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ORANGE COUNTY CALENDAR: ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, LEISURE; Delightful, Delovely; DeLap Blends Magic, Art in Retrospective That Opens Saturday: Orange County Edition

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Getting to know artist Tony DeLap generally involves sleight of hand rather than a handshake.

"Pick a card," says the soft-spoken DeLap, his blue eyes smiling mischievously behind a scruff of gray locks and silver spectacles. DeLap, 73, keeps a deck handy in his pocket and others readily available around his beachfront studio and home in Corona del Mar.

Sitting behind a red, velvet-topped magic stand, DeLap twirls his handmade willow wand over the cards and pulls off a fast trick. "Isn't that amazing?" he asks. The question could apply to his art as well.

A master craftsman, DeLap has managed to fuse his passions for art and magic to produce simple shapes that curve, bend, twist and balance in tenuous and unpredictable ways. At times, the art even appears to float.

The illusions built into DeLap's work are the crux of his first career retrospective, opening Saturday at the Orange County Museum of Art. The show runs through Jan. 14, and will then tour nationally.

DeLap's wizardry will be striking to viewers strolling through the new exhibition, says guest curator Bruce Guenther.

"When you stand in front of one of Tony's works, its intelligence asserts itself immediately," said Guenther, former chief curator at the museum that holds two dozen DeLap works in its permanent collection.

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"As you look at it from left to right or top to bottom, it reveals a surprise, something that wasn't immediately noticed. It continues to evolve each time you see it. The surprises sneak up on you."

The exhibition highlights 45 "sculptural paintings," five free-standing sculptures and sketchbook drawings that chronicle four decades of DeLap's career since the 1960s when abstract expressionism was being usurped by minimalism. DeLap was among the first generation of American artists in this new movement.

"It's a special opportunity to recognize an internationally known artist living in Orange County," Guenther said.

"Tony is one of the seminal artists to work with minimalism and geometric abstraction in the 1960s. This is the first retrospective of his work that deals with the breadth and depth of his career," Guenther said.

That career began in the San Francisco Bay Area. Born in Oakland, DeLap began tinkering with magic and art as a child. At age 9 he was hooked on the Tarbell Course in Magic books and their illustrations.

"It was great unlocking these mysteries of magic," DeLap said. Like the magic book drawings, DeLap's sketchbook, a part of the exhibition, reveals the inner workings of his craft.

"His work is so refined that it's exciting to see the process the artist goes through," Guenther said.

DeLap spent a lifetime learning the tricks and developing his brand of minimalism. Crafting magic sets and model planes, DeLap studied the importance of painstaking detail. In high school he would do magic shows and use props that he constructed at home.

DeLap then brought his blend of art and magic to the Southland in 1965 when he moved to Orange County to help create UC Irvine's new art department. He retired from the university in 1991 and returned to his studio full time.

Decades later, he still chisels, shaves, hammers, glues and paints materials such as aluminum, wood, resin and fiberglass found in his hybrids of sculpture and painting.

Their titles come from the history of stage magic. "The Great Escape" is a wood and steel rod sculpture. "The Floating Lady IV" appears as a gravity-defying sculpture of plexiglass and wood. "Houdini" is a work made of steel and fiberglass with a photo of the master magician attached.

Another aspect of his style reflects elements of graphic design, sculpture, painting and architecture. His handiwork is part of the suburban landscape throughout Southern California from the blue-painted steel slab at the Market Place in Irvine to the red monolithic sculpture at the Pacific Mutual Insurance Co. in Newport Beach. The wave-shaped steel rod suspended across Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica is his too.

DeLap and his work continue to pop up in unexpected places. He has teamed with New York-based choreographer Peter Pucci in a dance concert that is part of the Eclectic Orange festival. The new ballet, "Now You See It," will receive its premiere today by Ballet Pacifica of Irvine at the Irvine Barclay Theatre and play the opening day of the art exhibition.

The collaboration is one of the ways DeLap plans to keep his ideas fresh, pulling new tricks from his old magic hat, figuratively and literally. In working with Pucci, he offered advice on how to make bodies appear or disappear, shrink or enlarge and float or sink on stage.

"I didn't have a clue as to how to work with a choreographer, because I've had no experience in that area," DeLap said.

DeLap will also appear in a video featuring California artists that is expected to air on public TV. The half-hour segment on DeLap will be on view at the museum.

Regardless in which new art forms he may experiment, DeLap continues his search for ways to dazzle the art world. In his book of tricks, illusion and creativity are one.

"All the art we enjoy is magical," he said.

EXHIBITION TIMES

Paintings and sculptures by Tony DeLap, the Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach. Tuesday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Opens Saturday. Through Jan. 14. (949) 759-1122.