

**Art Practical:** 'From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column', by Matt Stromberg, February 14th, 2012

# From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column

As part of its epic survey of postwar California art, the J. Paul Getty Museum is currently displaying one of the largest pieces of California Minimalism ever created: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column (1975–76). *From Start to Finish* focuses not only on the work itself but also on the history of its creation and its restoration thirty-five years later. In its current installation, Gray Column is an impressive and totemic example of the Southern California Light and Space movement of the 1960s and '70s. Artists including Larry Bell, Helen Pashgian, and Robert Irwin were captivated by the physicality of the atmosphere in Los Angeles. As the critic Dave Hickey notes in the introduction to a recent exhibition catalogue of 1960s California Minimalism, "The consequence of living in this full world, in a world without emptiness, is that... [the] object and its atmosphere, the mind and the body, the self and the other all flutter, fade, and intermingle at the edges."<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the crisply defined light of the East Coast, the West Coast artists of the Light and Space movement celebrated the thick Hollywood haze.

The Light and Space movement focused on a viewer's changing perception when confronted with the unstable. Yet these artists were also known, sometimes dismissively, as "Finish Fetish" artists because they utilized the latest industrial materials such as polyester resins and fiberglass. This infatuation with seductive surfaces caused their work to be derided by some of their East Coast contemporaries as overly decorative. New York artists including Tony Smith, Richard Serra, and Carl Andre favored traditional construction materials such as steel, wood, and brick, often contracting a work's fabrication. The resulting sculptures are aggressively assertive, daring viewers to walk on or under them, threatening them with their sheer size or precarious orientation. Their California counterparts shared an appreciation for industrial aesthetics but used space-age materials—they were chemists instead of construction workers, and the pristine surfaces of their finished products belied the amount of physical work behind them. In this context, the Getty presents Valentine's piece as a long-lost Light and Space masterwork.

Whereas Valentine's Gray Column is similar in scale to the works of many New York minimalists, it is not nearly as confrontational. It does not invade a viewer's space or confine one's movement but instead invites viewers into its depths. The inky, smooth, dark-gray slab rises as a single, massive block of cast polyester resin, standing 12 feet high by 8 feet wide and weighing 3,500 pounds. Looking at it head-on is like gazing into a murky lake, and a viewer is confronted by her irregular reflection in the darkness.



Gray Column, 1975–1976; polyester resin; 140 x 87.5 x 9.5 in. Courtesy of the Artist and the Getty Center, Los Angeles.



De Wain Valentine polishing Gray Column in 1976. Courtesy of the Artist and the Getty Center, Los Angeles.

As one looks upward, the solidity of the gray gives way to transparency and the effect of a mirror becomes that of a window. Despite the column's imposing presence, the viewer does not so much look at it as look into or through it. In a well-produced video that accompanies the exhibition, Valentine explains how the atmosphere of Los Angeles influenced him—how “the smog became a substance...and the quality of the light had a body to it.” Instead of recreating an image of the haze, Valentine recreated an experience of it.

In order to capture the unique conditions of this contemporary city, Valentine and many of his colleagues used materials that referenced the aesthetics of surfing, custom car culture, and the area's burgeoning aerospace industry—materials that had not previously been associated with and may not have been best suited for artistic production. Industrial polyester resins of the time, for example, cured too quickly to be used for large pieces and would crack as they hardened. In 1966, Valentine developed his signature resin with Hastings Plastics. After the painstaking casting process, Gray Column had to be polished arduously for days by Valentine and his assistants. Beginning with coarse-grit sanding wheels, the process was finished by hand buffing with auto wax to achieve the pristine finish that, ironically, would leave little trace of its manufacture.

From Start to Finish touches on both this initial creation and the recent restoration of Gray Column undertaken by the Getty Conservation Institute. Though the conservators now have the ability to polish the surface to a much higher sheen than was originally achieved, they decided after consulting Valentine only to remove the scratches that had accrued since the work's creation. Valentine's original intent was to create as smooth a surface as possible, yet it is more important to understand that the work has a place in history, and to alter its appearance beyond its original state would be dishonest to this history. The Getty goes further than simply restoring the surface of the piece; the sculpture is also presented in a vertical orientation for the first time. In its original setting, the headquarters of a Chicago pharmaceutical company, the piece was part of a diptych whose two parts rested on their sides because they could not stand upright. At the time, the monolithic pair—then called Two Gray Walls—was relegated to being little more than a room divider. Since the Getty exhibition separates the work from any architectural demands, a viewer can instead focus on her relationship to the piece, as originally intended.

In presenting this newly restored example of the Light and Space movement, the Getty attempts a broader restoration of the role of California Minimalism within the art of the 1960s and '70s. With a focus on the process of Gray Column's creation, the exhibition proposes that Valentine and his compatriots were concerned with similar formal concerns as their New York peers but that they cultivated an openness to materials and inspiration specific to their geography. More than simply making less rigorous versions of what was happening on the other side of the country, Light and Space artists created works that could only have originated from this locale but that had significant resonance well beyond its boundaries.