



A Thousand Points of Light

WOOD STREET GALLERIES OFFER AN ILLUMINATING NEW EXHIBIT

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It's very odd to see an elderly man across an empty, low-lit room and believe that you're staring at yourself. But for a few moments after I entered Erwin Redl's "Matrix II," the hunched frame and balding head of another gallery visitor looked like my own mirrored image, and not because I resemble him.

That's the effect of Redl's work, a disarming grid of floating lights that sets out to illuminate your perception of space and your physical parameters within it.

The piece, on display on the second floor of the Wood Street Galleries as part of its *After Image* show, consists of 140 tiny green LEDs strung from nearly invisible copper wires, which emit constant, steady flecks of light with the intensity of stationary fireflies. They run from ceiling to floor and wall to wall, so that when you enter the grid, the mind makes sense of the seemingly unanchored LEDs by assuming they are reflections in a house of mirrors — not part of another dimension, where time and motion have stopped.

Actually, both sensations are evoked simultaneously by Redl, who was also com-

missioned to make "FLOW," a large LED piece installed on the gallery's Liberty Avenue façade. The effect, suggesting an infinite number of infinitely diminishing parallel lines, allows a quiet, somber contrast in a space both boundless and restricted.

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But it's not just Redl's arrangement of the lights that provokes a weird, existential doubt; LEDs themselves are somewhat unnerving technological devices. Unlike other light sources such as fluorescents, diodes vibrate at only one frequency, so when the light burns into the retina, it leaves a funny visual residue: As a whole, Redl's lights seem somewhat blurry, but each one pierces like a bright star. It's a cheap, low-tech special effect, but the easy reach retains layers of *conceptual* residue, as well. Redl's green grid in this black hole of

a room conjures up the intangible space of computer technology — the void that we imagine within the physical confines of the monitor. It's as if Redl wants to dive headfirst into the green pool of early computer screens.

With a background in furniture and electronic music, the Austrian-born Redl's main interest lies in using LED technology to make a connection between body and space. His lights are points defining the edges of geometric planes, making his viewers aware of space as a mass, rather than a void. James Turrell has been doing a similar thing since the 1980s, with his phosphorescent light-space installations, but Turrell's mesh of the mind, body and architecture is rooted in spiritual concerns, whereas Redl's work expresses a love for the digital. (Turrell

is a Quaker who wears a long, white beard and lives in the desert; Redl's a thirtysomething electronic musician, who wears a shaved head and lives in New York City.)

Yet "Matrix" is still as warm-blooded as a portrait. This sparse piece doesn't simply explore the dark spaces of technology, which by this point pervades almost every earthly realm. Rather, by giving the invisible force of emptiness a shape, Redl summons those dark, elusive spaces that exist in the human mind.

If Redl's installations take on the gestures of an abstract painting, Jim Campbell's small LED works are their more figurative counterparts. In his series "Motion and Rest," he has created a pattern of timed flickers of light across a Plexiglas canvas so that the image of a man appears — not like a robotic cutout as you might imagine, but like a solid charcoal drawing, or a cinematic shadow. Where Redl makes sweeping comments about the physical versus psychological in a single moment, Campbell tells a particular, personal story of human struggle through a series of frames. The steady walk that Campbell evokes was apparently meant to represent that of the handicapped. But while his figures move slowly and arduously without actually going anywhere, theirs is actually an artful motion, as if Campbell might not exchange that struggle if doing so meant losing the beauty of it.

There's a visual and conceptual line that starts with "FLOW" and runs through Redl's "Matrix" and finishes with Campbell's works. But the Wood Street show continues somewhat superfluously, with Leo Villareal's "Lightscape" — a work featuring large colored LEDs encased behind, and blurred by, latex sheeting. To view it, you sit in front of the screen and watch the blurred LEDs gradate in hue, tone, brightness and orientation for at least 10-15 minutes, long enough for your eyes to adjust to the slow pace of the shifts. The effect is something like that of a not-so-interesting kaleidoscope — or at least it would be if you were looking at it without your glasses on.

"You got the rolling papers?" a gallery visitor joked, referring to the psychedelic, "lava lamp" nature of Villareal's piece. But rather than being a throwback to '60s drug culture, the piece falls flat in its reference to even the technology itself, especially as it follows the work of both Redl and Campbell, whose aesthetic vocabularies are more eloquent. "Lightscape" is less of a lightscape than a light show, and if I wasn't an old man when I walked into the gallery, I felt like one by the time I left. ☞

After Image runs through Oct. 25 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown. "FLOW" will be on display in the Galleries' windows through 2005. 412-471-5605.

From Jim Campbell's series "Motion and Rest"