ALMINE RECH

De Wain Valentine
Works from 1967 to present

Apr 30 — Jun 8, 2019 | New York, Upper East Side

Almine Rech is about to inaugurate the first exhibition of De Wain Valentine's work presented on its New York premises. The exhibition will be on view from April 30 to June 8, 2019.

Valentine incarnates a key moment in the development of the Los Angeles art scene in the 1960s and 1970s (in parallel, and somewhat in opposition to New York-based Minimalism). His work caught immediate attention through a fresh vernacular artistic vocabulary that encapsulated the essence of L.A. life. Valentine's work stems from an unexpected alliance between his extraordinary technical and engineering virtuosity, and his rich and sensual perceptual experience. His sculptural and pictorial career has, for the past six decades, been spanning a colossal, yet, intimate project, and reflects Valentine's abiding "love affair with the L.A. ocean and sky."

This exhibition offers fresh avenues to engage more fully with Valentine's remarkably rich and complex ongoing career. Ever since his emergence on the Los Angeles art scene in 1965, Valentine stood out as an artist developing cutting edge technological solutions for his ambitious sculptures, as well as his lesser-known, yet striking paintings. He seamlessly put to use his unique engineering and scientific skills towards previously unseen aesthetic results. Valentine's abstract and geometric volumes were made out of synthetic plastic and resins, a material almost untouched by artists at the time. What remains the unique mark of Valentine's sculptural production, is that he was capable of endowing this industrial and commercial material with poetic qualities, and dreamy, ethereal, vaporous associations that were unforeseeable from such a material. Valentine transformed this medium and made it very apt to capture the subtle nuances of the rich and varied L.A. atmospheric effects.

Valentine was a key member of a group of artists loosely referred to as Light and Space (whose ranks also included Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, Peter Alexander, John McCracken, Craig Kauffman, Laddie John Dill, Helen Pashgian, Mary Corse, and other younger artists, such as Gisela Colon): they all tended to share a similar vision, each artist injecting his/her work with specific inflections and particular marks. They also shared an abiding interest in a formal vocabulary that consisted of flat smooth, highly polished, geometrical volumes, such as rectangular planks, discs, stelae, spheres.

Until 1966 (date when Valentine patented his invention of a new synthetic resin), it was impossible for anyone working with resins or plastics to elaborate a sculpture taller than a couple of feet due to the inherently soft and unstable properties of resin. The complex and hazardous process of building up free-standing volumes required several painstaking steps of pouring the resin under high heat, waiting for the first layer to dry before pouring in the next one, and so on. The result led to a block of material that was inherently flawed, and highly susceptible to break or crack.

Equipped with a rare gift in mastering complex equations in physics, chemistry, and engineering, Valentine signaled himself by inventing the material necessary in order to produce the sculptures that he wanted with greater solidity, stability, and impressive height. Having worked with an engineer at the Hastings Plastic Company, he came up with a new chemical product, commercially available under the patent of "Valentine MasKast Resin," which enabled him to produce the monumental translucent works that became his signature.

Valentine's technological prowess recently led to new scholarship, and a ground-breaking scientific exploration, the

results of which, were published by the Getty Conservation Institute, and were centered around the colossal Gray Column, 1971.[1]

His invention of a new resin formula—a rare scientific feat for any artist at the time— immediately enabled Valentine to endow his resin sculptures with the colossal scales (up to 12 feet and more) that he had dreamt of. These monumental sculptures count, among them, the sublime Gray Column, 1975, or earlier on, Red Concave Circle, 1970 (now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art collection). The historical disk sculpture, Circle Smoke Gray, presented today at the Almine Rech, is also dated 1970—a year of historic importance for Valentine who referred to the LACMA sculpture as "his first big circle." Indeed, Valentine was already familiar with the treatment of disks or circles within his sculptural practice. In a recent telephone conversation, Douglas Chrismas (founder of ACE) shared information on the early history of Valentine's disk sculptures, initially exhibited at his first gallery, the Douglas Gallery, in Vancouver, as early as in 1967.

Valentine has been working through a fairly contained vocabulary of geometric shapes and volumes (discs, trapezoidal volumes, pyramidical or rhombus-shaped stelae). These stelae made out of translucent, at times hazy-looking resin, differed considerably from the geometric vocabulary developed by minimalist artists during the same years in New York. While the latter group focused on questions of objecthood, immediacy, and conceptual clarity, Valentine and the Light and Space artists forged a new language, inextricably tied to a harmonious reflection that drew upon the visual spectrum produced by the West Coast climes: sun and clouds, fog and clarity, ocean and sand.

In his own inimitable voice, Valentine is fond of emphasizing what these works are about: "I always wanted a big magic saw I could cut up big hunks of L.A. smog or hunks of ocean and say: 'Look at this!' The polyester was the only way to objectify that love of it."[2] Circle Smoke Grey (1970), presented today, precisely embodies the artist's vision: it appears to have trapped in resin "a hunk of L.A. smog"—a transliteration of the dense and complex Californian atmosphere into a clear, translucent sculptural form.

Even though other artists (Robert Irwin, Helen Pashgian, and others) have shared in this fascination for the disk as an artistic form, in various iterations, Valentine pioneered the invention of a free-standing concave disk, and, through his own patented invention of a new genre of synthetic resin, was able to endow these disks (his "big circles") with unforeseeable dimensions. The exhibition at Almine Rech presents us with a rare opportunity to view and discover the diverse and rich spectrum of Valentine's artistic practice. It is rare to be able to see a selection of sculptures together with his paintings (a lesser known facet of his practice); yet, for Valentine, both constitute two sides of the same coin. His pictorial practice, with a different medium, and on a two-dimensional format, also aim at capturing the magical alluring aspects of the qualities of the atmosphere in the Pacific. Indeed, some of his most extraordinary paintings were executed in Hawaii and display an almost gem-like quality. In fact, referencing jewelry with respect to Valentine's paintings is no mere metaphor. Often proudly referring to one of his ancestors who was a gold miner in Colorado during the Gold Rush, Valentine discussed in a recent conversation his own fascination for gold. Valentine's fascination for gold and gems goes along with his long-held admiration for medieval manuscript illumination. In an analogous way, he resorted to applying pure gold leaves on his canvas before applying the rich layers of bright blue and purple pigments. Valentine's painting Purple Illuminated Skyline (1998) clearly carries a clear allegiance to the medieval genre of illuminations, also executed through a careful application of gold leaves on parchment. The scene depicted in the illustration below shows a distribution of gifts during New Year's Eve. This is one of the sumptuous pages in the Très riches heures du Duc de Berry, by the Limbourg brothers. A couple of features directly relevant to Valentine's own painting: the application of fine gold leaves on the surface, of course, but also the choice of a particularly rich blue/purplish pigment used to depict the firmament—the firmament also echoing Valentine's continued interest in "skylines": (found in the titles of many of his works). Both works, the Très riches heures, and DeWain Valentine's paintings are animated with a certain cosmological dimension. These layers of interests and references, unexpected from any artist in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, confer a unique place to Valentine within the art historical world. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to engage freshly with Valentine's ever surprising creative practices.

As a graduate student at the University of Colorado, Valentine received instruction in painting from Richard Diebenkorn and Clyfford Still. Valentine remembers the most profound advice he received from the latter: “When you see your heroes in your work, you kick them out, and what’s left is you. He said that won’t be very much, but that's what you start with.” For Valentine, who had been working in a quasi-figural style indebted to Cézanne and Matisse, Still’s words were transformative. A summer graduate course at Yale exposed him to the east coast New York art scene, while a visit to Chicago provided his first exposure to the Light and Space artists, several of whom were exhibited there. An invitation to teach a class on plastics at UCLA in 1965 prompted his move to Venice, where he quickly fell in with the local artistic community. He has been working in Los Angeles ever since.

— Joachim Pissarro