

BROOKLYN RAIL

Tony DeLap: Painting Sculpture & Works on Paper 1965 – 2013

By [Jessica Holmes](#)

In our globalized art world, it is strange that an artist whose work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Tate Gallery, and who has had more than 75 solo exhibitions since the mid-1950s, could also somehow be considered, if not unknown, then at least not very well known. But such is the peculiar case of Tony DeLap, the subject of a rich new monograph, *Tony DeLap: Paintings, Sculpture, & Works on Paper 1962 – 2013*. DeLap, who has spent a lifetime in California where he was born in 1927, has produced a multifaceted body of work that is not easy to categorize. Art historian and critic Barbara Rose notes in her intimate essay “Now You See It, Now You Don’t,” that these two significant details have worked against him, “because the art market does not appreciate unpredictability, geographic detachment, or work that is not immediately digestible by a public with an increasingly shorter attention span.” DeLap’s frequently allusive, largely uncategorizable work demands sustained contemplation in order to penetrate, and might therefore be easy to overlook by the time pressed gallery-goer. The book, then, serves as a well-overdue retrospective, considering every point of DeLap’s career, including a large section dedicated to his unheralded, surprisingly expressive drawings.

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DeLap inaugurated his artistic practice in the early 1960s, after working in commercial design. His first significant works—relief objects encased in frames and paned in with glass on both sides, presented freestanding on a pedestal—have both the three-dimensional dynamism of sculpture and the two-dimensional appeal of painting. The early work epitomizes the opening of Donald Judd's iconic 1965 essay "Specific Objects": "Half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture." (The essay, which refers to DeLap as an

exemplar of this form, was written at the nascence of DeLap’s career.) DeLap soon added text to these structures, one letter in each of the eight corners of the frame, compelling the viewer to walk around the entire work in order to read its message. His objects grew in sophistication as he began incorporating industrial materials like fiberglass, Plexiglas, and aluminum.

DeLap’s work later broke entirely free of the frame, as with his large Minimalist sculpture “Modern Times III” (1966). The curvaceous wood-and-fiberglass band rests on the floor at a dizzying gradient that jolts the viewer—though it is sturdy, it looks as if it could topple at any moment. Much is made in the book of DeLap’s longstanding interest in magic, and indeed, there is an illusory quality to his three-dimensional work that does not always translate well to page, though the book’s many sumptuous photographs make an admirable attempt. This is especially true of the “painting-constructions,” as Rose refers to them. Because one side of these structures is flush with the wall, perceiving the true measure of their three-dimensionality is challenging. One longs to stand before a work like the appropriately named “The Conjurer” (1991) and experience in person the mystery of the graceful twist of its wood plank and the chimerical section of white canvas that seems, on the page, almost to blend into the wall behind it.

A true revelation in *Tony DeLap* is the substantial section dedicated to the artist’s drawings, which up until now have been very rarely seen. As DeLap has said, “I love to make drawings because of the spontaneity. For so much of the things I’ve done through the years where the idea may be fine, they have started with a drawing.” Most included here are preliminary drawings and collages for three-dimensional objects, and they are assured and deft. “Untitled” (1989), for example, depicts two shapes: a circle, outlined in pencil and shaded in white, with a wedge cut out; and a triangle, shaded in a sienna hue, that pierces the circle, with the intimation of shadow peeking from behind it. (The drawing is probably an early expression of his wall sculpture “Count Orloff,” made later that same year.) The drawing displays a sensitivity, even a tenderness that is not as conspicuous in his three-dimensional work.

Even though it offers only a small percentage of his total output of works on paper this book presents the first serious and sustained study of DeLap’s drawings. They are an unrealized exhibition waiting to happen; indeed, the whole of DeLap’s oeuvre seems ripe for re-examination. Back in the 1960s, he was the sole artist to be featured in the most important American surveys of that decade, *The 1965 Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art, which introduced Op Art to the general public, and *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum in 1966, which focused on Minimalism, marking him as an artist at the forefront of that contemporary vanguard. But while other alums of these two landmark exhibitions—Judd, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, and Frank Stella, to name just a few—went on to reach stratospheric name recognition, DeLap has not received the same critical consideration. It has been more than 30 years since his work was last presented in New York. This may be, in part, because his work challenges. It offers no easy answers but rather demands patience in order to plumb its sensual depths, which are not obvious but rather lie beneath the surface. Nonetheless, they exist and a persevering and receptive viewer will be rewarded by their quiet revelation. Also, much is made in the book, and particularly in Rose’s essay, about DeLap’s decision to remain in California, and how this very personal choice has limited his exposure to the sanctioned “art world,” and to a wider audience. But California is not a remote island, and at this

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moment, it also seems that if the art world truly aspires to a global position, these artificial barriers, and especially those separating regions of the same country, should be dismantled. Perhaps this monograph will serve as a corrective.