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## Why there's (once again) a great future in plastics

Art made of plastic and polyester surely can't be worth much, can it? You'd be surprised, says Colin Gleadell

An exhibition at the Almine Rech Gallery in London this week will recall the Sixties in California – not the music of the Beach Boys, especially, but an art that captures that special, lightheaded sense of luminosity and airiness which has made Venice Beach such a draw.

Appropriately, the material with which the artists worked had something in common with the recording and film industries. No one who has seen Mike Nichols's 1967 film *The Graduate* can forget the party scene where young Benjamin (played by Dustin Hoffman) is taken outside by the patronising and ridiculous Mr McGuire, who intones: "Ben... I've just one word to say to you: plastics. There's a great future in plastics."

But he had a point. During the Sixties, plastic was going through a revolution, not just industrially, in the science lab, but as a material for artists.

On the West Coast, at the same time that David Hockney was exploring his California dream in paint (see review, opposite), a group of more technologically minded artists seized upon the potential of synthetically produced resins for making evocative translucent sculptures, contributing to what is referred to as the Light and Space movement. The organiser of this exhibition, *Plastic Show*, was one of those artists – DeWain Valentine. He taught plastics technology at the

University of California and in 1966 patented his own type of modified polyester resin, which he used for his sculptures. But, like several of his peers, he has been sidelined by the market.

However, in the past six years there have been important exhibitions devoted to the artists of the Light and Space movement – at museums in San Diego, Berlin and Seattle, and at commercial galleries, notably the Almine Rech and David Zwirner galleries, two international power houses committed to the minimalist aesthetic. Prices at *Plastic Show* range from \$100,000 to \$2 million, the most expensive tending to be for the earliest works. Of the artists in

this show, one of the most expensive at auction is John McCracken. When he died in 2011, McCracken's auction record was \$337,000 (£173,000) for an 8ft fibreglass plank sculpture coated in polyester resin. Since then, his prices have been rising steadily, reaching close to \$1 million at auction, and privately even more.

*Plastic Show* includes five polyester works by him, three from his desirable Seventies period.

Also in the \$1 million league at auction is Robert Irwin. He has just one work in the show, but at 12 ft high, the shiny acrylic column, *Prism*, 1971, is the biggest.

DeWain Valentine has yet to reach those peaks.

His work barely surfaced at

auction until 2011 as it had little resale value. But since then it has been selling, mostly in Los Angeles, for up to \$175,000.

Apart from Valentine's inclusion in museum shows, Almine Rech, who has represented him since 2014, has devoted exhibitions to him in London and Paris, where François Pinault was among the buyers, at Art Basel in Miami and at Frieze Masters in London, where sales were strong. "He was forgotten for 20 years, but now there is new interest," says Jason Cori, of Almine Rech.

In 1964, Craig Kauffman enlisted the help of Planet Plastics to make vacuum-moulded plastic wall reliefs with spray-gunned translucent colours to give them radiance. Before long, he had been taken up by the Pace Gallery in New York, but immersed himself too much in teaching to be a force in the market. Like most of the artists in this show, his auction market only started recently – in his case, after he died in 2010 and Zwirner staged a group show for the Light and Space artists.

Of the handful of vacuum-formed plastic sculptures that have been sold, a rare surviving 1967 example holds the record – \$293,000 – set in New York in 2014. The six examples in this show date from the Nineties onwards.

The outsider in the group, not because she is the only woman but because she is more of a painter than the others, is Mary Corse, now in her Seventies. A student of quantum mechanics, psychology and philosophy, she began with monochrome paintings and Plexiglass constructions until she started using tiny glass beads or microspheres in her acrylic paintings. Other galleries that have vied to show her work are White Cube in London and Lehmann Maupin in America. Her work has only really appeared consistently at auction since 2010, and hit the \$100,000 mark a year ago.

The human thread to this show is that all the artists knew each other. They shared interests in Buddhism and UFOs, but explored the new technology in different ways.

"They were friends – but also rivals," says Cori.

DeWain Valentine's *Concave Circle Blue*, 1968 is included in *Plastic Show* at Almine Rech Gallery

