

# Art Issues Magazine

## Tony DeLap at ORANGE COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

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Even if you've never done it yourself, everyone knows what it means to peep through a keyhole. If the circumstances are right (and when it comes to spying, circumstances are everything), what makes the keyhole enticing is not just the feeling of seeing someone who doesn't see you, but the risk of being caught in the act. Lots of art addresses such ideas about vantage points in one way or another, but what sets Tony DeLap's apart is the way it makes viewing positions intimate, in the manner of a keyhole.

The very last work in his retrospective, from 1965, says it all. The pedestalmounted piece invites you to bend over and peer through an aperture at the center of a metal block incised with concentric rings. There, you find two dots mounted on the panes of glass that enclose the form. By adjusting your body's position, you're eventually able to bring the dots and the aperture into perfect alignment, at which point you're rewarded with a view of . . . nothing. The exercise is a trap; it ends up blocking your sightline. In many ways, all of the work DeLap has made over the past thirty-five years spins variations on this central trope. A fair share of digressions and false starts occur along the way, but still culminate in the masterful economy of the most recent pieces.



DeLap's example is particularly relevant in light of recent sculptural developments being advanced by some young West Coast artists (Torbjorn Vejvi, Vincent Fecteau, and Jason Meadows come to mind), who also tease out the optical qualities of three-dimensional objects. Whereas these artists work out of a Pop sensibility, relating their work to the virtual conditions of video and computer simulation, DeLap is a formalist at heart. He is often numbered among first-generation Minimalists, but the comparison is

limited because so much of his work hinges on a problematized kind of visuality. Unlike the sculptures of Carl Andre or Donald Judd, which create an almost hostile sense of uniformity and standardization, DeLap's objects constantly compromise their own logic. The precision geometry and machined surfaces of a modular piece like *Triple Trouble II* (1966), which resembles a set of huge, unfolded paper clips, do not keep viewers at bay but lure us in with a gamelike sense of recombining.

Like most games, though, this one works best when it doesn't draw attention to the rules. The artist's too well-documented interest in magic and sleight-of-hand sometimes crosses that line. What makes a magician's act fun is the riddle of how he got the lady to look as if she's been sawed in half, or, in DeLap's case, how he got her to appear to levitate. *Floating Lady IV* (1974) is a long plywood beam that would seem to be defying gravity except for the two clearly visible Plexiglas brackets supporting it at both ends. It is representative of a group of works that focus on a particular sculptural "trick"--how to liberate an object's sense of mass. In *Selbit* (1971), a pane of glass mortised into a wooden column makes the upper half look weightless. In *The Great Escape* (1972), pulleys and cords achieve the same effect. Because these freestanding pieces feel as if they're disclosing professional secrets, they cast the viewer as inquisitor. If they don't quite satisfy, it's because DeLap himself has shown a better way to deal with that kind of spectator: Make him or her work harder.

From about 1972 to the present, DeLap's wall-mounted work also has concerned itself with illusion but demands a more visceral investment from the viewer. Instead of presenting maps that expose magical destinations, *Blue Bluff* and *Chuck-A-Luck* (both works, 2000) make you feel as if you're actually on the highway, driving just a little too fast into a blind curve. With only the slightest deviation from a dead-center viewing angle, these chalky blue canvases begin to shape-shift, sometimes hugging the wall unexpectedly, sometimes pulling away from it, forming sensuous pockets of space in the recesses that result. While DeLap's most recent works are also about the interaction of concealment and revealment, they play off of one's perceptions and expectations regarding geometric form and mass. From this position, every secret and surprise feels as if it's delivered in a whisper--and can be divulged without really giving anything away.

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Tony DeLap *Floating Lady*, 1974-78 Steel, wood, and concrete 74" × 552" × 141"