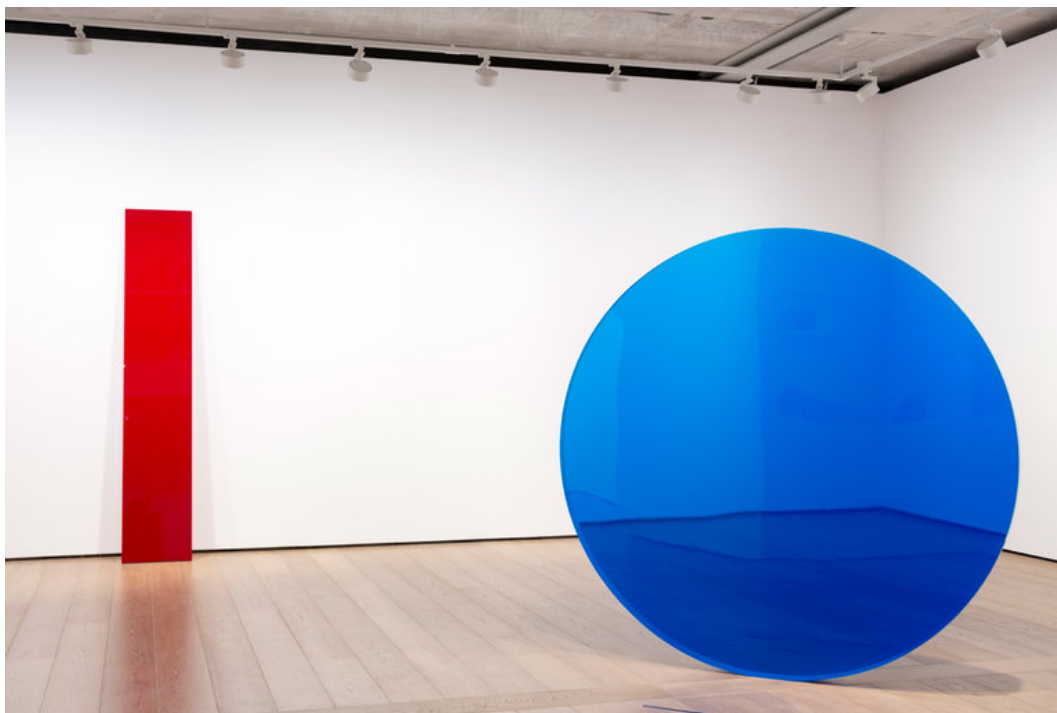


Kayne Griffin Corcoran



An Art Show Celebrates a Once-Maligned Material: Plastic



An installation view of “Plastic Show” at Almine Rech Gallery in London.
Melissa Castro Duarte, Courtesy of Almine Rech Gallery

When DeWain Valentine was deciding what to title his newly organized “Plastic Show,” he paid homage to an exhibition he helped put together some 45 years back. “I named *that* The Last Plastics Show,” recalls the artist of the earlier CalArts exhibition. “There’d been so many shows regarding plastic and art that I thought it was the last one that I wanted to be in!”

“Plastic Show” brings together works by Valentine and four of his contemporaries — Mary Corse, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman and John McCracken — who were all experimenting with newly available materials in Venice and Santa Monica in the 1960s. Valentine arrived on the L.A. art scene fresh from Boulder, Colo., and recalls feeling like an outsider to start with, but the move had an immediate impact on his art.

“The sky was so clear in Colorado that you didn’t notice it,” he explains. “When I moved to California, it was a time of heavy smog, and the air became a substance. I had a studio half a block from the beach, and that marine air with the smog had a Turner quality to it: The sky was all different colors. I think it affected everyone’s work here. So the so-called Light and Space movement grew out of the atmosphere here on the West Coast.”

Valentine’s acrylic sculptures have precisely that suggestion of the air “becoming a substance”: They’re vast glossy blocks, columns, discs and lozenges that change color as you move around them and gaze in and through them. “All my work is really about the sky and the sea,” he says.



Another view of the show. Melissa Castro Duarte, Courtesy of Almine Rech Gallery.

Equally influential on the art scene of the time was the Californian culture of “boating, surfboards and hot rods,” as Valentine puts it. The high sheen of his sculptures comes courtesy of buffing and lacquering know-how picked up at his parents’ auto garage. Works in the show by John McCracken, by contrast, draw directly from surf culture. His columns, “paintings” and planks are constructed from plywood and fiberglass with a glossy shell of polyester resin, just like a surfboard.

In L.A., Valentine worked with a local plastics manufacturer to develop a resin that he could cast in large sections, as much as 5,000 pounds in one single pour. By then he was already an old hand: He’d first experimented with plastics before he was even in his teens. “I actually started working with acrylic in junior high shop in 1947,” he says. “Denver had a lot of military manufacturing, and the Air Force had declassified acrylic after the war, so they sent all these scrap acrylics to the various shop classes so that the kids could cut it up and play with it.” The following year, the Navy declassified fiberglass and polyester and likewise sent surplus stock out to the local schools.

There’s a certain poetic justice to Valentine curating a show of plastic art in a French-run London gallery. Decades ago, he was firmly told — first by his traditionally minded art school, then by snobby Europhile dealers in New York — that the material had no place in an artist’s repertoire. “It was in the 1960s that I first took my slides to New York City to show the galleries. They said, ‘Gee, this looks really interesting, what’s it made of?’ I said ‘Plastic,’ and they said, ‘Oh, the art galleries will *never* show plastics,’” Valentine recalls. Turns out they were wrong.

- Hettie Judah