

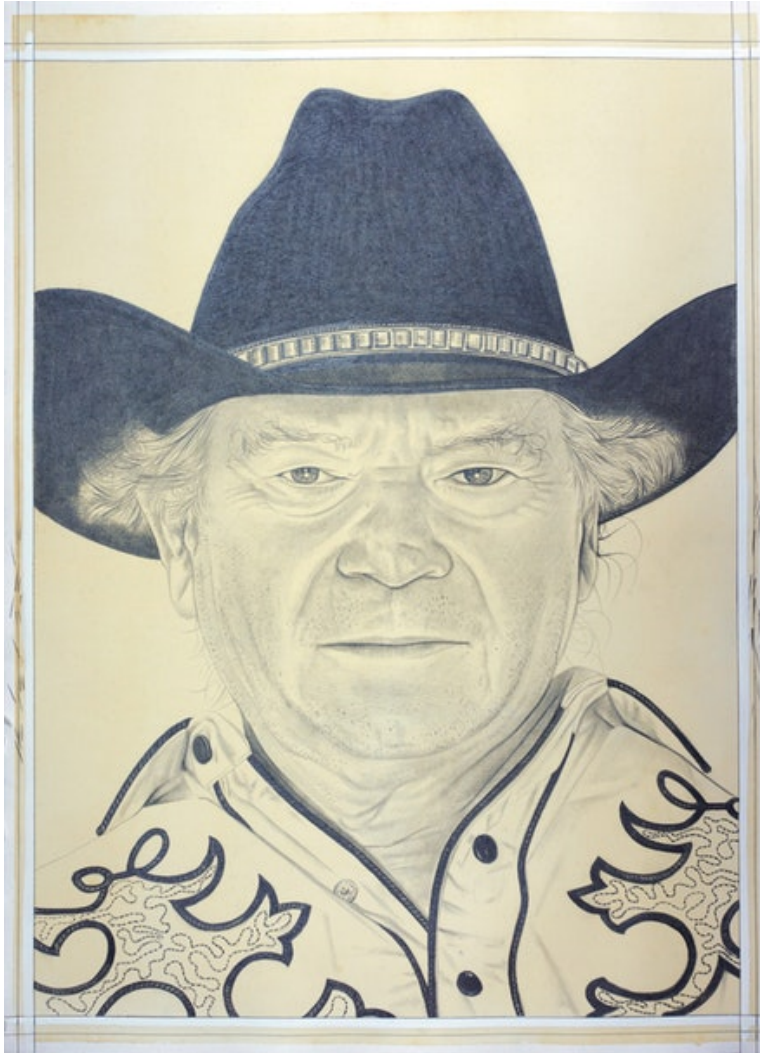
Press: "De Wain Valentine with Michael Straus," by Michael Straus. The Brooklyn Rail. May 2019.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Art INCONVERSATION

DE WAIN VALENTINE with Michael Straus

MAY 2019



Portrait of De Wain Valentine, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

De Wain Valentine has long been a pioneering artist based in Southern California, most known for his evanescent and light-transforming sculptures cast in polyester resin. His work was centrally featured in the Getty's comprehensive exploration of West Coast artists working from early in the '60s, entitled "Pacific Standard Time," and is often seen as a member of the so-called "Light & Space" circle of artists, a group whose contemporaries would include Larry Bell, James Turrell, Helen Pashgian, Mary Corse, Ron Cooper, Laddie John Dill, Peter Alexander and others, as well as younger artists such as Gisela Colon who have continued to explore and expand on the qualities of non-traditional, acrylic, and similar materials.

De Wain's current show opened on April 30, 2019 at Almine Rech in New York and includes a range of paintings and sculptures across his career and to date. While his sculptures are well-represented in East Coast (and multiple other museums), including at MoMA and the Whitney, this will be for the first time that his paintings are being shown in New York.



De Wain Valentine, Concave Circle Blue Green, 1968 – 2017. Cast polyester resin, 23 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 9 7/8 inches. © De Wain Valentine. Courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech. Photo: Melissa Castro Duarte.

I spoke with De Wain on the eve of the opening, covering a range of topics from his early childhood and lapidary explorations in Colorado to his time at the Yale-Norfolk program; influential mentors along the way, including his junior high shop teachers as well as Richard Diebenkorn, Philip Guston and Clyfford Still; his life and work in Venice, California beginning in the early '60s; his sense of color, space, the sea, the air, and the sun; and we even touched on some of his Country & Western musical compositions.

Michael Straus (Rail): We're recording this interview on a Skype call from my office in Alabama to De Wain Valentine's studio in California by way of the Almine Rech in New York. De Wain, it's great to see you. I don't know if you can see in the background but one of your "Gray Rings" from 1968 is on the side table by my desk.

De Wain Valentine: Oh, I see it!

Rail: Just so you know, I didn't put it there just for this interview—it's always there.

Valentine: And why not!

Rail: And why not for sure! It means that even though we're thousands of miles apart, we're always together. And having some De Wain Valentine presence is important to me as it is to a lot of people. So I was wondering, just to sort of kick this off, how do you feel, or what goes through your mind, if you just go into someone's house or are walking through a gallery or museum and you see one of your works? It's now out there in the world. What is the sensation?

Valentine: It always makes me cheery. And it's nice to have surprises. When I walk into someplace and there is a piece, and I don't know ahead of time, it's always a nice surprise. I can get off the track very easily in this interview, by the way, so you keep me on track.



De Wain Valentine, Amber to Gold Circle, 1971. Cast polyester resin, 17 1/2 x 17 1/2 x 1 5/8 inches. © De Wain Valentine. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech. Photo: Matt Kroening.

Rail: No, no, going off the track is the name of the game here! One reason I was asking about your reaction to seeing your works out in the world is that there are some artists—there's one I'm thinking of in particular but I'm not going to use his name—who said to me once, "You know I am a very selfish person, I only make the work for myself." He respects and appreciates people who also like his art, but his view is, "Maybe it goes into the world, maybe it doesn't." How do you feel about that?

Valentine: Well, that's the way I've always felt it. If a piece doesn't give me the warm fuzzies, it doesn't work. I always have to please myself. And I'm going a little bit crazy at the moment. I've been working on this painting for several years and it's now going to the show at Almine Rech.

Rail: I think the show in New York will be eye-opening for a lot of people. And I think it's great that you're going to include some paintings.

Valentine: Me too. I'm so lucky that Almine likes them. I have a studio set up here that was made for milling and polishing big polyester resin works, like the ones at MoCA LA and at the Hayward, the big columns. But I've had to rebuild it, modify it to work as a proper spray booth so as not to contaminate the paintings.

Rail: Let's talk about your working process on the cast polyester resin sculptures for a minute. These aren't really works whose fabrication you completely delegate, along the lines of saying to a fabricator, "Here are the dimensions, you go do it and tell me when it's done." You keep your hand in the process at a number of points, don't you?

Valentine: Well, for the most part yes. But for some of the big polyester pieces, they've now made it against the law to cast them in my space in the city, so I have to send the molds way out into the east desert to have them cast. And yes, the people working with me can do that because they've worked with me on smaller pieces and now they have built up to the point where we can do six foot circles out there. We work on color samples on the mold to get everything right and then they cast and polish them out there. For a period recently I wasn't able to go out personally because I had to have spinal surgery. So Kiana and her Mom went out. I had four vertebrae rebuilt—numbers 2, 3,4, and 5—and it took about three years out of my work. But I'm back to work now and smokin'! [Laughter] It really feels good, I like that.

Rail: I know that was a tough moment and could tell when I spoke to you a few times during that period.

Valentine: So now I'm back.

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Rail: But let's talk a bit more about the people who work with you on the pieces. It's always seemed to me like something of a partnership. I'm thinking of Jack Brogan, obviously. So how do you view that working relationship, because again it's really not a question of delegating.

Valentine: Well Jack calls me his best friend and we are great friends. In fact, he's working on a piece that's going to the exhibition right now. I told him at his eightieth birthday party, which we had here, that I hope I passed away before he did because if he passed away first I wouldn't know what the hell to do, because we do collaborate. He's never totally "start-to-finish" made pieces for me, but he knows how to do everything and so we work back and forth all the time. If he needs a solution that I already would have, he calls me and we go over the problem; and vice versa. Right now he's doing the painting on some double disks, a pair of double disks that are going to the gallery. These are pieces cast from the molds I made in 1966. They are double dated, once for the molds and once for the fabrication, because they are still original from that period.

Rail: In other words, what you are casting now is from the same forms or from the same molds that were used, for example, to create the triple disk piece that the Museum of Modern Art has.

Valentine: Yeah, and the Five Red Disks (1967) that the Whitney has and—

Rail: And the Hall collection has a double disk that's kind of white with a black

in the middle. **Valentine:** Yes, the silver with the black edge.

Rail: These have somewhat of an erotic form. Is that intentional?



De Wain Valentine, Clear Portal, 1969–2014. Cast polyester resin, 24 x 17 1/2 x 4 inches. © De Wain Valentine. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech.

Valentine: Well, I always think that good art can be a little sexy. Because it stimulates us that way. I always loved figure drawing because you always got that juice from a beautiful model, a beautiful pose, and that feeling went right into the

work. I always felt that with Matisse, and Picasso. When I discovered those guys, it changed my whole life. I discovered their works when I was in high school in a city library in Fort Collins, Colorado, along with drawings of the old masters. I was really a cowboy back then. We raised horses and cattle and I wanted to draw horses. But when I saw beautiful drawings of nudes I was like, fourteen I think, thirteen, and I thought, “the hell with horses, I know what I’m going to do.” And of course when I went to study art at the University of Colorado and then at Yale-Norfolk, well every new day was an eye-opener for me. My first painting teacher was Richard Diebenkorn and we became great friends. We almost shared a studio in Venice. Later on when I had a Yale-Norfolk fellowship, I studied with [Philip] Guston right at the good time he was doing those abstract landscapes, which I love. I guess I was working on a silvery kind of illuminated pieces, which was right up my line. And then my last semester at the University of Colorado the guest artist was Clyfford Still. Clyfford was probably most influential of all of them on my work because I was still going through my adoration phase of Matisse and Picasso and Clyfford said, “De Wain, when you find one of your heroes in your work, kick them out because that’s not you. Get rid of all of that and what will be left is you”—that was very frightening because what’s left is a very small thing. But you have to take that spark, blow on it and make it for yourself. So we keep kicking people out. But influences also always come back in.

Rail: I don’t know if I’ve heard people speak about Clyfford Still as having a generosity of spirit or being something of an avuncular mentor, but it sounds to me as though he did have that side. Maybe he wasn’t quite as opaque or cantankerous as people paint him to be.

Valentine: Oh he was cantankerous. And whenever he played softball with us students on the weekends he’d take off his sport coat and tie but was still in blue chambray shirt and street shoes while we played.

Rail: Well let’s talk for a minute about what will be in the show at Almine Rech in New York, which will open at the same time this interview is out in print and online. You started to talk about the painting you are working on. I’ve seen some paintings at your studio when I’ve visited but I don’t think people know them as much. How do you see them in relationship to your drawing days, as well as to the sculptures? Or maybe, what did you knock out from your heroes’ works, to use Clyfford Still’s terms, to get what’s left in painting them?

Valentine: They’re about that same kind of transparent color in space that the sculpture is about as well. I’ve always thought of the sculpture as painting in space. You’ve seen a lot of the paintings, Michael, but they’ve never been shown in New York; so it’s exciting for me to have them on a wall in New York.

Rail: I think it’ll be great, And I think it will expand people’s understanding and perspective of what animates you.

Valentine: The cast polyester resin works that people are more familiar with started when I was living near the beach in Venice, California in the 1960s and experienced the kind of atmosphere that LA had then as compared to the Colorado atmosphere. The atmosphere in Colorado is so clear you couldn’t see it, but moving to LA in the 1960s the atmosphere was so thick you could cut it, you could take a saw and cut a chair out of and sit on it. [Laughter] These works started with that California sea air. I was living a half block from the beach, so I spent a lot of time looking at it.

Rail: People are always curious about the genesis of an artist’s particular sensibility, so now you’re talking about the thick atmosphere in LA in the ’60s, to which a lot of people might say, “Well, gosh, I’d have gone back to Colorado where I could breathe better.”

Valentine: That’s the truth! But one of the reasons I got a studio half a block from the beach in Venice was because it has the best air in LA.

Rail: Is that why your friends of many years—Larry Bell, Bob Irwin, and others—were all clustered around the same area?

Valentine: Within a block of one another; we were all together.

Rail: But it wasn’t just the sea air that brought you together in that one place, was it? There must be something else about what was going on in that moment.

Valentine: Well, the space was cheap. My building was about 5,000 square feet and it was \$75 a month.

Rail: You should have gotten a 50-year lease.

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to our hometown in Fort Collins. There was a lot of military industrial business being done then in Denver and surrounding areas. The Air Force had just declassified Plexiglas and my junior high shop teacher, Mr. Warner, I don't remember his first name, said "De Wain look at this stuff, you can cut this on a table. Saw, sand it and polish it. It's a lot easier than cutting and polishing stones." So that was how I started working with Plexiglas in 1946-47. Then the next year, the Navy was building fiberglass-reinforced polyester resin PT boats in Denver and they declassified polyester resin.

Rail: Because they used to make the PT boats out of plywood, didn't they? At least that's part of the story of John Kennedy's plywood PT boat getting cut in half when it was rammed by a Japanese destroyer.

Valentine: They were originally made out of wood, yeah. And then they started making them, especially the bottoms, out of very thick fiberglass and plastic. And after the War is when the Navy declassified polyester resin and it became available to civilians and, as I said, my shop class. This is now just after I first encountered fiberglass. So my shop teacher the next year, Mr. Knight, showed it to me and said "De Wain, look at this stuff. You mix a little of this, a little of that and you can make your own color. Now you can create your own stones!" So that was my introduction to polyester resin. I would make molds and then had to cook the resin in them. But I used to cook them in Mom's oven and when she came home she'd have a fit and say, "You are going to kill us all, you're going to poison us all," and yadda, yadda, yadda. So I'd just open the doors in the middle of winter until the house cleared out. And then I went to art school at the University of Colorado and later when I was at Yale-Norfolk everybody would poo-poo the plastics. But I kept making works out of it. I took my slides of my work under my arm to New York to galleries and the gallerists would say, "Well this is very interesting, but what is it made out of?" And I'd say "Plastic," and they'd go, "Oh we don't show plastics." This was in the early '60s, 1960 or '61. Finally I got Leo [Castelli]'s attention. I don't remember what year it was, but I showed some pieces with Leo and traded a piece with Leo and also traded a piece with Don Judd. I became very friendly with all those guys, which was wonderful.

Rail: Was Leo Castelli your first gallery exposure?

Valentine: Essentially, and now here's a story, Michael. It's embarrassing to talk about. Ivan [Karp] would say to me, "Come in here with Leo. We've got to sit down now, we've got to give you some money." That scared the devil out of me, because I was just this cowboy kid from Colorado. But Leo was wonderful to deal with and I had a great time with him over the years. Very sweet to me.

Rail: You mentioned Donald Judd. At the time you were living in Venice, CA. And probably by then Judd and others were thought of as being part of a group in New York that is described as "minimalist." So he and others were working with forms and objects in a certain way that some people have described as distinct from what is grouped as "Light and Space." I'm not suggesting that these groupings and categorizations always work or are impermeable. But I do wonder how you think about any distinctiveness in the work you were doing at the time?

Valentine: Well Michael, I was very lucky. I was able to show with Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles and I met all those guys through Dwan. And they were excited that somebody was working with new materials in very simple forms, a minimal way, but different. In fact, I traded Don for one of his 14 or 16 foot long wall pieces with a blue linear top with chartreuse blocks underneath. And I was so excited about MoCA when it started that they talked me into giving the work to MoCA. It's one of Judd's pieces which, if I had kept it, would have satisfied any financial problem that I might have ever had at any given time thereafter, but—



De Wain Valentine, Five-Sided Diamond Column Gray, 1975. Cast polyester resin, 62 x 16 3/4 x 8 inches. © De Wain Valentine. Courtesy the artist and Almine Rech. Photo: Joshua White.

Rail: Well, other people will enjoy it anyway, you can console yourself with that. But it's interesting as you talk about the forms because I did want you to discuss what I think are your elemental forms, those that are recurrent. There are the circles, the columns, disks, curved slabs. I know there are other forms besides these, but these seem to be the core. Sometimes they are large and other times small enough to be on a table, but still that same set of forms. Yet what is it that dictated your basic vocabulary of formal elements?

Valentine: It was determined by the nature of the material. And I've also made some prismatic columns.

Rail: Yes, I vividly remember your large Diamond Column (1978) that's owned by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, and that was in the Phenomenal exhibition that was part of the Getty's "Pacific Standard Time."

As I started to say earlier, there is something I've noticed about the sizes of the works that you tend to gravitate towards, maybe it's dictated by the material, but I wonder is there more than that? There are a number of slabs or columns that are at about people height, for example, and then others that are, for want of a better term, table top size, like 16–18 inches. Those seem to me to be two basic parameters. Is that a fair statement?

Valentine: Yes, Michael, and the middle ground of sizes, you know, doesn't always seem right. Four-foot columns? No, I want to see them more human size.

Rail: So they're either a size that you can easily place on a table, or are as big as a person. And your color palette, which I think is also very distinctive. Is there a color wheel you work from, because there is a certain softness in the light quality of the sculptures. The colors that generally appear there are not exactly pastels, but there is a richness to them without being opaque that seems to allow the light transmission to work so perfectly.

Valentine: Exactly, Michael, because the sky is transparent and I want to keep the sculptures transparent because that's what they're about, the sky and the sea.

Rail: So in fabricating, in creating the piece, what do you use? Is it a dye? I guess I'm getting technical here, but—

Valentine: It's from artist's colors. Lamp black, ivory black, alizarin crimson, phthalo green, phthalo blue, phthalo yellow.

Rail: And those colors are being used for the polyester resin?

Valentine: Yes, Michael.

Rail: Mixing in the pigments themselves?

Valentine: Those happen to all be transparent pigments. I remember when my buddy Bob Morris had his show in Dwan Los Angeles all his pieces were gray, and I said, "Bob, why are all the pieces gray?" And he said, "That's the color that the gel-coat comes in." So for him, the color was not a consideration.

Rail: Apparently not.

Valentine: And back to the East coast, the artist who related most heavily to my work was Dan Flavin. Dan and I were really fast friends. He gave me a Tatlin Monument—he said I just had to go pick one out.

Rail: Do you still have it?

Valentine: Well, suddenly Dan was gone. In fact I have a letter from him before he died saying, "You still haven't picked out your Tatlin Monument."

Rail: So you never got to pick one out?

Valentine: No, but I long for it.

Rail: What do you think Flavin responded to in your work?

Valentine: The light and the color.

Rail: Well that's got to be right. I learned something very interesting about Dan Flavin some years ago and that's that he was a serious collector of Hudson River School painting. As you know, he lived along the Hudson River. But it's the luminosity of the Hudson River painters that he clearly responded to and looking at their paintings you can see why. There is a quality about the light in their work as they responded to the water, the sky and the sun, the way you do as well. So I can absolutely see why Flavin would gravitate to it in your work.

Valentine: Did you see his one man show at the Jewish Museum in the '60s?

Rail: I'm afraid I was still in grade school, but I would have loved to have seen it.

Valentine: [Laughs] When I walked out of that exhibition, Michael, I must have been 10 feet off the ground because it was so incredibly beautiful. It was just a total knockout. I can still see much of that show in my mind's eye. It was just gorgeous. Dan dedicated several exhibitions to me, something I was very proud of.

Rail: I imagine it was so radical to see somebody create a magical environment of light with just store-bought fluorescent fixtures as elements.

Valentine: I knew him when he was doing his first pieces with screw-in light bulbs.

Rail: Oh, and those are cool too.

Valentine: Yeah, they were cool, but not very magical.

Rail: Ok, then very charming. Anyway, you showed together with Flavin and Judd at Dwan and I would imagine also at ACE Gallery with our friend Doug Christmas.

Valentine: Yes, Douglas. Oh Michael, he has a wonderful eye. He's got great visual acuity for choosing great art, there's no doubt about it.

Rail: Maybe you can talk for a moment about your relationship with some of the other pioneering artists working in Southern California at the time who are also thought of as grappling with the qualities of light and space that we've been speaking about. I'm thinking of Helen Pashgian, Ron Cooper, Larry Bell and Mary Corse, for example, but also now Gisela Colon, who's a generation younger but gives you so much credit as an inspiration.

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Valentine: I don't feel there is any competition in art, Michael, there isn't. Somebody wants a Judd, they want a Judd. Somebody wants a Sol LeWitt, they want a Sol LeWitt. Somebody wants a piece of mine, they have a piece of mine—there's actually no competition. That's the wonderful thing about art. You're just doing your own thing. You're not trying to get even with anybody else—because if you do your own thing there's nobody to give you a headache but you.

Rail: I'd like to see that ethic more practiced these days, because I don't know if everybody still shares that perspective. **Valentine:** Oh my gosh, Michael, that's true, and it's just crazy.

Rail: Well, we've kind of covered a lot of territory from your great-grandfather to date. Anything else you want to share as to past direction, current work, future direction?

Valentine: Well the future direction has to come through with hard work. You work yourself to death and then you trip onto something, or you find something new, or you get tired of what you're doing and you decide, "Well I want to do this next." But I've got so many things I want to do. I won't run short of ideas very soon.

Rail: I don't think you will. Hey, one other passion of yours is guitars, music. We haven't talked about that.

Valentine: I'm a dilettante guitar player and an avid guitar collector.

Rail: And Larry Bell also collects guitars, as you know—

Valentine: Oh Larry, for sure. Have you ever seen his guitar museum?

Rail: I have, out in Taos. It's pretty spectacular. I know he loves the shapes, their forms.

Valentine: They are sexy. You know, I also write Country & Western music and I even wrote a song about them [sings]:

My beautiful blonde,
I can stroke her as much as I want
and she never leaves home.

Rail: Well now I'm wondering, is any of your music available on YouTube or someplace? I don't think I've ever heard it before.

Valentine: No, it's all in the bottom drawer of my office.

Rail: Would you like to share some more of it?

Valentine [sings]:

Well he's an old artist,
who drips in his pants,
he can't get no shows,
can't get no grants.

That's the old artist song. [Laughs]

Rail: Ok. On that note I want you to go through that desk drawer and start to share these!

Valentine: You know, I grew up in a trailer. So here's some more of that song [sings]:

Who says artists can't get the blues?
Grew up in a trailer house,
got nothing to lose.
'Cause he's an old artist,
who drips in his pants,
he ain't got no shows,
and he can't get no grants.

And it goes on.

Rail: [Laughter] Priceless! And thank you so much, De Wain!

Contributor

Michael Straus

MICHAEL STRAUS is a Contributing Writer for The Brooklyn Rail as well as one of its Board members. He is also Chairman of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, past Chairman of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and a member of the Drawings Committee of the Whitney Museum of American Art.