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## Minimalist Magician

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Triple Trouble Two, 1966, acrylic, plastic, lacquer, 13 x 23 x 13 inches

Tony DeLap's work has always been more complex than what it appears to be at first glance. Some examples can best be called painting/sculptural hybrids or "specific objects," to use a term coined by Donald Judd. Others are obviously paintings, although many also display subtle ambiguities that artfully dodge cooperation with obvious esthetic conventions. But regardless of whether we identify DeLap's works as paintings or painting/sculpture hybrids, we still must recognize that they hark back to the time before prestidigitation gave way to prestadigitalization, making them seem uncanny to contemporary eyes.

DeLap (1927-2019) started in northern California and migrated to southern California in the early 1960s. Throughout a six-decade career, his work has always teased the eye, foregrounding a subtle now-you-see-it-now-you-don't organization of formal and material elements. This approach reflected his long-standing interest in the optical mechanics underlying magicians' tricks, reminding that he was a longtime habitue of the exclusive Hollywood Magic Castle, a legendary haunt of magic enthusiasts worldwide.

The eponymous exhibition includes ten well-chosen works from 1963 to 2011. Though less comprehensive than DeLap's 2018 retrospective at the Laguna Art Museum, it still conveys the gist and evolutionary high points of his practice. The earliest example, *Day*, a freestanding work from 1963, reveals his early interest in Op Art of the sort that led to his inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 exhibition *The Responsive Eye*. It is a small obelisk containing a visible interior of multiple layers of concentric frames-within-frames, coming off as an imploding sequence of thresholds. The other freestanding work from 1966, titled *Triple Trouble II*, is made from two sandwiched sheets of heat-formed acrylic plastic painted in yellow and blue lacquer. Torqued such that it twists and tucks in and out of itself, the object creates a subtle spatial illusion while also embracing the minimalist emphasis on self-contained objecthood.

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Subterfuge in Blue, 1991, wood, aluminum, acrylic 35 x 33 x 7 1/4 inches

The show also includes four choice works from the late 1970s and early 1980s, generally regarded as the high point of DeLap's career. One is *Invisible Irma* (1976), the only oil painting in the exhibition. At first glance, it comes off as a somber grey-purple monochrome harking to a time when "tough painting" was an actual thing in the post-finish fetish Southern California art world. Only the most inquisitive eye will notice how the support structure of this work torques and bevels back underneath its surface, suggesting that its resolution is the momentary consequence of obscured sleights of hand. Soon after, DeLap switched to acrylic, evidenced in *Merlin's Edgework* from 1978, a three-quarter

circle-shaped canvas anchored by a smaller square panel at the nexus point. Both panels vibrate with a closely calibrated spectrum of grey greens running the gamut from olive to viridian, calling attention to the fact that the arc circumscribing the semi-circular panel is contained in a precisely beveled wooden frame.

Two works from the early 1990s show how DeLap extended the ideas behind his 1970s works in the following decades. *Subterfuge in Blue* (1991) features acrylic paint applied to a two-panel structure made of wood and aluminum. One side is a cobalt-cerulean circle upon which another wooden one is superimposed, jutting downward like a large fang. The latter shape also appears in *Bluey-Bluey* (1992), set vertically against a torqued triangle saturated in the same tight spectrum of blues. Both works bespeak a lingering influence of Lorser Fietelson's *Abstract Classicism* paintings from the 1960s, tinged with a slight hint of space age Surrealism. They also echo the work of Brazilian modernists such as Lygia Clark and Lygia Pape, although it is unlikely that DeLap would have had enough familiarity with their work to be directly influenced by it in the early 1990s.



The Courty Card, 2010, acrylic on linen, 24 x 24 inches

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A trio of straightforward acrylic paintings on linen from 2010 and 2011 reveal similar connections. All measure 24 by 24 inches and feature an area where the linen shows through as an area of light brown ocher. The other dominant color is a dark teal blue/green of the type that we might associate with the felt surface of a gaming table, accented by smaller areas of white and black. *The Courtly Card* (2010) features a strong white diagonal shape that seems like a faceless playing card standing on its side, viewed from an aerial perspective. Here, the point is to show how graphic shapes can appear to “flip,” forming illusionistic entities, a characteristic made more explicit in *Double Cross* and *Zanex* (both 2011). These works feature cruciform compositions, again looking like playing cards viewed from on high, precariously leaning against each other. Simultaneously, they oscillate optically back to flat rectangular shapes that activate the adjacent spaces, pointing, yet again, to the magician's ethos that lay at the core of this artist's most compelling output.