanging a rotating selection along the walls on the way to the elevators. The biggest change was moving the security desk back and facing it and the wall behind it in back-lit onyx instead of wood. The security gates are now off to the side, rather than at the center near the desk, easing the flow of workers into the building. It is a benefit for the building's tenant, which is one of the biggest reasons for the new lobby.

The 1 million-square-foot tower, which is home to Bank of America, ACE Insurance and Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, among others, is about to lose its biggest tenant, the GSA, which has 300,000 square feet on floors 2 through 10, which will

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empty out at the end of 2014. The Durst Organization will begin marketing the space this fall and hopes the new lobby will help entice tenants into this better looking building. "It's a whole new building," Mr. Durst said. "For the third time now, it's a completely new building." It is also meant for those who may never even set foot in the building. "Some people may look at this from the street and think, 'Oh, it's just a light thing,'" Mr. Villareal said. "But then they find themselves transfixed, it's changing, it's a seductive thing. Suddenly you're coming back, you're bringing your family back, your coworkers, and you're all staring at this lobby. I've seen it happen already."

