
From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column at the J. Paul Getty Museum

by ARTDAILY.ORG

Published: September 15, 2011

Unknown, De Wain Valentine doing the final polishing of Gray Column in 1976., 1976. Every effort has been made to identify and contact the photographer whose work may still be in copyright, or their estates. Anyone having further information concerning copyright holders should contact the Getty. Photo: Courtesy of De Wain Valentine. Artwork © De Wain Valentine.



LOS ANGELES, CA.- One of the most influential sculptors active in Los Angeles in the 1960's and 1970's, De Wain Valentine is perhaps best known for his striking, semitransparent, and delicately colored large-scale polyester resin sculptures of simple geometric forms that interact intensely with the surrounding light. Not as well known, however, are the challenges Valentine faced in finding a material that would allow him to realize his artistic vision.

Now, as part of the Los Angeles-wide Pacific Standard Time initiative, the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) presents From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column, an exhibition focused on the materials and fabrication processes developed by Valentine that made the creation of his large-scale works possible. The exhibition centers around the 1975-6 sculpture Gray Column, which, at twelve feet high, eight feet across and about 3, 500 lbs, is one of the largest artworks Valentine made with polyester resin, and has never before been publicly displayed.

On view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Center from September 13, 2011 through March 11, 2012, From Start to Finish complements the Getty Museum's survey exhibition Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1945-1970, which also includes an additional work by Valentine.

Valentine was one of a number of artists during the postwar era in Los Angeles who adopted new materials and highly innovative fabrication processes for their work, most of which were being developed for use in the aerospace, boat, automobile, and even surfboard industries. Like several of his contemporaries, Valentine had –

turned to polyester resin, a material that could be cast and polished to create sculpture with a stunning, pristine surface. The most limiting factor in using the commercially available polyester resins, however, was that none of them could be used to create large volumes in a single pour—anything more than a thin layer of resin would crack badly during the casting process due to the high levels of heat released on curing. As a result, only fairly small-scale sculptures could initially be achieved.

Unwilling to accept this limitation, Valentine partnered with Ed Revay, a local representative from PPG Industries' resins division to modify the company's existing products. With much trial and error, the pair was able to develop a polyester resin that would enable Valentine's vision: to create, with a single pour of resin, luminous artworks of much larger proportions.

Gray Column exemplifies the incredibly large scale on which Valentine could work with the new material he helped to develop. The sculpture was originally conceived as one of a pair of columns intended to stand side by side in the new company headquarters of Baxter Travenol in Deerfield, Illinois. However, modifications by the architect to lower the ceilings led Valentine to change the installation by laying the two columns on their sides. *From Start to Finish* will be the very first installation of one of those columns, installed upright as the artist intended.

From Start to Finish brings to the public's attention the importance of the materials and manufacturing processes utilized in Valentine's innovative work, illustrating the story of how this extraordinary piece of art, *Gray Column*, was made—from the casting of the resin to the extensive polishing required to achieve the final, perfectly smooth finish. The exhibition also will explore some of the practical and ethical issues linked to the conservation of the work.

In addition to the exhibition, the GCI is gathering information on the materials and working methods of many of the artists from the Post World War II era known for utilizing a vast array of new resins, paints and plastics such as Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, John McCracken, and Helen Pashgian – all of whom produced bright, pristine-looking objects directly inspired by California culture and landscape to create the distinctive "L.A. look" sometimes referred to as "Finish Fetish." The rich colors and beautiful surfaces that typify their work, painstakingly achieved through novel fabrication processes, will be researched through artist interviews, technical examinations of select artworks, and scientific analysis.

The exhibition *From Start to Finish* and the wider research project are part of the GCI's larger Modern and Contemporary Art Research initiative, which aims to advance the conservation profession's knowledge and practice for modern and contemporary art by addressing some of its most pressing needs. The initiative includes a broad...

range of activities and approaches, including scientific research into the stability and behavior of many modern materials such as modern paints and plastics, the dissemination of information via workshops and publications, and the promotion of dialogue among professionals through meetings and conferences.

Available in conjunction with the exhibition is the publication *From Start to Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column* (Getty Conservation Institute, \$24.95, hardcover), which tells the fascinating story behind the making of Gray Column, from its original concept to its display at the Getty Center, which marks the first time the piece will be installed as Valentine intended—standing vertically. The book includes a short essay, a conversation with the artist and a wealth of stunning archival images taken during Gray Column's creation. Together, they illustrate the extraordinary lengths Valentine undertook to develop a material that would enable him to cast colossal pieces, and the effort undertaken to achieve their extremely delicate, pristine surfaces. The book also includes a 30-minute DVD that recounts the project in greater detail through interviews and documentary footage.

Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A., 1945-1980 is an unprecedented collaboration of more than sixty cultural institutions across Southern California, which are coming together to tell the story of the birth of the LA art scene. Initiated through grants from the Getty Foundation, *Pacific Standard Time* will take place for six months beginning October 2011. ■