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Reputation and Monolith, Both Stand Tall

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A 3,500-pound, 12-foot-tall column made of solid cast polyester resin, one of De Wain Valentine's most ambitious pieces, on display at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

De Wain Valentine in his studio.

THE studio of the sculptor De Wain Valentine sits here anonymously amid 1970s-era shopping strips deep in the suburban savannah south of Los Angeles, sharing a parking lot with a dental ceramics manufacturer. On a recent walk around the property Mr. Valentine, 75, peered in at some of his dental neighbors, laboring silently in lab coats and paper face masks, and told a visitor: "I like to see those guys. Maybe they'll let me trade one of my pieces for some bridgework if I ever need it."

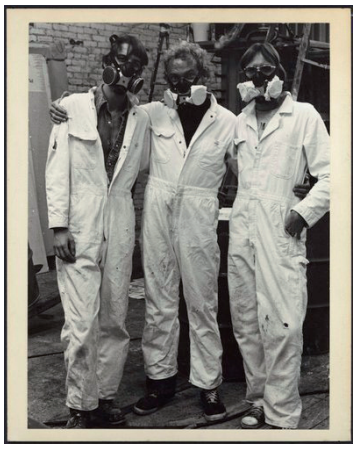
The sculptures that Mr. Valentine has made over the last four decades — quasi-religious incarnations of coastal light and air made from some of the most sterile, synthetic materials ever produced by American industry — are not exactly low-end bartering chips. They have been showing up with increasing regularity in prestigious Chelsea and Los Angeles exhibitions, and last year one of his early pieces, from 1966, was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, where its now commands the middle of a room devoted to Minimalism.

But for many years it seemed as if Mr. Valentine's name had slipped off the list of artists celebrated for forging a distinctly West Coast version of Minimalism in the 1960s and '70s, and that his work had been relegated to a kind of period curiosity. One of his most ambitious pieces was long thought to be lost: a pair of 3,500-pound towers made of solid cast polyester resin, imperious 12-foot-tall monoliths that ended up (for reasons beyond Mr. Valentine's control) residing ignobly on their sides, looking a lot like elevator lobby screens, in the headquarters of the medical-supply company in Deerfield, Ill., that commissioned them in 1975.

Now, as part of Pacific Standard Time — the sprawling multi-museum event opening throughout Southern California in the late summer and fall to re-examine the history of postwar Los Angeles art — both that lost work and Mr. Valentine are being, in a very real sense, rediscovered.

If anyone seems to serve as the symbol of Pacific Standard Time's ambitions — shared by more than 60 institutions — to bring underappreciated West Coast artists into the historical spotlight, it is Mr. Valentine. Last week the J. Paul Getty Museum opened "From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's 'Gray Column,' " an exhibition centered on one of the resin monoliths. His work is also being featured in shows at three other museums as part of the event, in addition to a large survey exhibition at the Getty, whose research institute and foundation arm hatched and nurtured the Pacific Standard Time idea.

The "Gray Column" show, which presents the resin sculpture to the public for the first time in the form in which Mr. Valentine intended, turned upright like a looming interplanetary sentinel, did not come to the Getty through normal curatorial channels. It began instead as a project of the Getty's Conservation Institute, a fitting avenue given that in his heyday Mr. Valentine often seemed to be as much a materials...



De Wain Valentine, center, and two studio assistants.

"Diamond Column" (1978).

scientist as an artist, one of the most daring pioneers in the use of substances previously unheard of for art making: fiberglass, Plexiglas, cast acrylic, polyester resin.

As a child in Colorado he developed an appreciation for color and surfaces, spending time with his miner uncles and scavenging copper and iron ore from tailing piles, the rocks and gravel left by the mining process. He worked in boat shops and began to make art pieces from plastic, which he tried unsuccessfully to show in New York. "The galleries would look at my slides and say: 'Oh my, that's lovely! What is it made out of?' And I'd say, 'Plastic,' and that was that," Mr. Valentine recalled in an interview. "It wasn't something one made art out of apparently."

Giving the other coast a shot in 1965, he arrived in Los Angeles at just the right time. Artists like Larry Bell, Peter Alexander, Craig Kauffman and Helen Pashgian were in the early stages of creating the spare, luminous aesthetic that came to be known as the Los Angeles Look or Finish Fetish. (The latter term was wielded by critics as an insult, much as the words Baroque and Impressionist once were, though after so many years it has come to acquire an air of connotative cool.)

The look was defined by a kind of holy union between the sleek synthetic materials then becoming available from booming postwar manufacturing and the panoply of things those artists could mold the materials to evoke and idealize: Pacific sunlight, hot-rod and surfing culture, the airline and aerospace industry, and a kind of Eastern transcendence they seemed to be much closer to than their Minimalist counterparts on the other side of the country.

Mr. Alexander described his early translucent cast-resin works — which grew out of his experience glossing surfboards — as "containers of silence, as if one were underwater." Mr. Valentine spoke of wanting a way "to cut out large chunks of ocean or sky and say: 'Here it is,' " and he came close to finding it in his work.

He took up poured polyester resin, which hardens in a mold, but within a few years he began to yearn to create larger chunks of sea and sky than the properties of the commercially available resin would then allow. And rather than wait for the industry to catch up to his ambitions, he essentially raced past it instead. He developed a close relationship with one of his suppliers, the Hastings Plastics Company in Santa Monica, and in 1970, as a result of his studio experiments, the company introduced a new kind of highly stable resin named for him, Valentine Maskast Resin No. 1300-17, which allowed him and other artists to go far beyond the 50-pound limit to which they had once been restricted.

A 1970 company brochure sang his praises perhaps more loudly than critics of the time did: "It was difficult for Hastings Plastics or any other supplier to believe that an artist has worked out formulas and techniques for casting relatively clear polyester...

De Wain Valentine in front of "Gray Column" in the 1970s.

resin pieces in single pours" up to several thousand pounds. It was a breakthrough for cutting-edge sculptors but, as the brochure said, also quite handy for "bar tops, table tops, glazing, stained-glass windows, room dividers, etc."

Mr. Valentine eventually set to work with the new resin on the mammoth paired columns, a commission from the medical-supply company then known as Baxter Travenol for its new headquarters in Illinois. Pictures from the time show him and his assistants in his Venice Beach studio, which could easily have been mistaken for an explosives factory: the men wear protective suits and face masks, working over huge blue chemical drums, ready with a forklift to shove a piece out the garage door in a hurry if the catalyzing process caused it to become so hot that the wooden mold caught fire.

A few hundred pounds of resin came off during the grueling weeks of sanding and polishing. It was exacting and expensive work. "I didn't make as much as a grocery store clerk on the whole thing, but I really wanted to build a piece that big," recalled Mr. Valentine, who now sports a long gray pony tail in place of the bushy beach hair he once wore.

"I'm glad I did it when I was young," he added. "I thought I was going to live forever and could do anything."

As he finished the columns, he learned that the ceilings in the room for which the pieces were destined in the company's headquarters had been lowered, so he reluctantly agreed to install them on their sides, renaming them "Two Gray Walls." They stayed there for several years; at some point one column toppled against a couch and was damaged. The pieces migrated into storage and finally back into Mr. Valentine's possession, where they sat for years — unseen, too large to do anything with, too expensive to restore — and there they would probably have remained.

This is where Tom Learner came in. He runs the Modern and Contemporary Art Research program at the Getty Conservation Institute. The institute has become a leader in the growing field of conserving 20th- and 21st-century art made from complex, tricky industrial materials, and Mr. Valentine's work seemed to provide a veritable petri dish of research possibilities. Then, as a result of the Pacific Standard Time project, the conservation interest quickly broadened into a plan to rescue the undamaged column from storage and base an entire exhibition around it and the story of its creation.

For Mr. Valentine, whose health has slowed his productivity in recent years, probably the most satisfying aspect of the piece's revival has been the simplest and least expected: over more than three decades, he had never once seen the work standing upright. (It had been molded, finished and shipped on its side.) But several weeks ago he walked into the gallery at the Getty Museum where the column now rises,

...its deep gray gradually dissolving into a ghostly, colloidal translucence as it tapers toward its top.

"It changes so much depending on the light, the time of day, even just the way you look at it," he said later. Asked what he thought when he saw it, he smiled, leaned in and whispered, "Wowee zowee."

"People ask me what color it is," he said, "and I just say, 'Magic.' " ■