Leo Villareal's Long Term Art Installation Across The Thames' Bridges To Become World's Longest Public Artwork

Leo Villareal's Illuminated River, view of Waterloo to Lambeth Bridges. © Jason Hawkes.

Leo Villareal's Illum

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Measured by the sides of the bridges that serves as its canvas, Leo Villareal's Illuminated River in London claims to be the longest public artwork in the world at 5.5km—and there's more to come. As its second stage goes live, the New York-based light artist shares some background and insight into the work.

TEXT: Herbert Wright
IMAGES: Courtesy of various

An epic artwork that is transforming the heart of London just got bigger, more than doubling in length as it snakes along the city's largest spatial corridor. Yet by day, it's not there at all. Only by night, does it have a subtle, almost subliminal presence. This is *Illuminated River*, a project in which Leo Villareal's meticulously-planned design lights up bridges along the River Thames from dusk until 2am. The project, which won against 104 other proposals in an international competition, is very different to London's Instagram-friendly cacophony of multi-coloured floodlit buildings and structures. Responding to CoBo Social, Villareal reveals that he hopes

Leo Villareal's Illuminated River, view of Waterloo to Lambeth Bridges. © Jason Hawkes.

Leo Villareal's Illuminated River, view of Westminster Bridge. © James Newton.

In 2019, the first phase of four bridges, all beside London's financial quarter The City, were switched on. This April, a further five bridges were added, extending the calm, sequenced washes of colour and gently pulsing lines of light to bridges past the South Bank and the Houses of Parliament, as far as Lambeth Bridge. Each bridge has a different, dynamic lighting design. Eventually, bridges all the way to Chelsea will complete the project, to stretch along 8km of river, and it will run until at least 2029. Villareal's lighting is designed digitally, using sophisticated tools which model not just the built environment, but motion in the city, weather, turbulence on the river and more.

Illuminated River is a collaboration between Villareal and London architects Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands. Their responsibilities included the major engineering challenge of installing the new lighting fixtures, and negotiations with a myriad of "stakeholders"—from local authorities to bodies concerned with transport, heritage and wildlife (bird, fish and mollusc habitats are protected). The light's carbon footprint is minimal—Southwark Bridge (in phase one), for example, uses a mere 3 kilowatts per night, which is as much as three hand-held hair dryers.

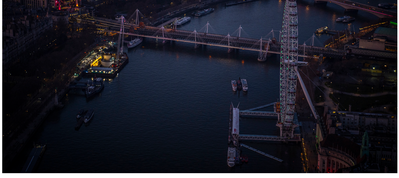
What is the backstory of the artist and the vision he brings to London? Villareal, originally from Texas, studied at Yale, where he first decided to be an artist and made his first installations with found objects. He recalls that they "had a Frankensteinian aspect, the idea of bringing these dead things to life". It was a technology program in summer at New York University which planted the seed of applying technology to his art. After graduating, he spent time in Italy, where a visit to a private collection introduced him to works by the light artists James Turrell and Dan Flavin, as well as by Bruce Naumann and others. That visit "really changed my perception of what art could be," explains Villareal. He then spent three years in Silicon Valley working on virtual reality, which he realised "was a very lonely place, empty, with this kind of geometry". Two epiphanies followed. Attending the Burning Man Festival, the legendary annual event in Nevada, he found that the artworks and the desert environment were not unlike virtual reality, but the difference was it could be populated "with actual people". Secondly, he realised that to give life to a dynamic, digital artwork driven by computation, you only needed a minimal amount of information, like the 16 ones and zeroes in his first light sculpture. All this has shaped his practice. He summarises it by saying "My works picks up where Flavin left off, some ideas of Turrell, plus computation, and time. Everything I do is about time."

Villareal's first public artwork *Supercluster*, a grid of programmed light panels covering a facade of New York's P51 Contemporary Art Center, was shown in 2004. He began sequencing light, and instead of just on/off, he introduced dimming. His biggest project before *Illuminated River* was the *Bay Lights* project in 2013, transforming the cables supporting 2.9 kilometres of San Francisco's Bay Bridge into a shimmering form of changing light. It was so popular that it was re-instated in 2016.

With *Illuminated River*, Villareal's sequenced light takes advantage of a phenomenon called entrainment, which has long interested him. He describes it as "a synchronisation that occurs when the brain encounters an external rhythm and begins to align with it". Villareal explains, "I am intrigued by the ability for *Illuminated River* to create a sense of harmony with viewers. The patterns I created are based on the kinetic activity around the bridges with the aim to provide a meditative focal point for all who see them."

Leo Villareal's Illuminated River, view of Blackfriars Bridge. © James Newton.

Leo Villareal's Illuminated River, view of Lambeth Bridge. © Paul Crawley.



Leo Villareal's Illuminated River, view of Golden Jubilee Footbridges. © Jason Hawkes.

Among the bridges of *Illuminated River's* second phase, the most eastern is Blackfriars Bridge which glows with red-pink hues. Meanwhile, Waterloo Bridge's sides remain dark but its underside is colour-washed, creating a tunnel of light between its support columns, and scintillating 379 metre-long lines of light sweep across it beside the footpath on each side. Minimalistic monochromatic pulses pass through a row of lights on the contemporary twin Golden Jubilee Footbridges, structures which were designed by Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands themselves. Westminster Bridge's arches are bathed in gentle greens, and Lambeth Bridge is completely lit in shades of red. The green and red reference the seating colour of the two chambers of the Houses of Parliament between these bridges.

Because of the COVID-19 travel ban, the second phase designs relied on a LiveU Databridge high-speed link that could stream 4k video to Villareal's studio in Brooklyn, New York. "I was able to be productive from thousands of miles away," he says, but 'the final touches were done in London where I could finally see the bridges for myself." As Villareal notes, "*Illuminated River* is all about being present with the bridges."

After the stay-at-home lockdowns and everyday life that seemed to be channeled by phone and computer screens, such a real-world experience should be more important than ever. With Villareal's subliminal super power of entrainment by synchronisation at work, *Illuminated River* really does draw the visitor away from the hustle of the city, into a state of contemplative, dream-like serenity.

#Illuminated River #installation art #Leo Villareal #Light Installation #London #public art