MAY THE FORCE BE WITH US
LEO and YVONNE FORCE VILLAREAL
and What Art’s Got to Do With It

Radiant Wheel, 2016
Coded Spectrum, 2012
Buckyball, 2014

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LEO VILLAREAL’S STUDIO is part of a complex in Greenwood, Brooklyn. The buildings there span five streets and house dozens of artists’ spaces. They are perpendicular to Gowanus Bay, and east of the Gowanus Expressway. The streets are paved with cobblestones. The buildings are monotone. They are six stories tall with green windowpanes. There is salt in the air and rust on most of the loading docks.

Leo’s studio is on the fourth floor. Everything echoes when walking up the metal stairs. There is a doorbell outside. Inside, there is light.

“I realized that I could control light with [computer] code, and I had an epiphany that it was a powerful combo,” says Leo, whose illuminated sculptures and large-scale public works projects are displayed worldwide. The art in his 6,000-square-foot studio are museum and gallery pieces he created. They all project randomized patterns of colorful lights. One, titled Flag, is a representation of the American flag, a project he created in 2008.

“This is as close as I would get to using an image,” says Leo of the piece. “I started thinking about the flag as a symbol, and its ratios and proportions.” At times, you can see the flag. At times, it portrays abstract patterns. “It resonates in different ways depending upon what’s happening in the world.”

Earlier this fall, Leo joined Pace Gallery. He made his Pace debut with works shown at Frieze London in October, and he will be showing a new piece at Art Basel Miami Beach this year. He’ll be joined there by his wife, Yvonne Force Villareal. She’s been to Art Basel since 2007 to support the Art Production Fund (APF), a nonprofit she cofounded in 2000 to commission and produce public art.

Both see art as a way to foster community and conversation. It’s a public service.

In March 2013, Leo illuminated San Francisco’s Bay Bridge with 25,000 LED lights. The Bay Lights project was supposed to be up for two years. He moved his studio from Chelsea to Brooklyn soon after, as the Bay Lights boosted both Leo’s profile and the scale of his work. In January 2016, about a year after the project’s official end, the Bay Lights became a permanent installation.

People are compelled to tell Leo their stories of the Bay Lights. He enjoys listening. “They’re not just describing a piece of art. It’s like a whole impactful moment that people have,” says Leo. “The passion it creates is really amazing.” At Pace, Leo will be working closely
“Public art OFFERS art FOR everyone, AND THAT’S SOMETHING THAT WE REALLY BELIEVE IN.” —YVONNE FORCE VILLAREAL
with Future\'\'Pace, an innovative partnership with Futurecity that is dedicated to public art.

Yvonne knows the ins and outs of producing large-scale public works. APF helps to bring such projects—art that often requires permits, money and administrative support to pull off—to fruition. New Yorkers may remember Rudolf Stingel’s floral carpet in Grand Central Station’s Vanderbilt Hall, installed in 2004; Art Adds, artwork placed on top of taxis in 2011; and After Hours, exhibits that existed on roll-down shutters outside closed stores in 2011 and 2013. All were APF projects.

“Public art offers art for everyone, and that’s something that we really believe in,” Yvonne says. “People need art to consider a different way of looking at things and communicating.”

The Art Production Fund began as a collaboration between Yvonne and Doreen Remen. The two are graduates of the Rhode Island School of Design. The name was chosen for its simplicity, allowing each project to have its own identity. “We look for work where you can understand the project on your own terms,” says Yvonne. “We strive to foster projects that a child can really delight within and communicate, and simultaneously an art historian would be interested in.”

The Art Production Fund doesn’t water down projects. “We keep to the artist’s vision.”

The most recent APF opening was Seven Magic Mountains just outside Las Vegas, by artist Ugo Rondinone. It took five years to bring the project to fruition. “It’s a modern-day Stonehenge,” says Yvonne.
“It’s a sculpture that has its own sense of purpose and spirituality, and you don’t need to read too much about it to understand it.”

APF’s most iconic contribution to date is Prada Marfa, a project by artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. The permanent installation is on U.S. Highway 90 in west Texas. It’s 26 miles outside of Marfa, which is a community of 2,000 year-round residents that has become an epicenter of minimalist art.

Prada Marfa is a museum, with real Prada shoes in sizes large enough to accommodate male feet in the window. “Prada Marfa is a monument to consumerism and sexual identity,” says Yvonne. The project was a collaboration with Ballroom Marfa, a nonprofit that seeks to further the community’s art scene. APF often operates by formulating partnerships with local institutions or museums. “We placed it outside Marfa because the project has a lot of personality,” says Yvonne of the piece. She didn’t want it to overwhelm the community.

“The quiet beauty and the emptiness of Marfa is like a blank canvas in a way,” says Leo. “When you get there, you feel a sense of space.” The family—Leo, Yvonne and their two children, Cuatro and Lux—has a home there. They also have a cottage in Orient, Long Island, and a loft in New York City.

Yvonne and Leo go to Burning Man to reboot. The annual weeklong festival in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert is a gathering of artists and visionaries who create a village. “You come back exhausted but energized,” says Leo. Yvonne agrees. “What binds everyone together is that Burning Man is a gift economy. It brings out the best in people.” The festival is based on tenets of inclusivity, where a diverse group of people is welcome to create art without judgment or criticism.

Leo first went to Burning Man in 1994, when the festival attracted a fraction of the 70,000 attendees it caps out at today. It was there that he started connecting software and light. The discovery was a practical one—“I needed a light to find my tent,” Leo says.

The couple have been going to Burning Man together for the past 18 years. Leo now sits on the board of the Burning Man Project, a nonprofit that helps to fund the festival, as well as a variety of related spin-off productions.

The two travel for their art, but New York is home for the couple. It’s where their kids, ages 5 and 13, go to school. They do not have a television in their Greenwich Village great room. The walls are white brick. They are covered with pieces created by Jeff Koons, Alex Ross, Alex Katz, Dash Snow, Rachel Feinstein, Lisa Yuskavage, Rudolf Stingel, Jessica Craig Martin, the couple’s children and Leo. Yvonne has posed for Katz almost 20 times. “We live with the art of our friends,” Yvonne says.
Leo wears a Gingham Print Slim-Fit Shirt by Eton: Saks Fifth Avenue, 611 Fifth Avenue, 212.753.4000. Belt, pants and shoes, Leo’s own.

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—LEO VILLAREAL
“It’s really an honor to have their work. The way you place it creates its own dialogue and relationship.”

A white John Chamberlain couch is in the center of the room. “We first met at an opening for John Chamberlain,” recalls Leo. Yvonne bought the original couch, a hand-carved prototype. Leo purchased one of 10 editions. They began dating soon after.

The original couch is next to a baby grand piano. Both of their kids play. It’s important to Yvonne that they’re exposed to different hobbies. Her older child, Cuatro, sails. “We don’t know anything about sailing,” says Yvonne.

“I had a very atypical upbringing,” she continues. Yvonne spent most of her formative years in Key West. “It was the ’70s. I was in a bathing suit and bare feet. But it’s also an artists’ home, a community where people embraced all walks of life.”

The two return to South Florida, to Miami, for Art Basel this year. Pace will feature Leo’s work. As it has in the past, the Art Production Fund has partnered with artists to create and sell cotton beach towels at Art Basel. This year’s artists are Laurie Simmons and John Currin. Priced at $95, the towels are a way for people to own a piece by an artist that may not otherwise be accessible to them. All of the revenue from the sale of the towels goes back to public art projects. “It’s another way to give back to the public,” Yvonne says.

Earlier this summer, Leo debuted *Volume (Frisco)*, a piece at the Star, the Dallas Cowboys’ training facility in Frisco, Texas. “It’s a volumetric piece with 40-foot long stainless steel rods, located in the lobby,” says Leo. Both *Volume (Frisco)* and the Bay Lights have been featured on television during breaks in football games. Leo’s phone starts buzzing with Google alerts when it happens. “I guess we should start watching more football,” says Yvonne.

The Cowboys commission in particular has resonated with a trend that both Leo and Yvonne see in art—that it doesn’t have to be confined to museums anymore. Recently, Yvonne and her APF cofounder Remen started Culture Corps, an art consultancy for the private sector, particularly in hospitality, media and real estate companies. This month, the duo announced that they will be handing the reins of APF to executive director Casey Fremont, who joined the organization in 2004. They’ll continue to be involved on the board of directors, but will now focus on Culture Corps. “There’s a growing desire to bring high-integrity projects to places,” says Yvonne. “Sophisticated people and places in general want to have art as a part of their lives,” Leo chimes in.

That list now includes the city of London. Leo was just shortlisted for *The Illuminated River*, an initiative to light all 17 bridges across the river Thames. The winner will be announced on December 8.

The bridges are the perfect metaphor for what both Yvonne and Leo strive to do in their work—to use art as a catalyst to bring people together. ♦
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