

Los Angeles Times

The Trick to Minimalism; Art With just four basic parts, magician Tony DeLap's installation is part sculpture, part illusion: Orange County Edition

ZAN DUBIN

1999

In Orson Welles' 1948 murder mystery "The Lady From Shanghai," the setting for the famous climactic shootout is a hall of mirrors. When the bad guy spies his target--Rita Hayworth--and fires, he shatters her reflection only.

Image and reality likewise coexist, albeit in a gentler way, in Tony DeLap's "Houdin's House," an installation that embodies the artist's lifelong fascination with illusion and magic. It's a hobby that also captivated Welles.

"Somebody said that if Welles hadn't spent so much time doing tricks," DeLap said recently, "he would have made more movies."

DeLap has been making minimalist art in Orange County since 1965. He named his installation after Robert Houdin, the 19th century French magician upon whose name Harry Houdini based his own. It's on view at the Orange County Museum of Art, which owns the piece and plans a DeLap retrospective for late next year.

The work comprises two 6-by-6-foot right angles of silvery aluminum and two glass panes of the same size set diagonally to the metal panels. The photograph of a woman, floating horizontally as if levitated, is projected onto one of the aluminum panels and reflected onto one of the glass sheets.

When viewers enter the museum's installation room, they first see the woman's reflection, and only then her "real," or projected image (although from certain angles, up to four floating women can be seen at once). But, like "Shanghai's" villain, they'll initially think they're seeing the real thing, DeLap hopes.

"When they first look in here, I want them to not really know what's going on, physically," he said during an interview at OCMA. Even when they do figure it out, he hopes the sense of illusion lasts. In other words, like all good tricks, "it still looks magical."

DeLap, 71, created his first version of "Houdin's House" in 1966, the year after becoming the first member of UC Irvine's art department.

Back then, with Minimalism's advent, artists were enthralled with the idea of interchangeable parts and serial imagery. Instrumental in defining the genre, DeLap has reconfigured the work's four basic components over time.

"I thought of each one of these pieces very much like a brick," he said, ambling past the architectural work's sharp edges. "A brick is a certain shape or form, but you can configure it into almost any shape or size or whatever you want."

Artists of the '60s also wanted to bring sculpture off the pedestal and into the real world, DeLap said. By walking between its glass and metal walls, viewers become an integral part of "Houdin's House," which links it firmly with the historical precedent set by Marcel Duchamp, who famously asserted that art, a patent illusion, requires the willing suspension of disbelief.

Entranced by magic since childhood, DeLap still practices card tricks and legerdemain, and he is a longtime member of the Magic Castle, the professional magicians club in Hollywood.

Psychology, mathematics, optical illusion, theatrics--magic touches upon it all, said the Corona del Mar resident, "and at its very best, it's art. The best sleight-of-hand performers are certainly very fine artists, the way that ballet dancers are."

He wove his interest in magic into the installation through reflectivity, which is used in tricks with angled glass that seem to make people or things vanish and reappear. Also, for the work's latest incarnation, which DeLap built from scratch because he'd dismantled the previous version for lack of storage space, he incorporated the floating woman, which he's also used before.

In 1977, to inaugurate the former Newport Harbor Art Museum (which became OCMA), he had a real woman, suspended from a towering crane, slowly circle the museum's exterior. Five years ago, students assisting with an exhibit at Cal State Fullerton appeared to be hovering midair in "Floating Lady."

Combining a "literal form"--the photograph of a floating woman--with an abstraction, "Houdin's House," has brought the latter up to date, DeLap said.

"Art today is more pluralistic than it used to be. There's a lot of mixing up, and I think there's nothing wrong with having these diverse elements get together."

The new incarnation takes itself less seriously, added DeLap, who also exhibited "Houdin's House" in "American Sculpture of the '60s," a major show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

"Minimalism in its beginnings was somewhat of an intellectual process that utilized systems and so forth, not so often with {any} humor," he said. "This, in some ways, is not particularly humorous, but it's more inviting for everyone."

parrasch heijnen

* Tony DeLap's "Houdin's House" is on view through June 20 at the Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. \$4-\$5. (949) 759-1122.