

# De Wain Valentine and the Profundity of Pleasure

BY PETER PLAGENS

## 1. You Can Take the Boy Out of Colorado...

At dinner, recently, in a neighborhood restaurant in New York—which he’s visiting to tend to some business relating to the art world’s rekindled interest in his work—De Wain Valentine refers to himself as “the old cowboy.” He says it with a mildly rueful smile, partly because he’s now 75 and, although he’s lived a pretty good life near surfable beaches in California and Hawaii, and has seen his work enjoy both commercial and critical success, he has never quite hit the pages of the history books with the impact of some of his contemporaries. He also says it because he *is* kind of an old cowboy. Valentine was raised around horses in Colorado, and got his first Stetson when he was three years old. He remembers the hat as being as tall and wide as he was.<sup>1</sup> Today, a cowboy hat—he fancies gunfighter black—is still as much a part of Valentine’s head as his curly, dirty blonde hair.

“Cowboy” has other meanings, too, that can apply to Valentine. In the art world, it’s someone who forgoes the security of, say, an art-teaching job in order to stay full-time in the studio, and takes his chances with galleries and collectors rather than dance to the tune of an academic bureaucracy. That—except for a

few guest gigs early on—is Valentine. In southern California art precincts, the term also implies somebody who’s somewhat off the Brentwood lawn-party trail, who doesn’t have his studio nestled in one of those “creative community” neighborhoods. Valentine does his work down in what the architecture critic Reyner Banham called Los Angeles’s “Plains of Id,” in Gardena, of longtime draw-poker-palace fame. His neighbor makes dental ceramics.

Before he hit puberty, Valentine was finishing car bodies with multiple layers of lacquer, and when his car-dealer dad started selling boats, he became familiar with fiberglass. Yes, Valentine painted and studied with the likes of Richard Diebenkorn and Clyfford Still at the University of Colorado in Boulder. But “plastics”—a catch-all term for term for synthetic sculpture materials such as Lucite and cast resin—is where Valentine started, maintained, and barring any sudden, late-career 90-degree turns in his aesthetic, ended up. During a stop in Chicago on a postgraduate trip to New York, trying unsuccessfully to interest galleries in his sculpture made with plastics, Valentine visited the Art Institute, where he encountered work by Larry Bell who, he’s said, was already one of his heroes. Inspired, Valentine moved to Los Angeles in 1965 and taught a class in

“plastics technology” at U.C.L.A.

## 2. “Are you listening?” “Yes I am.” “Plastics.”

Valentine’s first major work—one that’s one of the foci of the Museum of Modern Art’s recent reinstallation of its mammoth permanent collection—Triple Disk Red Metal Flake - Black Edge (1966)—is, however, not the kind of “plastic” work we’ve come to associate most with Valentine. It’s essentially a *reductio ad aestheticum* of a beautifully customized hot rod—three tilting, bulging discs leaning diagonally like the racing car wheels in the great 1913 Jacques-Henri Lartigue photograph, *Car Trip, Papa at 80 Kilometers an Hour*. Triple Disk Red is a “fantastic object” (an oft-employed term for a certain kind of 1960s and ’70s L.A. art), as space-agey seductive as anything produced during the same year by Craig Kauffman (in vacuum-formed Plexiglas), Larry Bell (in chromed steel and electroplated glass), and even Robert Irwin (in synthetic polymer on aluminum). It’s heavy on applying custom-car and surfboard vibes to an *objet-d’art*, but as yet still light on being the perceptual and ontological mysteries that Valentine’s cast resin discs would later be.

There were other, and formidable, resin-casters in the L.A. art world of the time, but works such as Peter Alexander’s *Cloud Box* (1966) were still pedestal-small. Valentine wanted to go big, to go beyond the conventional wisdom that 50 pounds of polyester resin was about as much as one could cast without the piece cracking, bubbling, or becoming foggy.

With the collaboration of chemical engineer Ed Revay, Valentine came up with his own material, “Valentine MasKast Resin,” that enabled him to cast the large, freestanding, transparent colored discs for which he became most well-known. The discs weigh a couple of tons but, as Valentine told me a long time ago, he could cast one “without even a bubble the size of what you’d find in a bottle of 7-Up.”

The problem—if it can be called a problem; it’s more like a coming up barely short in the lifetime achievement awards—was that Valentine’s objects fell into a kind of art-critical crack between L.A. art’s smooth, shiny, sunset-colored objects that married the technological aesthetic of southern California’s aerospace and movie industries to intimations of a great Zen one-ness, and the “light and space” art of Irwin, Jim Turrell and others that explicitly embodied (or disembodied) that immaterial one-ness. Over time, a gauze of technological curiosity—more, “Wow! How did he do that?” than “This causes me to wonder about the meaning of life”—began, unjustly, to attach itself to Valentine’s art.

## 3. Phenomenology to the Rescue

The solution—that is, giving credit where due to the profundity of Valentine’s work—is not so much learning, intellectually, how to look at one of his cast resin sculptures, but in allowing oneself to regard the object less as a thing, and more as an *experience*. The fancy name of this practice, this letting go, this *allowing*, is phenomenology.

Although the philosophical discipline of phenomenology dates back to Edmund Husserl and the turn of the previous century (or even G.W.F. Hegel at the turn of the century before *that*), the key work—albeit densely written—is Maurice Merlau-Ponty’s 1945 book, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. A relevant quote: “In perception we do not think the object and we do not think ourselves thinking it, we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Look at a Valentine disc. (The large discs are the best stimuli, but his other cast resin works are also instructive—and beautiful.) Its undeniable weight, mass and presence notwithstanding, the sculpture is simultaneously a kind of installation—not the “installation art” sort, but an activator of the space around it. Rather than being put at a psychological distance from the art object (a main point of orthodox, opaque Minimalist sculpture), one is drawn toward it. With a large disc such as *Circle Blue*, 1970, with the approximate wingspan of an average human, this feeling is enhanced by the object’s seeming to be a kind of other person. The

transparency of the piece manages to pull one perceptually *through* the work, through a kind of worm-hole of spatial distortion, to the other side and a charged awareness of the space *around* the sculpture. Valentine’s talent, his craftsmanship, and prescient sense of what a piece of three-dimensional art could do if certain preconceptions—in force in modern art when Valentine began his sculptural sojourn in plastics—were cast (pun intended) to the side, make the experience an aesthetic one, a pleasurable one. In other words, art.

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<sup>1</sup> Bondo Wyszpolski, “Valentine’s Day,” *Easy Reader*, December 11, 2011, <http://www.easyreadernews.com/42071/pacific-standard-time-valentine/>

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merlau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, translation by Colin Smith, 1996), p. 238.