

Los Angeles Times: 'PST, A to Z: De Wain Valentine's 'Gray Column' at the Getty Center', by Sharon Mizota, September 24th, 2011

PST, A to Z: De Wain Valentine's 'Gray Column' at the Getty Center

Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



De Wain Valentine's process of creating *Gray Column*, 1975–76. Credit: Cathy Weiner

Part fun house mirror, part Kubrick-ian monolith, De Wain Valentine's "Gray Column" is a behemoth piece of plastic. More specifically, it's about 3,500 pounds of specially formulated polyester resin poured into a 12-foot-high rectangle that tapers gracefully from base to top. Tinted with black pigment that grows less dense as the form rises, it transitions almost imperceptibly from opaque and mysterious to translucent and smoky. Despite its dark color, its surface is highly reflective, although it's less like polished granite and more like an oil slick, pulling and blurring your reflection as you walk around it.

The surface is lovely, and the piece is remarkable for its size, but it's actually the least interesting part of the installation. The Getty Conservation Institute, which restored the piece and is presenting it as part of Pacific Standard Time, has smartly surrounded it with objects, texts and short videos that shed light on the intense scientific and physical processes that went into its creation and restoration: the chemistry of polyester, the slow, dangerous process of pouring the volatile resin, and the labor-intensive sanding and polishing that brought the surface to a mirror gloss.

As it turns out, resin, like glass, is a material that keeps moving, imperceptibly, even after it has hardened. Left to its own devices, the surface might sprout what Valentine calls “grow-outs” or ridges that mar its perfectly smooth surface. Valentine worked with a manufacturer to develop the resin specifically for “Gray Column”—no one knew what would happen as it aged.

The piece is now 35 years old and the exhibition confronts the technical and ethical issues involved in conserving contemporary art made from unconventional materials. In one of the videos (also available on the Getty's website), the conservators discuss their choices: Should they restore the piece to a pristine finish as the artist intended? Or leave it as it is? Their decision is revealed in a wall text. The surface was polished and wet sanded to remove «scratches and superficial damages,» but otherwise left intact. All of this was done with the artist's blessing, although the final effect is not what he originally envisioned in 1975.



Gray Column, 1975–76, De Wain Valentine. Artwork © De Wain Valentine

The exhibition leaves it up to viewers to decide whether this was the right approach, but it also raises another question: With all the resources and time that went into creating and now restoring “Gray Column,” was it worth it? Valentine is certainly an important figure associated with the Finish Fetish movement. But when the process of making the work is more interesting than the result, one wonders if we need the object at all.

--Sharon Mizota