

ALMINE RECH

L'OFFICIELART

Start Spreading the News, De Wain Valentine's Work Has Arrived in New York Titled "Works from 1967 to present" is the artist's first show since 2015.

By: Maxwell Williams
May 8, 2019



De Wain Valentine Double disk (blue with red edge), 1966, painted in 2019. Fiberglass 66x59x66 in

Los Angeles, at one point not long ago, was home to a cadre of artists like Robert Irwin, John Baldessari, James Turrell, Helen Pashgian, and Peter Alexander who forever changed the course of what art was meant to be. DeWain Valentine was right there, known back then for his wavy hair and equally undulating monolithic sculptures and paintings made from plastics and glass and auto paint. Valentine straddled the line between what has now come to be known as the Light and Space movement and the Finish Fetish movement.

And at 83, on the eve of a solo exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery in New York, not much has changed.

Valentine is soft-spoken, with a wry sense of humor, offering me “beer, booze, wine, or water” when I enter the compound of buildings in the south L.A. neighborhood of Gardena he’s been working in since the 1990s. He points to the retrofitted skylights in the ceiling, an indication of Valentine’s long relationship to the sky.

“I cut all these fuckin’ holes, and overdid it, and now you need sunglasses in here,” he says with his gently gruff, but jovial, voice.

ALMINE RECH



De Wain Valentine *Purple Illuminated Skyline*, 1997 Acrylic on canvas with acrylic polymer resin

Valentine is a little bit under-appreciated when compared to some of the other artists from his generation. But his body of work is just as impressive, and the technological achievements he developed in the 1960s have influenced artists using plastics and resins ever since.

It all began in Fort Collins, Colorado, where Valentine grew up the grandson of a gold prospector (who got him interested in the form of polished stones) and the son of a heavy machinery operator, who worked on government contracts at the aerospace bases nearby. It was the proximity to the bases that provided Valentine with the materials he would spend the next 75 years working with.

“When I Started junior high, the government had declassified acrylic,” he recalls. “They were using it for fighter aircraft windows. There was a lot of military manufacturing in Denver because it was away from the coast, and theoretically away from possible attack. So, they turned loose all the scraps to the junior high shops, so my junior high shop teacher, Mr. Warner, came to class one day, and he said, ‘DeWain, look at this.’ So I started working with acrylic in 1945. And then the next year in 1946, the Navy was making PT boats out of fiberglass reinforced polyester resin in Denver. They declassified polyester resin.”

He goes back into his library and comes out with two tiny sculptures, small acrylic works made in his mother’s oven before he was even a teenager in the 1940s. They look remarkably like the sculptural version of pre-evolutionary fish that would soon grow legs to walk on land, Valentine’s massive structures he built later being the final form.

His mother encouraged his artmaking, and he continued to make things, which lead to his becoming the head of the art department at the University of Colorado Denver. While there, the guest artist program invited Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Richard Diebenkorn, and Clifford Still to give talks, exposing Valentine to art like he’d never seen before. All the while, Valentine’s pieces were continuing to grow.

“In Colorado, I made really big pieces before I moved out here—20 feet high, polyester and Fiberglas and neon,” he says.

ALMINE RECH



De Wain Valentine Circle Blue Green 1972, casted in 2019 Cast polyester resin 23 1/2 x 23 1/2 x 9 7/8 in

But in 1965, Valentine had been hearing about these guys in California—Craig Kauffman and Larry Bell and the like—who were making work that used the available light in California to change the way we look at art. Valentine was enthralled.

“I got an opportunity to teach an opportunity to teach a class at UCLA, which didn’t pay jack shit,” he says. “But, it was a ticket, and I said, ‘California, here I come.’”

Valentine set up a studio in Venice, California, where all the Light and Space artists were working and started to develop his sculptures, but he kept getting frustrated by the materials he was working with. The resins would set too quickly for him to cast larger scale works in plastic. So he developed a relationship with a plastic company to find solutions.

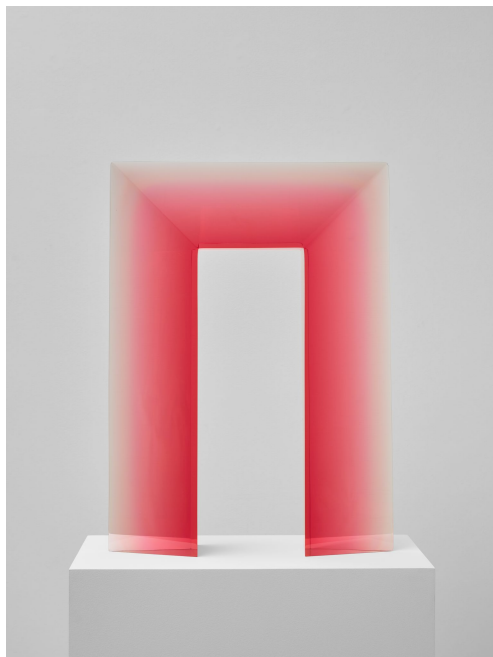
“In 1967, I invented and copyrighted a methodology of casting the big pieces through Hastings Plastic Company, and it was called DeWain Valentine MaskKast Resin,” Valentine says. “Of course, it’s just called ‘resin’ now.”

The next year, happy with the results of his experimentations and explorations, Valentine held his first major solo exhibition at Ace Gallery in 1968. Something else had changed in Valentine’s work by then. He had noticed that California’s air had a certain quality to it that intrigued him.

“[My works] started out the color of the stones,” he says, referring to his grandfather’s influence. “In Colorado, the sky is too clear to see, so you don’t think about it. But when you move to California, you really think about it, because when I moved here in ’65, the air was so thick that I said you could take a saw and cut a chair up and sit on it. I couldn’t figure out why all the headlights were yellow. And this funny smell that L.A. had. I made a lot of smog pieces.”

After a string of successful shows—including a solo exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1979—Valentine was able to live part-time in Hawaii, where he learned the beauty of the sunsets and clear water.

“Sometimes it’s the air, and sometimes it’s the water,” he says of the subject matter of his work. “I spent a lot of time in Hawaii. I love the water and the sky over there. I always wished for a magic saw that I could saw a piece out of the sky. The cast polyester pieces were as close as I could get, objectifying that transparent color space.”



De Wain Valentine *Purple Illuminated Skyline*, 1997 Acrylic on canvas with acrylic polymer resin

While in Hawaii, Valentine met his wife Kiana at a lei ceremony, and he laughs when he describes the early days of dating her, her mother attending to each of their first seven dates, and her father going on the eighth. Now, he dotes on at the studio.

All the while, he had friendships with artists like Bell, whose studio neighbored his in Venice, John Chamberlain, and Chris Burden, who he saw perform some of his most daring works.

“Interesting, the Venice artists didn’t talk about art,” he recalls. “I had to go to New York to talk to artists. The Venice artists drank and played poker, and I didn’t play poker. I hated drugs; didn’t do drugs. I smoked a little grass, and I couldn’t even think for two weeks, and I said, ‘No more of that.’”

The 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s were a period of time when Valentine did a series of public commissions. His large-scale sculptures, often made of glass around this time, are dotted throughout Southern California and the world. In 2011, Valentine and the other Finish Fetish and Light and Space artists got a re-evaluation during the Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980 initiative, spurring a resurgence of shows.

Valentine mimics a showtune when I ask him how it feels to open nearly his 40th solo exhibition. “Another opening, another show...” he sings, before admitting that the shows still really take their toll. “The exhibitions and archival pieces, by the time you get everything packed up, you’re just half-dead.”

But though he’s well past the age of retirement, Valentine is still going strong, making paintings that mimic horizons and seascapes. He shows me around his studio, where archival works and maquettes are everywhere. He’s also a prolific collector of African masks and art, Native American baskets and Diné rugs, and cowboy boots.

“Me and a bunch of my friends say, ‘Artists never retire; we just get tired,’” he says with a chuckle.

The show at Almine Rech (on view now through June 8, 2019) is his first solo show in the U.S. since 2015, and features a new “double disk” resin sculpture of the sort that has the curves and California colorific quality that earned him a following in the first place, about a dozen landscape paintings, and a few archival sculptures like “Amber to Gold Circle,” a translucent resin piece from 1971 that takes on the form of a golden sun at dusk. Valentine is an artist who traverses the spaces between nature and engineering, invention and atmosphere. And even rarer still, an artist whose work is necessary to see in person..”