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O.C. ART / CATHY CURTIS A Friendly Deception Woodworking Meets Magic in Tony DeLap's Exhibition at CSUF: Orange County Edition

CATHY CURTIS

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"You see how the deception is made. That's very important to me, to see how the trick was done," Tony DeLap said of "The Great Escape," part of an exhibition of his work from the '60s and '70s at the Cal State Fullerton Main Art Gallery (through March 13).

Settled into a battered couch in the airy studio he and a hired hand conjured out of a Corona del Mar garage 17 years ago, the 66-year-old artist said the piece was "my excuse to work with materials, instead of being purely conceptual. Something where I could show off . . . the craft. Something I can do well."

He held up his index fingers to show how the steel rod and the long wooden post "float" vertically, a few inches above the floor, at opposite sides of the gallery. A ceiling-mounted cable-and-pulley system-clearly visible-connects them.

When the pieces in the show, titled "The House of the Magician: An Installation of econstructed Works from 1967-1979," originally were made-four of them are being reconstructed to fit the gallery space-their spare look and unadorned raw materials seemed to reflect the matter-of-fact physicality of minimalist art. Two decades later, their metaphorical and vernacular qualities emerge more clearly.

In these sculptures, the craft of woodworking-and the practicalities of calibrating an object to fit in a specific architectural space-meet the craft of magic. The deceptions that fool the magician's audience meet the formal conventions that rule the world of contemporary art. The artist-magician calmly exposes all his tricks, daring you to find meaning and pleasure simply in being in on the secret.

A longstanding member of the Magic Castle, the professional magician's club in Hollywood, DeLap is fascinated by the world of professional deceivers.

"I love the stories of card hustlers and card cheats and the way they would design and invent sleights-of-hand," he said. "There is no way in the world I would want to lead that kind of life, but I find it fascinating. I love the terminology, the slang, the technical information on how cards are palmed."

For DeLap's version of the "Floating Lady" trick (on view at CSUF), a woman lies supine on a board balanced on a chair. Nearby, a metaphorical version of the piece consists of two gallery-spanning wooden "beams" (actually just plywood veneers) that almost meet in the middle, where a block of Plexiglas serves as the "secret" fulcrum.

DeLap's allusions to famous magicians' tricks are only means to an end, however, like his meticulous tongue-and-groove joints attaching one piece of wood to another.

"How can I have the pleasure and justify using tools and paint and refining a kind of craft-how can I justify all that and still make it something that's of some importance as art?" he asked rhetorically. "For me, that's the catch."

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As a youth in the Bay Area during the '40s, DeLap painted watercolor landscapes. At Claremont Graduate School, where he studied with Millard Sheets, Phil Dike and others, he began to be aware of the larger world of modern art.

California artists were isolated from major currents in contemporary art in those days. In San Francisco, DeLap depended on black-and-white art magazine reproductions of works by such Abstract Expressionists as Conrad Marca-Relli and Robert Goodnough to fire up his own abstract collages. Meanwhile, some Bay Area painters were abandoning abstraction for a lyrical new figurative style.

"Everyone was painting people sitting in chairs in the corner, which all came out of (Richard) Diebenkorn," DeLap said dryly. "I missed all of that, probably as much as anything out of naivete. My interests were obviously other places."

To support himself, he did graphic design, exhibition design-"anything I could find that was somewhat architectural," he said.

Typically, one major piece of guidance came from a memory of an architectural detail: the concrete bricks with cross-shaped cutouts shielded by glass in Frank Lloyd Wright's Millard House in Pasadena.

DeLap's breakthrough work was a series of pristine two-sided glass boxes with edges that step down toward the center. Displayed at the Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco, they resulted in what he calls "a fairy-tale come true"-an illustration of his work on the cover of the February, 1964, issue of Artforum, with a glowing review by his friend and teaching colleague John Coplans, then editor-at-large of the magazine.

When Artforum moved its operations to Southern California later in 1964, Coplans became the first member of the art department at UC Irvine.

DeLap accepted Coplans' invitation to move south and join the UCI faculty, which soon became a heady center of bicoastal networking, with major East and West Coast artists constantly being invited to teach or lecture.

"It was later, really, that I felt isolated," DeLap said, referring to the period after Coplans moved to New York, where Artforum relocated in 1967.

When top artists no longer routinely spent time in Orange County, the psychic and geographic distance from Los Angeles could seem almost unbridgeable. The consolation prize was a friendship with painter John McLaughlin—who lived in semi-isolation in Dana Point—and the freedom to pursue a personal agenda.

"The isolation can be good and not good," DeLap said. "One thing that is not good: The artist has a tendency to demand more and more (of himself) all the time, to feed their own daily activity. Whereas if you're in a real hot spot of art you are . . . meeting critics and collectors and museum people. I've always felt that (you get) kind of an edge from (such) daily activity.

"John Coplans once said to me—a backhanded compliment in some way—'Tony's never going to be a famous artist because he moves too fast.' I kind of know what he meant. Instead of spending time developing (ideas) with people . . . I moved on to the next thing."

For DeLap, the "next thing" was a hybrid of painting and sculpture that he began making in the late '70s (not in the CSUF show). These geometric pieces have edges that curve away abruptly, as if vanishing into the wall—often described as the Möbius strip effect you get when you twist a deck of cards.

An accompanying selection of prints and drawings from the past quarter-century (in the East Gallery) show off other facets of DeLap's fascination with magic. "Hand and Stick" and "13 Magic Tricks" scrutinize the mystique of vaudeville legerdemain and the mixture of wonder and didacticism inherent in vintage magic trick illustrations.

Other works—like the black-and-white postcard photographs of European monuments to which DeLap added small colored shapes mimicking his own works—play with notions of the self-aggrandizing magician-artist.

"One of the things I like about magic," DeLap said, "is that it can be so trivial and in a sense awful that . . . it can rise to an unbelievable height and become art. . . . It's the ability to do that that I like. The fact that much of it is subcultural activity. I think that's fine because that's (the origin of) all art."

* "The House of the Magician: An Installation of Reconstructed Works from 1967-1979" remains through March 13 at the Main and East Art Galleries, Cal State Fullerton, 800 N. State

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