

Arts and Leisure: Line king Redl shines light on altered realities

by Robert L. Pincus

We can't escape geometry. If you're reading this inside your home or office, you're surrounded by straight edges. When you're driving, as often as not you're navigating a grid. Nature might not favor clean lines, but we do in the things and the daily surroundings we design.

LIGHT SIGHT - Erwin Redl's installation, 'Matrix II,' consists of green light-emitting diodes. CNS Photo courtesy of San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. Though it may be all around us, geometry can still seem exotic. My case in point: The room-size work of art by the Austrian-turned-American artist Erwin Redl, "Matrix II," which consists of long rows of green light-emitting diodes laid out in tidy rows that stretch from ceiling to floor, wall to wall. The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego acquired the work last year with funds from its International Collectors group of patrons and the Annenberg Foundation.

Enter the door to the room and you are instantly inside a kind of three-dimensional grid. Lines of green lights, suspended from black cords, are at ankle level, eye level and higher. They run parallel to the floor and in a diagonal fashion. The configurations alter as you move through the rows of lights. Look one way and it might seem as if you're looking at a pyramidal form. Peer straight ahead long enough and it starts to seem as if there are invisible planes inside the grid.

One little girl strolled through the space with her arms hugging tight to her body, as if she thought touching any of the lights would be perilous. This was her own fantasy, but there is a sort of imaginary charge to "Matrix II," as if it were a force field.

It's something like being inside a diagram. (You have to think Redl knows his title will evoke the "Matrix" films for some viewers.) Part of the fun is to see others moving in a different part of the room because they both blend and contrast with the established lines of Redl's work.

This piece was part of a big exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2005, "Ecstasy: In and About Altered States." It fit the theme, even if it wasn't as overtly hallucinatory as Takashi Murakami's cartoon sculptures with imagery culled from anime and manga comics, or Carsten Holler's larger-than-life-size "Upside-Down Mushroom Room." But in his own way, Redl makes real space seem

unreal.

If it seems as if the atmosphere of "Matrix II" is a bit like that of a video game, that isn't coincidental. Redl is using 3-D computer modeling as a means for creating his environments. He's adopted the term "reverse engineering" to describe his method.

Redl graduated from New York's School of Visual Arts in 1995 with an MFA in computer art, and in the years since then you can track a trend toward more monumental and all-encompassing uses of light. His studio is still in New York.

As a way of engineering space, Redl's art has an elegant simplicity to it. Its components are simple: The lights are hung, five to a strand. The piece, as installed, is 10 rows wide and 23 rows long. But it is the accumulated effect that defies logic.

It becomes an art of pure sensation. If you find some sort of mystical or transcendent implications in his work, it's probably you. This is visual spectacle.

Redl has done work on a grander scale, and in fact, public commissions have been coming his way since his approach lends itself well to architectural settings. One of his most memorable temporary works was created for the 2002 Whitney Biennial in New York; he shielded the museum's facade in a grid of light, as if there were a colored plane floating in front of it.

"Matrix II" was done on a grander scale for "Ecstasy," simply because the space the museum had for it in Los Angeles was larger. And while Redl's construction retains the power to seduce your senses, one can't help but think it would have more visual drama in a larger room.

That said, this is still the sort of environmental piece in which you can lose yourself for a time, and feel as if real space and real time fall by the wayside. It has a gee-whiz dimension to it, in the quantity and the look of the LEDs he orchestrates. But Redl's room is heavier on visual magic than technological spectacle, which makes it a work worth experiencing.

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