

## 31 years elapsed before De Wain Valentine could see "Gray Column" standing as he'd originally envisioned

"Pacific Standard Time" is a citywide exhibition of Southern California art from 1945 to the early 1980s. "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970," which is the Getty Center's main slice of the show's larger pie, reflects the climate and culture and the open spaces, the light, the color, and the mobility of where we live. Just go outside and look. It also counters the New York-centric view of modernism, whose critics have often bypassed L.A. postwar art as provincial and largely irrelevant. Nope, that doesn't seem to be true. Not now. West Coast art since the end of World War Two has become a viable force in the development of art across America.

Spearheaded by the Getty – because who else would have the deep pockets and the expertise – "Pacific Standard Time" with its interwoven exhibitions and programming presents quite a challenge to the general public, as it did to the people who organized it.

"Documenting the tremendous diversity of Los Angeles's postwar art history is a daunting and exhilarating task," the catalogue informs us. However, what began as "documenting the past... grew into a powerful statement about the potential of the present."



Portrait of De Wain Valentine in front of "Gray Column," 1975-76, during the polishing stage. Photo courtesy of De Wain Valentine

## Jewels of weight and light

Art is often classified by schools, movements, genres or categories, and one of the more prominent of these during the 1960s was Light and Space – which, I think we can say, was indigenous to L.A. The loose constellation of artists associated with it simplified forms and color schemes, with most of them utilizing new discoveries in plastics and coating material. Sometimes it's hard to say who was the first artist out of the gate, but those now considered integral to the Light and Space movement, also referred to as the L.A. Look and Finish Fetish, include Larry Bell, Craig Kauffman, Robert Irwin, John McCracken, and Norman Zammitt. Perhaps also Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengston, and Kenneth Price. On their heels if not in their midst were Helen Pashgian, Peter Alexander, and De Wain Valentine.

Much of the work these artists produced “was elegance and simplicity,” as Peter Plagens writes in *Sunshine Muse*, “and the mythical material was plastic, including polyester resin.” In the case of De Wain Valentine, Plagens notes, there was also “physical mass – in cast rings, truncated wedges, and large, convex purplish discs (which established him as the technician par excellence in the material, casting two-ton jewels of weight and light).”

Valentine, a Torrance resident, is also the subject of a concise exhibition made possible by the Getty Conservation Institute. “From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine’s Gray Column” highlights a colossal stand-alone sculpture that was commissioned in 1975 and shipped to Illinois. It may look like a big upright stick of molasses, or something salvaged from “2001: A Space Odyssey,” but there’s also quite a story behind it as well, which I’ll get around to shortly.

Kristina Newhouse, the initial curator of the Torrance Art Museum, featured Valentine (and Nancy Braver) in her inaugural show in 2005. Newhouse had hoped to exhibit Valentine’s architectonic glass pieces, displayed in 1979 at LACMA, but the costs of doing so were prohibitive – some \$40,000 or so. What they settled on instead were Valentine’s large-scale paintings, many of them created while he lived in Hawaii.

Asked her opinion via email of his monumental piece at the Getty, Newhouse replied, “With its scale – a true technological feat given the particularities of cast resin – Gray Column succeeds in evoking that sense of the sublime that many Light+Space artists were after, but only a few achieved. The Getty show is very insightful in that it shows people that such a visual and physical effect is accomplished through lots of hard work, as well as trial and error. The beauty of Gray Column did not come easy.”



“Gray Column” (cast polyester resin; 1975-1976), by De Wain Valentine. Photo © J. Paul Getty Trust

Eric Johnson, a San Pedro-based artist who recently showed work alongside Valentine, as well as Craig Kauffman, is no stranger to the materials that Valentine has used. “When you work in resin you really do realize it’s limitless,” Johnson says, “but then physics comes into play.”

Valentine developed his own chemistry, his own mixes, through patient experimentation. Although he took copious notes, Valentine was fairly intuitive, Johnson points out, so that “He didn’t have the stumbling blocks that some people have.” As for Valentine’s artistic motivations, “Probably the single thing would be his drive to conquer the difficulties,” Johnson surmises. “He wanted to attack whatever he envisioned.”

Plagens’ *Sunshine Muse*, quoted above, was published in the mid-1970s and is considered by many to be the first book that brought contemporary West Coast art to the attention of a mainstream audience. Plagens was also *Newsweek*’s chief art critic for several years. In 2005, I spent several days exploring Belgium in his company, and that of his wife, the artist Laurie Fendrich (in the mornings I would accuse them of having thrown wild, all-night parties in their room and then concoct angry notes purportedly from hotel management). Plagens continues to champion Valentine, and when asked recently for his current thoughts on the artist – and his work at the Getty – Plagens didn’t mince words: “De Wain Valentine was the best, and most ambitious, of the resin-casters. His background as a hip, fastidious ‘car guy’ in Colorado led him first to such remarkable sculptures as *Triple Disk Red* (1965), but he soon moved on to the clear (when obsessively polished, that is) lollipop-hued resin discs for which he’s well known. And deservedly so: Valentine’s big transparent standing circles constitute the most profound intersection of what was called the ‘fantastic object’ (think Craig Kauffman and Larry Bell) and the dematerialized ‘phenomenological’ installations of Robert Irwin and Jim Turrell. They weigh tons but they feel as light as colored air. Even, somehow, when they’re gray and columns.”

## Horses to nudes and polished stone

De Wain Valentine’s home and studio is on the eastern border of Torrance. It’s an impressively large and labyrinthine space, but you’ll miss it every time if you don’t know the exact location. Inside, naturally, it’s a cultural palace filled with books and art, and the wonderful, bubbly, Kiana Sasaki.

“Gray Column,” at the Getty, is accompanied by a short but exquisite book by Tom Learner, Rachel Rivenc, and Emma Richardson, and the opening essay is prefaced with words spoken by Valentine in 1984: “All the work is about the sea and the sky. I would like to have some way, a magic saw, to cut out large chunks of ocean or sky and say, ‘Here it is.’” In the book, which like the display itself is called “From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine’s Gray Column,” Valentine mentions that growing up in Colorado he certainly saw the sky, but he didn’t really see the light (literally, this is not some spiritual analogy). “That’s right,” he says. “Occasionally we’d have clouds, but it was just blue. There was no realization that you were looking at sky. But out here sky was an object in Los Angeles.”

When I point out that his sculptures are reminiscent of the American luminist painters of the mid- and latter-19th century (Hugh Fitz Lane, Sanford Gifford, etc.), Valentine steers me to a catalogue essay that Christopher Knight of the L.A. Times wrote in 1979. Same observation about precedents. Just as one may coax a genie into a bottle, Valentine seems to have bundled or bottled the sky into his sculptures. As for specific influences, he names painters Albert Pinkham Ryder and J.M.W. Turner. He also mentions Philip Guston, Norman Zammitt, and Dan Flavin.

Zammitt, he says, was a magician, and no one knew how to achieve the same effects (a Zammitt painting is among the first you'll see upon entering the "Crosscurrents" exhibition). Flavin, on the other hand, was apparently the only artist in New York who understood what was going on with light in art.

Valentine's work may look stoic and monumental, but when he was a kid in Colorado (and then Wyoming) he wasn't drawing Greek temples but rather the horses in Prince Valiant comics.

"My dad was from Texas, so we always liked horses and being around horses. I got my first Stetson when I was three years old, which was exactly the same height as I was tall, and the same width." He acquired his first cowboy boots at the same time, and I think he still has every pair of boots, and every cowboy hat, that he's ever bought or received since then. "I was always trying to draw horses, and they are really hard to draw. When I was in junior high, I was poking around the library – the art courses then were just babysitting kids, really just finger-painting B.S. – and I saw this book, *Master Drawings*. I reached up and took it off the bookshelf, opened it up, and here was Ingres and Rubens and all the great [figurative] artists' drawings of nudes. I said, to hell with horses, I know what I'm gonna do. And that was the last time I tried to draw a horse."

So, when you stand in front of "Gray Column," just remember that it all started with a horse that metamorphosized into a nude.

Somewhat concurrent with the interest in drawing was a fascination with the beauty of cut and polished minerals. "I used to have dynamite boxes full of stones – agates and jade," Valentine says. After his father's cowboy days were through he became a heavy equipment operator. One of his jobs entailed putting in a pipeline that ran through a bombing range. "I'd go with my dad on the weekends, and there was a big bunch of dirt dug out and they'd exposed all these rocks. Especially when they bombed, a lot of things blew up deep down and, oh my god, it was like finding magic on the ground. We'd dig it up and spit on it, and see through it. Oh, you know, it got me.

"In junior high, in 1946 or so, my shop teacher (Mr. Warren) brought some of this clear plastic to class, and he said, 'De Wain, look at this.' He cut off little pieces with a table saw. You can polish it, and it's much easier than polishing stone." Valentine says this was acrylic that the Air Force out in Denver had given to the schools for the kids to mess around with.

The following year, Valentine's new shop teacher (Mr. Knight) showed him how to mix different liquids to bring out various colors, "and you're making your own jewels." He ended up

creating jewelry for his mother. “It wasn’t great, but she loved it; and from that time forward I have worked with those plastic materials.”

He pauses, and jumps ahead several years.

“When I went to New York I’d take my portfolio and slides and stuff, and I’d go to the galleries. And they’d go, oh, this looks terrific; what is this? And I’d say plastics.” Silence. “Out the door... Artwork will never be made with plastic.”

He’d made the trek from Denver by train. Along with his overnight bag he brought “stinky cheese and crackers,” which was all he could afford. There was a layover in Chicago, and so the then-bearded young man wandered into the city. “One guy walked up the street to me and said, You must be an artist.” Pause. “Well, yeah. And he said, Go see what all this crap is at the Chicago Art Institute. And I did, I went there. And here was Ad Reinhardt and Mark Di Severo and Larry Bell – it was all my heroes.”

## Packing up the trailer

De Wain Valentine could have stayed in Colorado with a teaching position at the University of Colorado in Denver. In fact, he was teaching, but says he hated it. Meanwhile, some of his work was being shown, and this included having a piece accepted for the opening show of the Whitney Museum in New York.

“From there it went wonderfully well,” Valentine says. “Just like, you know, these steps. [They] were not really handed to me – because I’m working my ass off – but they just fit together, they meshed at the right time. You know, if I’m gonna move to California I’m not just gonna screw around and play in the ocean and stuff; I was gonna get a studio and get to work. And that’s what I did.”

From Start to Finish discusses “Gray Column,” but it doesn’t mention the personal struggles of the man behind it. That’s true of most art catalogues and it’s true of Pacific Standard Time, a catalogue that is a survey and an overview, but with very little about how anyone fought and cried as he pursued his artistic dreams.

In Valentine’s case he had a wife and three young children when he decided to come to California.

“I had the children’s mother and a Saint Bernard and a cat, and my best friend here at the time (Jack Hooper) let us stay in his laundry room garage; and so the five of us were sleeping on the floor. We had a shower in the warehouse where we parked the trailer, and we didn’t have any hot water. We’d have to go get the water or bring the hose up and put it up by the roof, and there was a water tank up high so gravity would bring it down.”

He'd taken a boat trailer frame, reinforced it with plywood on the sides and on top, filled it to the brim with his belongings, and driven it from Boulder to Albuquerque and then to California.

After the first trip, "I took the trailer back to Colorado, loaded it up, came over the passes again; it was crazy, like the Joads." There was a mattress in the back of his station wagon for the kids; when they needed to pee they'd do it from the tailgate while the car was moving. "They laughed. In those days nobody would pay any attention to it."

A painter friend of his had an apartment that was being remodeled, and Valentine was being urged to live there. "So we took the apartment," he says, "which only had one bedroom – and the kids and the dog and the cat slept in the trailer. Nobody thought anything about it; that's just the way it was. If you couldn't do that you'd never amount to shit as an artist. You have to sleep under your truck. If you're too good for that, you're too good for life."

## The human scale, and beyond

Living and working in Venice, Valentine seemed to meet all the right people – he had a studio next to artist Larry Bell and, "the first or second week I was in town," met architects Frank Geary and David O'Malley. Venice at that time was seedy and affordable, and if Valentine still owns a couple of buildings right by the water that's more by accident than by design. At one time the structures were condemned, other tenants had moved out, and Valentine was at a crossroads because he didn't think he could find a studio comparable in size and cost. And besides, if you've made a big move recently, as I have, you know it's a chore and then some.

Valentine had become friends with the property managers of the two buildings, and he told them that if they ever wanted to sell he'd like to have first option. They did. But because the buildings were condemned, Valentine couldn't get a loan. So the property managers financed him. Along with a lot of hard work, Valentine has had some lucky breaks and this was one of them.

In high school, Valentine says, he received A's in two subjects – a cappella choir and physics. To my knowledge, the first of these went unfulfilled, but his fascination with refraction grading (splitting light into infrared on one side and ultraviolet on the other), 3D geometry, and 3D drawing began to merge with his earlier interests in shop classes. He mentions coming across a book by Albert Einstein that opened his eyes. For Valentine it's always been about human scale in relation to the rest of the universe.

With regard to his work, getting the consistency of the material just right so it wouldn't fall apart somewhere between conception and completion, Valentine says it was simply trial and error. "I kept track of what worked, and I would move on to the next piece and then they kept getting bigger and bigger." This was increasingly satisfying. "There's a certain size that takes

it out of the human scale, and if it doesn't take it out far enough it's awkward. So you either have the human scale, or your next one is the architectural scale – and that's a whole different ballgame.”

He cites freeway overpasses as an example, with their grace and beauty. Imagine if artists could work on that scale. It occurs to me that Richard Serra is one of the few who comes close. His monumental steel sculptures are as big as houses or rocket ships – and they seem to complement or contrast intriguingly with Valentine's work.



Andy Moses, Dawn Arrowsmith, Roland Reiss, De Wain Valentine, Kiana Sasaki, and Eric Johnson at Gallery C in Hermosa Beach. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski.

## Kick out your heroes

“Gray Column” also has a twin, and I suppose we could say several smaller siblings as well. But at 12 feet in height, eight across, and some 3,500 pounds, “Gray Column” is perhaps the largest artwork made from polyester resin. This was a special blend, so to speak, that Valentine concocted with Ed Revay of PPG Industries. The process itself was Herculean in its demands – ten drums of resin in a single, lengthy, continuous pour. Some 30 or 40 of Valentine's other polyester resin sculptures went wrong somewhere along the way and had to be discarded.

If one actually thinks about it, it's fairly clear that Valentine has all the characteristics of a Romantic – a Berlioz, a Wagner, a van Gogh or Robert Musil: someone whose vision is larger than life. The person he really resembles, however, is Beethoven. In this case, also physically. See Stieler's portrait of 1819-1820, for example. Same squarish, bulldog head, a wide brow, unruly locks, but an intense, humane gaze. I had to catch myself from asking him for some insight into the nine symphonies.

One way you become Beethoven is by not marching behind anyone else. At Yale, Valentine studied with Clifford Still who, noticing that his student admired Cézanne and Matisse, gave him some of the best advice ever:

“He said, De Wain, if you see one of your heroes in your work, you have to take him out. And whatever little spark [is left], that's you. You've found yourself. And so you take that little bit of spark and you rub it together, and rub it together, and rub it together until... Well, I already had the fire in my belly, so...”

That desire, that fire, to be an artist was always there. Becoming an artist, he says, is not something you choose; you either have to do it or you don't. “No questions in my mind, no confusion, and the path's been very straight, all the way to today, and it will be that way... Success was not even an aim for me; it was just to keep making the next piece.”

You have a lot of ideas for things you still want to do? “It's endless,” Valentine says, shaking his head. “As soon as you do one piece you have a ton of ideas to do the next piece and it keeps going; it just keeps going.” Less than a month before June Wayne passed away this year at age 93 she was telling me that she had ideas for other projects. “Of course,” Valentine replies. “We just hope we live long enough to keep doing them.” Asked if he's just painting these days (works as grand in their way as his sculptures), Valentine says he keeps doing everything at once – paintings, castings. One has only to step through his studio to realize that the man and his accomplishments are still a work-in-progress.

At one point, Valentine says, “It's nice at 75 to be an overnight success. “But if you're not an overnight success you have to work your whole life: How long did it take you to do that work? All my life. Each piece is like that; one leads to the other, leads to another and another. It's a snail's trail.”

## Standing tall at last

What's impressive about ‘Gray Column’ is that it's Classical and Romantic at the same time, austere and yet expansive, quiet and yet bold, solid and yet nebulous.

What got you interested in such a large scale? “Egomania,” Valentine replies. “Well, I did things so I could see them. Now, I wasn't trying to impress anybody; I just wanted to see if I could do that and what it would look like. All that was my fishing line, if you want.”



“Gray Column” was originally “Two Gray Walls,” twin massive slabs that had been commissioned in 1975 by Baxter Travenol Laboratories for their new corporate headquarters in Deerfield, Illinois. Valentine built the crate and they were shipped out. How come they’re not there today and how did they find their way back to California?

“Well, it’s an interesting story,” Valentine replies. The works were meant to be displayed standing on end, or upright, but when the building’s architects lowered the walls to under 12 feet, the columns had to be turned on their sides – becoming “walls” in the process.

However, there was a mishap and one of the walls was knocked over. “Fortunately, it rid up on the arm of a soft sofa,” Valentine says. “Didn’t hurt the piece, but they were frightened to death about their liability after that. So they never put them out again; they crated them and put them in storage.

At one point they asked me if I’d like to buy them back. I didn’t have money, I couldn’t buy ‘em back, so they stayed in crates wherever they were for years. [Eventually] they said, ‘Would you like those pieces back? We’ll send them to you.’ Can you imagine? What a stroke of luck. So they sent them back.”

It was hugely expensive. One column remains with Valentine in a shipping container (which we went out back to look at), and the other – after being “obsessively polished,” as Peter Plagens phrased it – was carefully transported to the Getty and installed (no small feat in itself). In the accompanying catalogue, De Wain Valentine is asked if he’s looking forward to seeing “Gray Column” as it was originally intended to stand.

“Are you kidding?” he replied. “I’ve wanted to see that piece standing upright in some place ever since I did it!”

And when it finally was? Valentine was deeply moved.

“Oh my God, I was tearing, I was actually tearing. It was so... Wow. I’d wanted to do that for so long.”

From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine’s Gray Column is on view through March 11 at the Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles. Hours, Tuesday through Friday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Closed Monday and major holidays. Free; parking \$15. Call (310) 440-7300 or go to [getty.edu](http://getty.edu). ER