

Frieze: DeWain Valentine, by Jonathan P. Watts, November 16th 2015.



Concave Circle, Rose, 1968–2014, cast polyester resin, 60 × 60 × 24 cm. All images courtesy of the artist and Almine Rech Gallery, London; photograph: Joshua White

DeWain Valentine's jewel-like cast polyester resin sculptures at Almine Rech, London, are an unexpected compliment to the Barbican's survey of that prodigious Californian partnership, Charles and Ray Eames. Aside from being long-term adoptive Angelenos – wisened to the ways of smog-enhanced light and space – both artist and architects were, as Rowan Moore wrote of the latter, 'the sunny side of the cold war and the fun side of the industrial-military complex'. Without a US navy contract for lightweight, modular leg splints they might not have got started; the prototyping of their now-ubiquitous moulded chairs coincided with the military declassification of plastics following World War II.



Skyline, 1990, mixed media on paper, 76 × 112 cm. Photograph Melissa Castro Duarte

Valentine's sculptures likewise owe much to military experimentation. He recalls being mesmerized by agate stones as a boy when his father, a government construction worker, relocated the family to Lander, Wyoming, a region littered with the by-products of iron mining. On drizzly summer Sundays he would walk the nearby aircraft bombing range, fire ceased for the day of rest, plucking stones extruded by blasts and washed by rain. Later, through a contact at a nearby Denver military base, Valentine's junior high school teacher introduced him to newly declassified polyesters and plastics, which were easier to cut and polish than stones. Valentine mixed colour paints to make any naturally occurring finish he desired. At home he made jewellery and baked plastics in the oven. 'One day you're gonna kill us all with that stink,' his mother lamented. She was right to be suspicious: Niki de Saint Phalle is only the most famous artist to have died as a consequence of inhaling toxic polyester fumes.



Clear Portal, 1969–2014, cast polyester resin, 61 × 44 × 10 cm. Photograph Joshua White

Those foul winds had long departed the translucent columns and discs on top of the gleaming white plinths at Almine Rech. Lining walls adorned with blooming pastel blushes on watercolour paper, these resin objects, dating from 1968–75, are now capsules of fairer climes, of palm trees, surfboards and the shimmering Pacific, of a more laissez-faire being: perfect for a drizzly October in Savile Row. The light and space movement – the name given to a loose association of South Californian artists in the late 1960s, among them Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, Helen Pashgian and Valentine himself – experimented with new industrial processes in pursuit of the purest expression of light and space. Christopher Knight, LA's grandee critic, regards the movement as the city's first wholly original contribution to art history, albeit one with a propensity for being misunderstood as parody – its interpretation of sunsets recalls those of Sunday painters by the sea.



Skyline, 1991, mixed media on paper, 75 × 105 cm. Photograph Melissa Castro Duarte

Despite the objects' cuteness, there's something singularly American about the toxicity of Valentine's pastoralism. Working with a commercial plastics company, in 1966 the artist developed his own polyester resin called MasKast, casting forms, sometimes metres tall, in wooden formers before sanding and buffing the surface with car wax for days and weeks on end. Materially speaking, these were something entirely new. A photograph shows masked men in overalls tipping resin from steel drums on a forklift. Are they the same steel drums washed up in John Gossage's 1985 photographs of a festering Maryland pond?

According to Leonard Pitt in his magisterial *Los Angeles A to Z* (2000), in the late 1960s and early '70s, the aerospace industry accounted for nearly 43 percent of the region's total manufacturing employment. Valentine's technician previously worked for the Atomic Energy Commission. Clearly this streamlined aesthetic, which has also given us Apple Macs and iPhones, has been an influence on Valentine's objects. (According to some, the gallery press release notes, so too did his experience of working with UFOs.) Derisively called 'finish fetish' for what some New York critics considered their superficial emphasis on surface, obsession with craftsmanship, and preoccupation with looking over thinking, Valentine's light and space objects – not to mention his later watercolours – do look peculiarly contemporary from the remove of some 40 years. The works on paper could be easy-on-the-eye Samara Scotts and those shimmering, hermetic surfaces look like industrially produced Rafael Hefti sculptures or props in the videos of Loretta Fahrenholz or Shahryar Nashat.



Rose to Clear Circle, 1970, cast polyester resin, 45 × 45 cm. Photograph Joshua White

In George Orwell's *Coming Up For Air* (1939) the middle-aged narrator, George Bowling, suspecting Great Britain has gone awry, returns to the village he was born in, now a large industrial estate. His suspicions are confirmed by the emergence of flashy new milk bars. 'There's a kind of atmosphere about these places that gets me down,' he writes. 'Everything slick and shiny and streamlined [...] Everything spent on the decorations and nothing on the food. No real food at all. Just lists of stuff with American names, sort of phantom stuff that you can't taste and can hardly believe the existence of.' We British have a particular aversion to slickness. I believe it was us, nihilistic and fearful, who pioneered YouTube videos of the newest iPhones being smashed with a hammer and of Nike trainers being cooked in the microwave.