Proceedings of The National Conference
On Undergraduate Research (NCUR) 2019
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
April 11-13, 2019

Characterization of the L.A. Look: Polyester Resin as a Vehicle for Los Angeles' Art Movement

Alexis Moon
Art History
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Leisa Rundquist, Laurel Taylor, Eva Bares

Abstract

From the 1960s through the early 1970s, Los Angeles, California experienced the first of what the city would consider an authentic, identifiable artistic moment, appropriately titled the "L.A. Look." This is considered as an overarching label, meant to relate artworks described by aesthetic terminology for this time period, such as Finish Fetish and Light-and-Space. The L.A. Look focused on visual and environmental experiences created by objects with clean lines and glossy, colorful, or translucent surfaces. Growing industry and economy in post-war Los Angeles contributed to widespread availability of industrial materials produced during the war, particularly polyester resin, which characterized this new movement. Arguments for the use of polyester resin are framed through L.A. Look artists to identify the impact of this material on their work. Artists investigated with more specificity include De Wain Valentine and John McCracken, due to their success using polyester resin. Objects by these artists will be comparatively analyzed with other L.A. Look work made of glass to determine why polyester resin was the media of choice. Ways in which the L.A. Look was forced to compete with preconceived, East-Coast notions about the quality and complexity of the L.A. aesthetic are described in order to further establish why the contribution of resin has been widely under-appreciated by scholars until this point. This paper demonstrates how industrial resin enabled artists of Cold War Los Angeles to set themselves apart, in both concept and materiality, as they developed an artistic identity while work of the L.A. Look became distinctive in the world of contemporary art.

1. Introduction

Production of art in late 1960s through early 1970s Los Angeles is categorized by experimentation with a variety of materials and concepts, including industrial-grade polyester resin. Polyester resin was influential in the elevation of the L.A. Look, and thus further influenced the growth of Los Angeles as an art center. For the purposes of this paper, the L.A. Look is considered as a general label to better relate and describe the aesthetic terminology for this time period, such as Finish Fetish and Light-and-Space, within the context of Los Angeles. Artists that will be investigated with more specificity in this inquiry are De Wain Valentine and John McCracken. These artists became a part of the L.A. Look through various means, and have differing life experiences and conceptual approaches. They found success in the L.A. Look, however, their careers changed in various ways after the 1970s had passed. The strongest relationship between them is, arguably, their use of polyester resin during their most well received years of art-making. Thus, visual analysis of select resin sculptures will provide clues into reasoning for the use of industrial resin as an artist's material. In addition, ways in which the L.A. Look was forced to compete with preconceived, East-Coast notions about the quality and complexity of the L.A. aesthetic are described in order to further establish why the contribution of resin has been widely under-appreciated by scholars until this point. This paper will demonstrate how polyester resin enabled artists of Cold War Los Angeles to set themselves apart, in both concept and materiality, as they developed an artistic identity while work of the L.A. Look became distinctive in the world of contemporary art.[1]

2. Terminology

Artworks of polyester resin created during the 1960s in Los Angeles are often described by various terms. The vocabulary I find most useful for my analysis of these artworks include Finish Fetish, The L.A. Look, as well as Light-and-Space.[2] Examining the use of language is significant because each of these terms highlights a different aspect of a work, whether it be conceptual or physical. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they are actually quite different. An object may be described as having characteristics of the Finish Fetish and may also fall into the general category of the L.A. Look. However, another object which portrays Finish Fetish may not be related to Los Angeles at all. For this reason, defining these terms as individually exclusive is pertinent.

Categorizing artists of 1960s Los Angeles within this terminology requires caution, as many of the period have actually preferred to be considered individually; artists like Billy Al Bengston and Robert Irwin claim that the art of the time cannot be considered as an actual movement, and thus, to neglect their individuality would be a mistake.[3] Naturally, there are many variables that influence the conceptual and material decisions of artists, this analysis will be specific to particular artists when appropriate, but draw connections where possible. The most general association that can be imposed upon these artists is their common relationship to the city of Los Angeles.

For the purposes of this thesis, the actual art movement of this period from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, within the city of Los Angeles, will be described as the L.A. Look. This will be an overarching label, meant to relate artworks described by such characteristic terminology as Finish Fetish and Light-and-Space. The L.A. Look is perhaps more indicative of the moment I am discussing compared to other titles for this period, including West-Coast Minimalism. There are artists within the L.A. Look who were in communication with and even aspired towards the traditionally acclaimed Minimalist movement of New York and European art centers, however, using this title of Minimalism may imply certain conceptual ideas and social impacts that were present in those other areas onto the works of Los Angeles artists, underserving the unique climate of this city. L.A. Look artists were informed heavily by their environment, both urban and natural. Los Angeles provided a unique combination of winding mountain landscapes, glittering seaside shores and clean, harsh lines of urban architecture and the glossy shapes of automobile bodies.

Robert Atkins, author of ArtSpeak, denotes Finish Fetish and the L.A. Look as being synonymous.[4] However, Finish Fetish relates to a certain physical quality of the object, while L.A. Look contextualizes the aesthetic with its particular moment within the city of Los Angeles. In general, the ideal finish was exceptionally smooth, without imperfection. It should be noted that Finish Fetish may be applied to both two-dimensional and three-dimensional artistic works. When we define the term finish as a noun, this relates to a certain characteristic of the artistic media. The term fetish seeks to identify an obsession with this surface feature. The effect of a glossy, reflective surface was achieved through the use of enamel paints, metal, glass, and of course, polyester resin. Polyester resin is not necessarily smooth, shiny or reflective and must be manipulated to achieve the desired appearance. The process of this physical modification will be explored more thoroughly later on.

In contrast, the desired environmental effects of Light-and-Space are perhaps more readily achieved through the use of polyester resin. Resin material enables the viewer to acknowledge space below the surface, or finish, on the work—there is an area within the piece that may be seen but cannot be physically experienced. Based on this idea, resin holds a bit of mystery for the viewer. The only thing that can interact with this untouchable space is, in fact, light. Both De Wain Valentine and Robert Bassler admit to this refraction of light as being an important aspect of their earlier concepts.[5] One frequent enhancement of the transparency could be achieved through the use of color. When light interacts with a transparent object of a singular hue, or a multitude of colors, this may create a unique display of prismatic light throughout an environment, such as a plain white gallery space. This is, yet, another way that resin works may actively interact with their surroundings.

Light-and-Space is said to have occurred subsequently after the birth of Finish Fetish.[6] However, there are artworks that are representative of both terms. For example, work by De Wain Valentine is often categorized under Light-and-Space, yet it utilizes the ultra-high-polish finish. Therefore, it is more appropriate to state that Light-and-Space as a title or definition was something that became more well established later on, in the 1970s and 80s, but that artmaking with consideration for this concept had existed all along. Aside from obvious differences between these two terms, another useful distinguishing factor of Light-and-Space could be its specific relevance to sculptural objects. Because the conceptual ideas of Light-and-Space are quite concerned with an art object which can not only occupy space, but also contain its own space within, it is not very conducive towards the inclusion of two-dimensional media.[7] In fact, these concepts almost limit Light-and-Space art media to poured resin, glass, and perhaps other modifiable plastic materials.

3. Historical Background

In order to properly analyze the use of polyester resin as an artist's material, a preliminary understanding of the economic and industrial growth in Los Angeles is required as these factors held great impact on the availability of new materials. Particular forms of industry that utilized these materials would prove to speak towards the foundational concepts of the L.A. Look such as automobile design, acrylic glossy-paints and aircraft production. In order to support efforts of World War II, Los Angeles developed several thousand industrial sites. Post-War L.A. found itself with new assets in oil industry, an ever-growing scene of film and entertainment, and strong ties to aircraft development for both national security and civilian use. Even during the 1950s, the United States Department of Defense aided in boosting the city's industrial economy due to tensions of the Cold War.[8] Naturally, increases in wealth and population occurred alongside this development of infrastructure.

A notable aspect of this accumulation of wealth may be exhibited in the city's large concentration of cars, which occurred at a rate much faster than that of other major cities in the United States. In 1959, Arthur L. Grey stated in the journal Land Economics some of the reasons for a focus on automobile commuting in Los Angeles including an appreciation for scenic beauty and recreational driving, an ideal climate for driving year-round, and a successful economy for automobile production within the city itself. As will be addressed in the aesthetic concerns of specific L.A. Look artists, the presence of cars within the city did not go unnoticed by its growing scene of creators. The everyday presence of automobile design was frequently cited as a major influence for interests in Finish Fetish, mimicking the ultra-shine and even jewel-tone appearance of cars during this period. As a result, the materials of automobile manufacture found their way into Los Angeles art studios—various forms of sheet metal, glass, enamel, lacquers. It is not surprising, then, that a material such as polyester resin fit well into the repertoire of artists with this aesthetic interest.

In 1940s post-war America, modern art from Europe and East Coast influence seemed to approach Los Angeles slowly. The city had been exposed to "modern" visual information before, primarily through the acceptance of midcentury architecture.[9] Art objects were introduced via immigration, often by young people attracted to the growing film industry. German and French emigrants brought with them their own tastes, and private collections within Los Angeles started to acquire works of Dada, German Expressionism, and Surrealism. Galka Scheyer, a German patron of modern art, attempted to expose the United States to expressionists Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger and Alexei Jawlensky. Scheyer, despite ferocity and dedication, never gained commercial success as a dealer in Los Angeles as there was simply no market for the work in this area.[10] The exhibition of Dada, Expressionist and Surrealist works was often private, with limited public access in small galleries, bookstores and shops. The new groups of modernist collectors did not compare to the majority of well established, conservative institutions such as the California Art Club and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). For this reason, it was exceptionally difficult for them to gain enough traction for their galleries and shops to stay afloat.

Much of this difficulty was purely related to a tense political and social climate in post-war Los Angeles. McCarthyism was rampant in the entirety of the United States as the 1940s progressed into the 50s, and Los Angeles was no exception. Due to much of its European roots, modern art forms were often labelled as, "un-American," "less than wholesome,"[11] or even, "a communist taint."[12] Artists who spent time in Los Angeles like Marcel Duchamp, or even Man Ray, who occupied a permanent residence there for about a decade, were accused of spreading Communism. James Byrnes was hired as the curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1946.[13] In 1947, Byrnes attempted to reconstruct the LACMA annual exhibition, moving it away from the traditional method of choosing primarily from local artists, and towards accepting new categories of modern art. Riots ensued, the California Art Club members and other local artists' organizations picketed and declared the show to be communistic, "degenerate junk."[14] This clash from the public sphere was not good publicity, and thus, did not create a solid foundation to support the growth of modern work during the time. Therefore, it remained a private endeavor within Los Angeles until further development in the 1960s.

Abstract Expressionism was prevalent in the centers of New York and even 1950s San Francisco, however, for reasons that have been outlined, it did not integrate into the works of southern California as smoothly as one may think. Much like the preceding Surrealists and Dada works, the followers of early expressionism in Los Angeles were few and primarily underground, shielded from the public eye to a certain extent. There were, however, many expressionists painters in Los Angeles and they made their impact through the transference of knowledge in Los Angeles art schools. As a result, Abstract Expressionism was especially interesting to the youthful, emerging artists of UCLA, Chouinard, the Los Angeles County Art Institute (which would later be known as the Otis Art Institute) and their cohort.[15] Many of these budding creators would find their own moment in the mid to late 1960s. Artists like Larry Bell and John McCracken, who started out producing abstract expressionist two-dimensional work would later prove to innovate the L.A. Look, creating a direct relationship between these two exceptionally different moments in

Los Angeles. These students were being influenced by both the suppressed, modernist tendency of their educators as well as their unique and bubbling city of Los Angeles, resulting in a form of experimental art-making that the city had yet to experience.

4. Material Specifications of Polyester Resin

By the time concepts of the L.A. Look were marinating in the minds of emerging artists in Los Angeles, the production of various forms of “plastic” material had already been well established in the United States. Industrial resin was not difficult to access by any means, as its sale had already been introduced into the public sphere, although not specifically for use as artistic media. The most difficult aspects of adapting polyester resin into sculptural material would be the particular environmental requirements and, like any other material, a learned skill to achieve optimum craftsmanship. There were two primary methods of working with polyester resin utilized by L.A. Look artists: a casting method and pouring onto substrate. In order to better understand the function of these two techniques, it is helpful to outline the technical aspects of the polyester resin and how the curing process works.

Both methods of working with polyester resin, casting and pouring, require that the studio or workspace be controlled under certain conditions of temperature and humidity. Robert Bassler states that the temperature must be kept within a range of 70-75˚F and a relative humidity below 50%.[16] Polyester resin sculpture was often produced from two basic components, a raw polyester resin component, or a “polyester charge,” and a catalyst. These two elements must be mixed in a proper environment to ensure that the reaction is catalyzed effectively. Temperature is very influential on the catalytic process and should the studio space exceed 75˚F, the resin may react too quickly, produce excessive amounts of heat, and cracking. Humidity is often indicative of resin quality, as excess moisture in the studio space may cause resin to become foggy.[17]

There were some hazards when working with the organic chemicals required for polyester resin during this period. Most of this need for caution was due to the solvent, styrene, and the catalyst MEKP. Styrene has since been classified as a possible carcinogen and can be irritating to eyes, skin and respiratory systems. MEKP seems to be the most commonly used catalyst during the period and is known to be exceptionally toxic when ingested and corrosive upon contact with the skin.[18] The artists were to avoid contact with the liquid polyester charge, vapors produced through curing or even dust created by sanding the solid material. Most of this could be easily avoided through the proper use of protective equipment and a well-ventilated studio space.

The first of the two methodologies I have chosen to highlight involves the pouring of polyester resin into a mold. This method is very time sensitive, as the resin charge must be mixed with catalyst before molding, and yet enter the mold in a liquid state. Additionally, the material of the mold itself must be able to withstand the heat and pressure generated by the curing of the material. Mold materials often included fiberglass, rubber, and metal, depending on the size of sculpture and shape desired.[19] For larger pieces, like those of De Wain Valentine, multiple studio assistants may be necessary in order for the mold to be put together and the resin to be poured inside.[20] Bassler states that it was difficult to achieve transparency through this method and pieces thicker than 12 inches would begin to appear more opaque than their smaller counterparts, which may be so successfully cured as to have the appearance of glass.[21] Pouring the resin into a mold is quite unforgiving, and if any mistakes are made, the pieces were generally ruined and resulted in waste of time, materials and money.

The second method, which required significantly less polyester resin material, involved the pouring of polyester resin onto a firm substrate. An example of suitable substrate could be a fiberglass-coated plywood, like the work of John McCracken. As in the first method, the pouring must take place after the resin charge and catalyst have been mixed but still while the material is in a liquid state. Once cured, sanding and polishing would be required to achieve the perfect shine. However, unlike the previous method which typically utilized the transparent quality of the resin, this technique was most often practiced producing shiny, opaque surfaces. Should the artist require multiple pours in order to achieve the desired density of resin, this could be done without compromising the visual quality of the piece. Multiple pours of transparent resin may present seams between pours, and even create cloudiness. However, if the material is meant to be opaque anyway, and contains some sort of dense pigment, then the process of pouring onto substrate may be easier, more flexible and even cost effective.

Once cured, the mold or barriers for the resin are removed and the process of sanding and polishing will proceed. De Wain Valentine and Bassler describe their sanding process using a mechanical orbital or vibrating sander. The level of grit, or fineness of the sanding would increase gradually, slowly achieving the smoothest of surfaces, not unlike the sanding of stone. Valentine is quoted by Dorothy Newmark in a 1971 interview to have started with 16 grit sandpaper, and continuing up to a 600 grit, the finest sandpaper available at the time.[22] The polishing process may involve 0000 steel wool and/or polishing medium.

As with learning the technique of any other sculptural material, polyester resin was taxing both mentally and physically for the artists who wished to perfect it. Their studio had to prepare for such a material, in order to avoid its toxicity. Artists like De Wain Valentine worked closely with engineers and scientists to ensure that they utilized the resin to its greatest potential. Other artists, such as John McCracken, did not find this sort of relationship beneficial to the conceptual aspect of their designs, and chose to be more experimental with the material, working out the problems through trial and error. While not the most expensive material on the market, the costs of polyester resin could add up as cured material could not be reused. Artists working with polyester resin had to be prepared for the possibility of failure on a regular basis, requiring the entire process to be repeated over and over. This speaks to the commitment of L.A. Look artists to their craft, although not considered a fine art material, to achieve their aesthetic goals.

5. De Wain Valentine

Although De Wain Valentine was certainly absorbed into the core group of L.A. Look artists, he was not a California native.[23] Valentine was born and grew up in Fort Collins, Colorado, and he would not move to Los Angeles until later in his adult life. Colorado certainly influenced the development of Valentine's skillset and possibly some of his early conceptual ideas with transparent objects. The young artist was exposed first to acrylic, which had been declassified by the United States Air Force after the second World War. Valentine claims that he found pleasure working with this material in the same way one would sculpt stone, and it was much easier and softer than working with actual stone. In 1947, the Navy released fiberglass and polyester resin to the larger market, and Valentine's junior high school shop teacher introduced the media to their class.[24]

As a teenager, Valentine was particularly interested in the appearance of jewels. De Wain Valentine's mother was a European immigrant and her family had moved to Colorado to work in mining. The artist remembers being taken to collect precious gems with family members and fondly traces back his interest in the interior, inaccessible space of the stone to these experiences. This initial fascination is best reflected in his transparent sculptures of the 60s.[25] Working with acrylic and polyester resin in school allowed Valentine to actively create and interact with the viewable interior space of the stone. While Valentine's interest in transparency would not end in Colorado, the conceptual function behind it changed once he moved to Los Angeles, California.

In the year 1965, De Wain Valentine moved his wife and three children to Los Angeles. The decision to move was primarily for the benefit of Valentine's career. Valentine claims that New York was inaccessible due to a lack of money and prospects, as the eastern art center had yet to accept the type of work with plastics Valentine was interested in. Through a friendship with Jack Hooper, an art professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Valentine was hired to teach a course in plastics. The artist set his studio up on Market Street in Venice Beach, the same street as Larry Bell.[26]

His studio location near the ocean certainly affected De Wain Valentines conceptual considerations regarding his transparent sculpture. The artist was made aware of what he described to be a "marine haze," evident in the interaction between water and air. The water would shine and glow bright under intense sunlight.[27] Additionally, Valentine was very cognizant of the differences in air quality between his old home and the new. In Colorado, he describes the sky as being clean and clear in contrast to the smog of industrialized, urban Los Angeles. This caused Valentine to view the interior space of his sculpture as a microcosmic representation of atmosphere.[28] By his relocation to California, Valentine had moved away from presenting objects that were too representative of stone and was much more concerned with the prismatic effects created through curved three-dimensional shapes, especially convex lenticular shapes. The earliest of these were of a smaller size range, around one to two feet in diameter, and colorless. However, as Valentine progressed and desired to create stronger effects through the use of color, he produced much larger and simpler prismatic shapes of intense hues. In the interview with Newmark, Valentine confirms, "In smaller pieces, intense color makes them too jewel-like, which is not what I am after. But the larger pieces can take it."[29]

The creation of these large, intense sculptural objects required a certain level of expertise with polyester resin. Valentine utilized a casting method, in order to create the highest quality prismatic effects for his work. The sheer volume of resin required to produce such objects is astounding, and not just any marketed polyester resin was capable of withstanding the amount of heat and pressure induced during the catalytic curing process. De Wain Valentine worked with Ed Revay, a sales representative of Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG) based in Hastings Plastic of Santa Monica, California. Through personal experimentation, Valentine produced his own ideal ratio of resin to catalyst. Hastings plastic distributed this combination of product under the title "Valentine MasKast Resin" of which, Valentine himself purchased twelve barrels at a time for each sculpture. Luckily, Valentine received royalties from Hastings for the sales of "Valentine MasKast Resin," creating an offset for the cost of his own purchase of this material.

Valentine stopped working with polyester resin sometime around the year 1975. The artist always aspired to create long-term, outdoor sculpture. Unfortunately, despite the ideal transparency of polyester resin, it could not survive in outdoor elements. Resin is especially sensitive to UV irradiation, which would make it vulnerable to sunlight. Eventually, PPG stopped manufacturing "Valentine MasKast." In From Start to Finish, Valentine expressed, "I have to say, I really don't miss worrying about the toxicity of the material."[30]

6. Concave Circle

Figure 1. De Wain Valentine, *Concave Circle*, 1970, Poured Polyester Resin, 94" x 12" x 6"
http://library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000387645.

De Wain Valentine's 1966 sculpture, Concave Circle, is a solid piece of poured and tinted polyester resin (Figure 1). The circle is ninety-four inches in diameter and twelve inches wide at its base, although it gets thinner towards the center, and is approximately six inches at the top edge.[31] The color of this particular circle is a deep, rosy red jewel tone. The color is most opaque at the edges of the circle, where the material is thicker, and gets increasingly transparent towards its center. While the resin is clearly a dense object which occupies its own space within a gallery context, the surface is polished to such an extent that the edges of the resin appear to be soft and dissipate into the surrounding white walls.

There is an intended experiential quality when viewing the Concave Circle. Visitors can take a multitude of different perspectives when approaching this three-dimensional object, as it is designed to be viewed from all sides. It is, as the title describes, concave, which results in a manipulation of light and shapes of the surrounding environment. As one moves around the object, this visual alteration of space is transient. The form is not only mysterious but also imposing. At nearly eight feet tall, the sculpture dominates over most every viewer, forcing them to look into the depths of its convex shape. The jewel tone hue of the object serves to enhance this shape and yet further distinguishes the dimensionality of the sculpture. While there is meant to be an illusionary effect that the piece has no real edge, the interior of the solid resin is inaccessible, creating a juxtaposition between inclusion and exclusion of the viewer.

In 1970, De Wain Valentine showed several of these lenticular shapes of various hues at the Pasadena Art Museum. They were not arranged in an organized fashion, and were instead placed to occupy the space organically. They faced one another, creating an interesting personified quality to the way they stood erect in the gallery space, almost as though they were in communication with one another. The circular shape would have been particularly unnerving as viewers may associate this form with a sense of movement. Although the base is supported and much thicker at the bottom, the sculpture would appear to be capable of rolling on its side. This may further enhance the experience of the viewer, whose movement in the gallery would have certainly been influenced by the position of these enormous sculptures. Additionally, the shadows and shapes reflected onto the floor of the gallery continued this alteration of space. Their manipulative shapes created effects not unlike stained glass, casting colorful splays of light onto the floor of the gallery.

The display at the Pasadena Art Museum is, however, only one way that these objects were exhibited. The Concave Circle is oriented upon a rectangular base, elevated a few inches from the floor. By placing the sculpture on a base, the viewer loses the unnerving sense of movement and organic, experiential environment created at the Pasadena Art Museum. Rather, the sculpture is meant to be admired from a distance. The viewer's interaction with the object is changed significantly by the simple addition of this base. The relationship between object and viewer, when previously described as a combination of both inclusion and exclusionary accessibility, is perhaps more exclusive and separate. The base symbolizes that the sculpture is no longer in the same plane with the viewer, and is meant to be observed rather than experienced.

Conceptually, De Wain Valentine sought to bring his own consciousness of the interior space of these objects to the viewer.[32] Valentine's previous sculptural investigations involved fiberglass forms, which held a hollow interior, but were not transparent. The use of polyester resin enabled Valentine to visualize this space he was already aware of, to make it vulnerable and exposed. Donna Conwell and Glenn Phillips, curators of the Los Angeles area, state in Duration Piece, "While the term "Finish Fetish" has often been applied to the work of Alexander, Valentine and Pashgian because of their highly polished surfaces, it was not pristine surfaces that preoccupied these artists."[33] Despite this, Valentine claims to have been very concerned with the surface of his polyester sculpture. In a 1971 interview, Valentine mentions, "I am fascinated by the idea of being aware of the outer surface of an object, of seeing through it…the more highly polished the surfaces are the more one becomes involved with the interior space."[34] Generally, Valentine's sculpture is perhaps more widely accepted under the term of Light-and-Space art, as his resin forms are often viewed as capable of manipulating light in space and may inform sensory experiences of the viewer. While this

is true, to disregard Valentine's polyester objects as works of Finish Fetish is hasty. Rather, I consider it more appropriate to see the high-polish finish and manipulations of light to be equitable aspects in De Wain Valentine's concept. This further justifies the use of the term L.A. Look, which encapsulates both.

7. John McCracken

A California native, John McCracken was born to two graduates of UC Berkeley in December of 1934. Their family lived all over the golden state throughout his childhood as his father, an engineer, searched for steady work. Once McCracken had graduated from high school, he enlisted into the United States Navy where he saw no live combat, yet, served four years as a sonar-operator on the U.S.S. Force.[35] This service provided McCracken with the G.I. bill, which supported him through his education as an artist. John McCracken completed his BFA at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC), along with some additional coursework through UC Berkeley.[36]

John McCracken, for the majority of his undergraduate career, considered himself to be a painter, even an illustrator. It was in 1959 that McCracken started to see his work through the lens of fine art. As a student, John McCracken absorbed influences from popular art journals like Artforum. It was through this media outlet that McCracken became aware of early New York Minimalists such as Donald Judd, whose work McCracken frequently referenced as a strong influence in his own aesthetic.

At first, his growing interest in reduced geometry occurred on the two-dimensional surface. By 1964, John McCracken added a new, mixed-media focus to his somewhat surreal, two-dimensional abstractions, manipulating painting textures using automotive lacquers in complex layers of plywood and Masonite. Early constructions still utilized canvas, but McCracken's need for this material faded away, using plywood and lacquers only. As McCracken started thinking of depth more consciously, eventually, the paintings themselves "…popped off the wall and became sculptures although still frontal."[37] This change, from Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism and subsequently from painting to sculpture, was possibly the most turbulent time in the development of McCracken's artistic identity. His experience was not unlike that of his contemporaries, as artists Larry Bell and Robert Irwin made similar aesthetic changes.[38] The change was characterized by his use of new, experimental material, polyester resin. This resin enabled McCracken to achieve the level of depth that lacquer could not.

McCracken had enrolled in the CCAC MFA program during this period and stayed in school until 1965. It was this same year that McCracken met Nicholas Wilder, who ultimately provided McCracken with his first ever solo show at the new Nicholas Wilder Gallery in L.A.[39] The reviews of this show were not particularly strong, but the show itself must have been motivating enough for the artist. John McCracken, thirty years old, left Oakland and his studies behind to support himself in Los Angeles.[40] The artist took jobs teaching at UC Irvine and UCLA, connecting with other artists of the L.A. Look. The city of southern California only satiated John McCracken for three years. McCracken followed his intuition, and moved to New York in 1968, following what he believed to be a deeply rooted connection.

As McCracken's success as a part of the L.A. Look grew, John McCracken had not forgotten exactly why his aesthetic changed. It was the New York minimalists who motivated McCracken so strongly, and the move enabled him to become acquainted with those artists he had aspired towards. McCracken associated himself with a multitude of New York-based minimalists including Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Barnett Newman.[41] John McCracken, for the next decade or so, would suspend himself between the two centers, occupying various teaching positions and showing work on both coasts along with some international outposts like Paris and Toronto.[42]

McCracken experienced a great deal of pressure both on his career, social life and financial stability while living and teaching in New York. In 1972, he sought escape from this intense lifestyle and moved to Nevada. This period of McCracken's life was much more spiritual, a complete diversion from the fast-paced New York lifestyle. He focused on writing and painting, stepping away from the minimalist sculpture scene in which he had thrived. In 1976, McCracken moved back to California—first to Santa Barbara, then to Los Angeles.

As soon as John McCracken had given up on New York, it had let him go just as quickly. McCracken struggled with lack of motivation for years. In 1985, the Flow Ace Gallery in California displayed some of McCracken's planks and early paintings. This exposure was attributed to a sudden, renewed interest in McCracken's work. More retrospectives followed, and this resurgence was different than it ever had been. McCracken was no longer identified as merely a California, L.A. Look artist, or associated with New York Minimalism. McCracken's work was able to stand and speak for itself, just as he had always desired. McCracken considered his polyester sculpture to be animated, not only occupying physical space with its presence but also actively existing as a person or some other being would. Although McCracken would continue to experiment with various industrial materials, his reduced geometric aesthetic remained the same. John McCracken moved to New Mexico in the 1990s to find affordable housing and separate his living

space from the toxic fumes produced by the polyester resin used in his studio. In 2011, John McCracken passed away due to advanced brain cancer.

8. Think Pink

McCracken's Think Pink, 1967 approaches the dynamism of resin through a different lens (Figure 2). The rectangular object is simple in its geometry but imposing in size. The leaning structure is approximately 105 x 18 x 4 inches, giving it a height of nearly nine feet. Think Pink is perhaps most recognizable for its soft, almost bubblegum pigment, created using completely opaque resin unlike that of the transparent poured resin works analyzed in other parts of this essay. The pink resin is reflective enough to manipulate light on its surface, almost like a mirror or enamel finish. This is, of course, the characteristic that defines this piece as a work of Finish Fetish, and consequently, the L.A. Look.

Figure 2. John McCracken, *Think Pink*, 1967, Polyester Resin, Fiberglass and Plywood, 105" x 18" x 3".
http://library.artstor.org/asset/AWSS35953_35953_35432015

Think Pink, along with much of McCracken's work, was created using the second aforementioned method of pouring polyester resin. While the resin was in a liquid state, McCracken would pour a layer of resin onto a stiff substrate—for this particular sculpture, the core material is plywood covered by fiberglass. The fiberglass helps to create an even layer of resin, as the plywood surface could be irregular. Depicted by photographic evidence, McCracken's process appears to have been to pour one side at a time, requiring the artist to sand the corners in such a way that they appeared to blend together.

Unlike Valentine's full-round sculpture, this plank appears to have always been displayed against a wall without a base, made evident in photos of gallery exhibitions and the design of the piece itself. McCracken had strong, multifaceted conceptual motivations for all of these pieces, starting with the fact that they lean as opposed to standing straight up. An object displayed in a gallery which sits entirely on the floor or a pedestal is a sculpture. In contrast, objects which are suspended on a wall are often defined as paintings, or two-dimensional works. McCracken considered himself to be both a painter and a sculptor, who operated in a grey area between the two. The planks are a literal, physical bridge drawn between the realm of sculpture, or the floor, to the home of painting, the wall.[43] The very end of the plank is slightly elevated, not exactly flush against the floor. This gives the viewer the impression of an unsteady foundation. At the same time, the sheer size and opacity of the piece presents immense volume and static energy. This description is not unlike that of any bridge observed in everyday life; bridges may appear tenuous, despite the fact that they are structurally sound.

The varying factor for this sculptor's installation was whether or not the plank was isolated, as McCracken would sometimes show numerous planks side by side along gallery walls. These multicolored planks would not exactly alter the movement of visitors within the space, as they do not influence direction within the center of an open room. In contrast, they do affect the geometry of a gallery and its walls. When aligned along the wall, these planks almost mimic the shape of architectural buttresses, guiding the eye of the viewer from the base touching the floor up to the ceiling of the room. McCracken's earlier planks, like Think Pink, were much wider at nearly two feet and were usually more isolated in a gallery setting. McCracken's later planks are thinner, and often organized in groups for exhibition.

Think Pink is a perfect example for how the growing industrial climate in greater Los Angeles inspired the aesthetic motivations of art students in the area. Some of McCracken's earlier attempts had been to cover plywood, a relatively inexpensive material, with enamel paint used in car manufacture.[44] This is reflective of the enormous automobile culture bubbling in Los Angeles contemporaneously with McCracken's time as a student in the city. However, the enamel would never work, as the paint would settle into the grain of the wood and could not achieve a purely even, shiny finish. At some point McCracken incorporated fiberglass to reduce the presence of wood grain. It was not until he perfected the process of pouring and curing polyester resin that he would be able to achieve the lacquer finish he so desired.

All of the artists analyzed in this research exhibit the use of industrial materials and minimalist aesthetic preferences, but John McCracken may be considered as one of the most well-known and abstract artists of the L.A. Look. His work creating planks like Think Pink bring up conversations that are not unfamiliar to 21st century scholars—the most overarching being, what constitutes an art object? By reducing the sculpture to its most basic aspects, it is simply a rectangular piece of plywood covered in plastic, leaning against a wall. Nothing about this work strikes the viewer to be fine art. The materials themselves, particularly the polyester resin, were enough for critics to generalize L.A. Look artists as crafty and flippant. It did not help McCracken that he used material processes and methods from the automotive industry and the production of surf boards, both of which reduced his image to a Los Angeles native, the implications of which will be further discussed in this essay.

For a better understanding of how contemporaries to McCracken received his work, the photographs of Charles Ray Plank Piece I-II (1973) provide some insight. In these performances, L.A. sculptor Ray has suspended himself on a leaning piece of plywood. The plywood itself is industrial material and plays an important role in McCracken's work, but he never left the material exposed like Ray has done in this work that appears to parody McCracken's concept. There are two major contrasting factors between the art of Ray and McCracken's planks, those being the presence of a body as opposed to that of polyester resin. Ray meant to modify the stiff, perfect object of a plank by adding energy and activity to the presented geometry of McCracken's aesthetic.[45] Essentially, he provided a bit of humor and stupefaction to an otherwise uninteresting shape. This idea, although relevant, does not account for the fact that McCracken considered the planks to hold their own sense of presence and being. Ray's interpretation reduces the plank to a subordinate prop in a performative piece, which contrasts heavily with McCracken's focus on the plank as a major entity.

Like De Wain Valentine and other L.A. Look artists who coincided with the Light-and-Space movement, McCracken viewed his reduced geometric objects as having their own life and energy.[46] This is where the polyester resin comes in—to the artists working with this material, it provided a sense of life and movement to the piece that could be hand-crafted and carefully constructed. The resin is beautiful through its finish, and elevates the basic plywood structure to something that can be aestheticized. The finish is both striking and a familiar connection to luxury objects of cars and other shiny, commodified things. Additionally, the resin makes the plywood an active object within the space, as it reflects light and images tor the eyes of the viewer.

9. An East Coast View of the Second City

Material experimentation and experiential qualities of the L.A. Look caught traction both nationally and internationally. This emergence of the Los Angeles aesthetic was surprising for a variety of reasons, including the weak gallery system in Los Angeles at the time. Some of the most well-established artists in Los Angeles were a part of the Ferus group, a major venue of the city. However, Ferus was less a high collar gallery scene and more like a male-dominated club, cultivating a social atmosphere for some leaders of the L.A. Look.[47] Truly, the collection of few small, isolated galleries was practically nothing in contrast to the tremendous support system of galleries and artist representation in New York. This shaky infrastructure clearly did not hinder artists, though, and was merely a result of the sheer expansion of Los Angeles. As mentioned previously, Los Angeles was a driving city. In a place like New York everyone walked, everything you needed was easily accessible, in proximity. Los Angeles artists did not have that sort of geographic convenience, and as a result, were more separate, and forced to organize key spots like Ferus for social interaction.

Another element of difference was that, despite their success and growing presence in New York, Los Angeles artists generally maintained L.A. as their home-base.[48] Until this period, if an artist wanted to be successful, they wanted to be in New York. It was both a need for the market, to build connections within the art world, but also the desire to be a part of it all. Los Angeles artists, in contrast, would travel to New York when necessary and often returned home to the glittering view of a sunset in order to actually complete their work. This behavior not only indicated a lack of dependence on what had been established as the United States art center, but was also exceptionally representative of the localized nature of this L.A. Look moment.

The most significant development in the absorbance of Los Angeles as part of the art world resulted in a title utilized by many to describe the city, either directly or elusively, as the Second City. At first glance, this title seems to acknowledge the growth evident in Los Angeles at the time. One must consider the fact that, though useful, this title was pejorative to Los Angeles as a growing center because it perhaps set the city in a subordinate position before it had really been given the time to thrive. The position of second was provided by those who considered New York to be first. Whether or not this numerical delineation was given to describe some sort of U.S. art-historical timeline of art centers, it nonetheless informed criticism that would pervade Los Angeles throughout the period. [49]

In reality, both artists of New York and Los Angeles were in communication with one another, and it is no coincidence that they seemed to present the phenomenon of Minimalism concurrently. Artists on both coasts were working with the reduction and repetition of geometric forms, convoluted distinctions between sculpture and painting as well as conceptual investigations of the volume and presence of objects.[50] These artists existed in distant yet mutually influential social circles and readily acknowledged connections between their aesthetic goals. They were still distinct, though, in ways that many critics considered to be definitive. It was frequently attributed to what Barbara Rose would denote as the "Los Angeles sensibility." [51]

This sensibility was an established understanding of what it meant to be an artist from L.A., with an infatuation for craft that was inherently subordinate to East Coast conceptual ideals. Rose herself declared work of the L.A. Look to

be erotic in nature, a sensual obsession with the creation of these works. Los Angeles was permeated with a focus on craftsmanship, on material experimentation. This is what distinguished Los Angeles artists most obviously from their New York associates. Andrew Perchuk compares De Wain Valentine, Judy Chicago and Larry Bell to artists like Dan Flavin and Carl Andre. While Flavin and Andre purchased unconventional materials, the L.A. Look artists went one step further, they became involved in the manufacturing process.[52] Materials like polyester resin were easily purchased, but were much more technically challenging than picking up a fluorescent tube from the hardware store and required a learned skillset of trial and error.

Rose theorized that decisions of Los Angeles artists to pick difficult, tactile processes of art-making were a part of some sort of ritualistic, cultish practice of their social circles.[53] This sort of language was not unique for the period and was only one mode of mystifying an obsession with materials and craft in Los Angeles.

> In California, the trademark look was called "Fetish Finish." In New York, it was called "Finish Fetish," and therein lies the tale. In California, these works were presumed to be icons of the full world that declared their translucent surfaces. In New York, they were signifiers of a world elsewhere—their handsome surfaces betraying the internalized psychological politics of virulent commodity fetishism, a disease with which these artists were presumed to be afflicted.[54]

The above quote, by American art critic Dave Hickey, is indicative of how the Los Angeles sensibility altered art historical understanding of this moment, even in this paper. No sources were found from the period utilizing the term fetish finish, and if they do exist, they are buried beneath articles of East Coast censorship. It is perhaps no coincidence that the majority of material available for this analysis has been direct accounts, interviews with Los Angeles artists. Understanding the true implications of any possible loss of information regarding the culture of Los Angeles during this period is outside of the scope of this paper, but is nonetheless important to consider regarding the work as a whole.

10. Conclusion

Los Angeles' focus on technique and artistic process was perceived as a lack of consideration for the more conceptual affairs of East Coast minimalist work. It was decided that, instead of creating objects with complex, thoughtful intention, Los Angeles artists were more concerned with the perception of their work.[55] In other words: they fixated on how the work was presented and received by viewers. As the conceptual intentions of L.A. Look artists have been described in detail throughout this paper, it needs to be reiterated that the purpose behind these objects was much more theoretical than attention to mere perception. Often, though, the Los Angeles sensibility was stretched even further, stereotyping Los Angeles artists as carefree, living in a constant dreamy state, and referred to as "lotus-eaters."[56] This sort of language was easily connected to other stereotypical associations with surfing and the Hollywood film scene, frequently romanticized aspects of the L.A. lifestyle.

Perhaps the most unfortunate result of Los Angeles' prescribed sensibilities is the affect it had on the way Los Angeles artists understood themselves and their work in a world outside of their city. Photographer John Baldessari states, "I hate being called a Los Angeles artist—just like I hate being called a conceptual artist."[57] While Los Angeles artists were working towards defining an identity, much of it seemed beyond their control. During John McCracken's short time living in New York, his identity as a Los Angeles artist followed him into every gallery and was considered in every critique, complete with its inherent baggage. John McCracken considered himself an artist of both Los Angeles and New York, and he connected much of his aesthetic and conceptual motivations with New York artists. Stereotypes associated with his Los Angeles upbringing greatly affected his motivation, and planted doubts in his use of polyester resin. McCracken absorbed comments on his pieces being too "seductive," and "superficially beautiful," and started creating works in steel to try and escape this commentary.[58]

Polyester resin, as a material, filled a void in Los Angeles. L.A. Look artists wanted something fresh, something exciting, and something that spoke to the artificial world being built up around them. Polyester resin held functional value in its ability to perform the conceptual needs of these artists, ranging from environmental influence, automobile or surfboard finishes, light, and even a sense of life and being. All of this was achieved with polyester resin in such success and abundance because the material itself was readily available, and Los Angeles artists were willing to go the extra mile to make it happen. Polyester resin worked for them, and when the time had come for these artists to move on, they did so. The use of resin was more practical than New York influence would have viewers believe, but perhaps this mode of experimentation was also more significant than Los Angeles artist themselves could understand.

11. References

1 Robert Atkins, *ArtSpeak* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 2013), 79.
2 The term *L.A. Look* is sometimes cited to have been first coined in 1971 by American art critic Peter Plagens in his work *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970*. However, the earliest occurrence of the term in publication seems to be Barbara Rose's *Los Angeles: The Second City*, published in the October 1966 issue of *Art in America.*
3 Rachel Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, California: Getty Conservation Institute, 2016), 12.
4 Atkins, *ArtSpeak*, 131.
5 Dorothy Newmark, "An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic," *Leonardo* (1971), 378.
Robert C. Bassler, "Lenticular Polyester Resin Sculpture: Transparency and Light," *Leonardo* (1972), 194.
6 Atkins, *ArtSpeak,* 150.
7 Ibid, 132.
8 David B. Howard and Helmut K. Anheier, "Foundations in Los Angeles," *American Philanthropic Foundations: Regional Difference and Change* (2018), 244.
9 Andrew Perchuk and Catherine Taft, "Chapter One: Floating Structures," in *Pacific Standard Time* (Los Angeles, California: The Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 5.
10 Ibid, 8.
11 Ibid, 21.
12 Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles,* 5.
13 The Getty Research Institute, "Modern Art in Los Angeles: The Late Forties," *Conversation* (2003).
14 Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles,* 5.
15 Perchuk and Taft, "Chapter One: Floating Structures," 28.
16 Bassler, "Lenticular Polyester Resin Sculpture: Transparency and Light," 195.
17 Ibid, 197.
18 "2-Butanone peroxide," Pub Chem, accessed December 6, 2018. https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/compound/Methyl_ethyl_ketone_peroxide#section=Top; Isurujith K. Liyanage et al. "A Case of methyl ethyl ketone peroxide poisoning and a review of complications and their management." *Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology,* (2015), 1.
19 Bassler, "Lenticular Polyester Resin Sculpture: Transparency and Light," 195.
20 Newmark, "An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic," 379.
21 Bassler, "Lenticular Polyester Resin Sculpture: Transparency and Light," 198.
22 Newmark, "An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic," 379.
23 Tom Learner, Rachel Rivenc, and Emma Richardson, *From Start To Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2011), 8.
24 Ibid, 6.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 8.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, 7.
29 Newmark, "An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic," 378.
30 Learner, Rivenc, and Richardson, *From Start To Finish: De Wain Valentine's Gray Column,* 12.
31 Newmark, "An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic," 377.
32 Ibid, 380.
33 Donna Conwell and Glenn Phillips, "Chapter Four: Duration Piece, Rethinking Sculpture in Los Angeles," in *Pacific Standard Time*, (Los Angeles, California: the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011), 194.
34 Newmark, "An Interview with Dewain Valentine, Sculptor of Plastic," 380.
35 Rachel Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, California: Getty Conservation Institute, 2016) 96. John McCracken served in the United States Navy from 1953-1957.
36 The CCAC is now California College of the Arts in Oakland, CA.
37 Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles,* 96.
38 Ibid, 93.

39 David Zwirner, *John McCracken: Works From 1963-2011,* (New York, NY: David Zwirner and Radius Books, 2014) 12.
40 Ibid, 12; Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles,* 96.
41 Ibid, 97.
42 Zwirner, *John McCracken: Works From 1963-2011,* 15.
43 John McCracken and Patricia Bickers, "UFO Technology," *Art Monthly* (1997), 2.
44 Art World, "John McCracken 1934-2011," *Art in America* (2011), 200.
45 “Charles Ray Plank Piece I-II,” The Broad, accessed January 2019, https://www.thebroad.org/art/charles-ray/plank-piece-i-ii.
46 McCracken and Bickers, "UFO Technology," 3.
47 Michelle Kuo, “L.A. Stories,” *Artforum*, (October 2011), https://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/docview/900104635?accountid=8388
48 Hugh M. Davies, “Foreword,” in *Phenomenal,* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2011), 8.
49 In some sources, post-war Chicago is also referenced as the second city, and I’m not sure where this designation begins or ends.
50 Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles,* 119
51 Rose, “Los Angeles: The Second City,” 110-115
52 Kuo, “L.A. Stories.”
53 Rose, “Los Angeles: The Second City,” 110-115
54 Dave Hickey, “Coping with Paradise,” in *Peter Alexander*, (New York, NY: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 39
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid; Rose, “Los Angeles: The Second City,” 110-115
57 Kuo, “L.A. Stories.”
58 Rivenc, *Made in Los Angeles,* 115