

The Guardian: 'De Wain Valentine's Gray Column restored for modern art show', by Vanessa Thorpe, October 9th, 2011

De Wain Valentine's Gray Column restored for modern art show

Modern art conservator Tom Learner reveals the challenges behind sculpture exhibition, From Start to Finish



De Wain Valentine doing the final polishing of Gray Column in 1976. Photograph: Courtesy of De Wain Valentine.

The joy of art conservation lies in rescuing damaged work by painstakingly restoring its looks. Sometimes, if a conservator is lucky, they can rescue an artist's reputation at the same time.

For the most part, this is a labour of love for the art of the distant past. Not for Tom Learner. A Briton working in California, Learner is one of a rare breed of conservators whose speciality is modern art. His latest achievement is the restoration of an extraordinarily large, previously unseen work by the Colorado-born artist De Wain Valentine, which is leading to a reappraisal of the sculptor's contribution to American art.

Valentine's artistic heyday was the 1960s and 1970s, so his oldest work has only survived four decades so far. Yet his use of experimental materials meant that a range of fresh challenges faced Learner and his team at the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles.

«It was an amazingly inventive time for art,» said Learner. «Those post-second world war, south Californian artists were using new plastics and resins because there was aerospace industry right there and a car industry and surf board technology too.»

The Valentine exhibition, now being staged at the J Paul Getty Museum in LA as a result of Learner's work, forms a small part of a collaboration between 60 museums and galleries on the west coast of America. Called Pacific Standard Time, it is running for six months and celebrates the explosion of creativity in US design and fine art that followed the war, giving the European inventors of modernism a run for their money. «We had been doing a lot of work behind the scenes with the biggest names of the era for the Getty's big blockbuster show for Pacific Standard Time,» said Learner, «when the possibility of doing something more public came up, perhaps focusing on one artist, or even one piece.»

Learner, 45, who trained at London's Courtauld Institute before working at the Tate and the Getty, has specialised in understanding and preserving the man-made materials favoured by modern and contemporary artists. It is an area of conservation that sets just as many technical puzzles as the restoration of 16th-century religious frescos or 18th-century oil portraits.

Now the Getty's successful conservation of Gray Column, this key, forgotten work of Valentine's from 1976, is to form the centrepiece of From Start to Finish, a show about his work and pioneering use of plastics and resins.

«We chose De Wain because his work was not easy to restore,» said Learner. «He did something a bit different with a new material. He wanted to use a polyester resin that could be highly polished to give a very pristine surface.»

Valentine, 74, an influential contemporary of Roy Lichtenstein and Dan Flavin, is enjoying a second flowering of critical appreciation. Chiefly known for his arresting, gleaming sculptures, his work has recently been re-hung at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and has graced the cover of the New York Times art section. «He had fallen off the radar a bit and moved out to Hawaii, but now there is a lot of interest,» said Learner.

The polyester resin Valentine hoped to work with was used for small objects, because it tended to crack. But the artist wanted to work on a large scale to create Gray Column, a 3m by 2m slab, weighing just under two tonnes.

«He started to make experimental resins by adding a bit more catalyst and noting down the temperature of the room. He left incredible records of what he did, luckily,» said Learner. «Eventually his work allowed him to cast this enormous piece.»

Valentine stayed awake for 36 hours to sand and then polish Gray Column - a work recently described as a «looming interplanetary sentinel».

«It is the largest piece he ever made, but the amazing thing is he had never seen it standing on its base,» explained Learner. «The Chicago company who bought it for their new lobby had lowered the ceiling. De Wain said to us: ‘I have only seen it upright in my mind.’»

The Getty wanted to mark what Learner sees as the «unique story of the intersection of art, science and technology», but conserving modern art throws up some tricky creative issues. Valentine’s resin has proved stable, but it scratches easily and a number of ridges had formed on the surface with age.

The artist wanted these sanded away but the conservators had a different agenda. They knew there was a value attached to the blemishes of time. «When the artist is still alive, of course, they can take quite a strong position,» said Learner. «De Wain felt Gray Column had to be completely re-sanded and repolished. But after around 50 or 60 years there comes a point where scholars and dealers value something for its age. For example, for a long time Mondrian’s paintings were simply retouched when they cracked, but now one with its original cracks is much more valuable at auction. We wanted to keep that value for De Wain’s piece.»

For Valentine, a smooth surface was the whole point of the work and he did not want it to look old. A compromise was reached and the artist is now happy with how his monumental piece looks. «I’m glad I did it when I was young,» he told reporters