

APPRECIATION: Tony DeLap

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Nov 2013



Installation view "Tony DeLap: Selections from 50 Years"

June 30 -- October 6, 2013

Photo: courtesy Oceanside Museum of Art

Tony DeLap's art at once conjures and resists category. His devotion for over half a century to geometric form has connected him to postwar artists and movements, especially American, in which shape is clearly stated, gesture is minimized, and the artwork insists, even centers, on its identity as a discrete object. But DeLap's fit with Hard Edge painting, Op Art, East Coast Minimalism, and even California Finish/Fetish and Light-and-Space art is not precise. Similar in look and spirit to all of these--and related to them historically by the artist's own admission and biography--DeLap's work seeks to do something else with these idioms, something that gently confronts their ideologies even as it overlaps with their practices. DeLap has himself learned from, taught, befriended, and inspired many of the artists who tuck more logically and comfortably under the above rubrics; but his relation to their aesthetic world has been less forthright, and certainly less polemical. Much as do his California peers, whose work can be at least loosely gathered under the label of "Perceptualism," DeLap addresses the basic circumstances of human sight--the way the human eye functions, the way the human mind comprehends, the way human society derives meaning from imagery and vice versa. But something is, knowingly, off in DeLap's practice. He counts on us seeing clearly, but he wants for us not to see "correctly" but to be misled. DeLap wants to play tricks on our eyes--and his emphasis is at least as much on the tricks as on the eyes.

In a new monograph surveying DeLap's work to appear shortly under the Radius Press imprimatur, Barbara Rose observes that "DeLap's conception of illusionism... is diametrically opposed to that of Frank Stella. As opposed to

Stella's legendary "What you see is what you see," DeLap is convinced that illusion is inevitably part of perception. From the outset, DeLap created works that can be seen in at least two different ways, depending on the point of view of the spectator. With this in mind, he constructs his spatial relationships in a way reminiscent of sleight of hand magic, i.e. now you see it, now you don't." For the entirety of his mature career, as Rose expands, DeLap has grounded his work in his interest in magic, in the crafts of illusion, sleight-of-hand, and other *trompe-l'oeil* presentation. He is an accomplished magician himself, steeped in the modern (and not-so-modern) history of magic practice. In his paintings, forms betray expectations. In his sculptures--including several notable public art projects--he seems to warp space itself. The bulk of DeLap's *oeuvre*, in fact, comprises painting-sculpture hybrids, objects that may hang on the wall or stand on the floor, combine disparate materials or exploit unanticipated structural fillips, and skew borders and materials so that the art object never quite behaves, at least as we expect it to. That is, it never seems to be now what it seemed to be in the first place. To be sure, many artists (some connected to DeLap, others entirely ignorant of his accomplishment and its breadth) delight no less in illusion and optical instability. But none has devoted an entire career to such a focus, manifested in so thoroughly consistent and disciplined an approach. Despite his evolution through many widely varied bodies of work, DeLap has used magic as an aesthetic, psychological, and physiological (if practical rather than philosophical) touchstone for pretty much everything he has produced, from the collages and beveled boxes he made and showed while living in San Francisco in the early 1960s to the elegant, intricate neo-constructivist paintings that have come out of his Orange County studio in just the last five or so years. Recent exhibitions of both the latter-day paintings and the early sculptures (one show pairing examples of both with various intervening pieces) have paid homage to the consistency and clarity of DeLap's vision--and the challenge he poses to our own.

DeLap has long enjoyed the recognition of museum as well as gallery exhibitions, and such recognition is beginning to surge once again. His recent inclusion in many thematic group shows has demonstrated not only his standing among his peers but his critical role as an educator, especially the four decades he spent at the University of California Irvine. (In the first decade alone of his tenure at UCI, Bruce Nauman, James Turrell, John McCracken, Chris Burden, Barbara T. Smith, Alexis Smith, and Laddie John Dill were among his students.) This fall, two solo exhibitions could be seen, in northern San Diego County, where the Oceanside Museum of Art mounted a compact but sensitively selected survey of DeLap's entire career, and in Santa Fe, where DeLap showed paintings mostly from the past decade at the Charlotte Jackson Gallery.

Helpfully, the retrospective included several more such recent paintings, hanging them in close proximity to a variety of two- and three-dimensional work, most notably *Houdin's House*, a legendary 1967 metal-and-glass quasi-installation that incorporates a projected filmic image of a levitating woman (a stage-magic trope and one of DeLap's own icons--perhaps the only figure ever to appear in his artwork). The black-and-white projection, crude as it is by today's technological standards, served to underscore the visual and even architectural complexity of the *Houdin's House* arrangement. Echoing the subtle, elaborate indirection of the earlier work, the recent paintings confront the viewer with renditions of shifted, skewed planes of color that meet one another at angles so oblique as to seem to slip into each other, bending the very space they seem to occupy and slicing off corners of one another. These forms seemed as weightless and unmoored as that levitating woman, and ultimately as unlikely.

In Santa Fe, DeLap hung much smaller monochrome panels above the corners of several canvases. These rounded, deep-hued apparitions tended to stick out along one portion of the continuous edge, while another portion hugs the wall. This device is an old DeLap trick wherein the erratic relationship of shape to wall is masked by an intense single hue, only finally to tip its hand--rather as a seasoned magician might do to give the audience a taste of the art and artifice behind the magic. With one or more corners torqued, these little guys almost read as thought balloons to the larger paintings--and, in their rich, solid hues and odd, almost-invisible distortions, they could well have been exactly that.

Tony DeLap turns art into prestidigitation--or turns prestidigitation into art. "DeLap's images metaphorically escape their literal bounds," Barbara Rose has written, "they jump around the corners making you wonder where they start and where they end, in the manner of a Möbius strip." DeLap's work is not about magic, it isn't a demonstration of magic or an argument for magic; it is magic.