

Hiding and Revealing: The Paintings of Tony DeLap

By Piers Veness. Published in Saturation Point on the occasion of the exhibition 'Tony DeLap', Edel Assanti, London, 2018

The old saying is "you can't have magic unless you hide something"
- Tony DeLap

OCTOBER 2018 Tony DeLap is a seasoned campaigner. At 91 he is still painting, producing all the work himself out of his studio in Newport Beach, California. The tutor of Bruce Nauman and James Turrell, DeLap is an important axis of US West-Coast abstraction and the epitome of the single-minded artist who beats their own path. *Tony DeLap* is a solo exhibition of his more recent work, at Edel Assanti in London, where the work is given plenty of space to breathe.

If there's one word which captures the essence of these paintings, it ought to be 'Illusion'. As an expert magician who performed magic tricks onstage for many years, DeLap now wows us with his stylish paintings and sleight-of-hand wizardry. Mixing architecture and Modernism, the paintings have been impeccably laid out in the gallery space in the fashion of playing cards dealt out in strict formation on a poker table. They possess the same sense of expectation, simultaneously hiding and revealing, their folded corners and hard-colour blocks obscuring and bedevilling close inspection.

Seeing these paintings by a major US artist in the heart of London is a magical experience. But behind the majestic sweep of these sophisticated card tricks, one can just make out the magician's sleight of hand; his personality isn't completely hidden.

One of his illusory tricks teases the relationship between the painting plane and the wall upon which it sits, creating a spatial push and pull. The flat slabs of acrylic automatically draw attention to the painting's 'objectness' – in the same way as the work of DeLap's contemporary Donald Judd – since they are utterly devoid of brushstroke or record of their creator's hand (and he paints them all himself); they are almost factory-made in their precision. But this is only part of the game: the play between the wall and the painting is heightened by a focus on the border of the picture. At times the edge is consciously painted to draw attention to itself; at others the edge is bevelled inwards to deceive and create a 'visual paradox'¹: the three-dimensionality of an essentially flat surface. At other times, there is no edge at all. Take *Whammo* (2018) for example. Its crisp, clean lines and utterly uniform blocks of colour seem to float off the wall. The painting is completed by the square formed by the white wall behind the piece, yet the shadow that is cast proves that this cannot be so. DeLap often talks of the "hide and seek in the paintings"² and there's a need to spend a moment on these pieces to explore the way they question their interaction with the space they occupy.

An interesting aspect of these works is the shape of the canvas. Some of the paintings have been cut into, upsetting their uniform rectangular format. At first this looks no more than a flashy visual touch, (like Frank Stella's shaped canvases from the 1960s) but nothing that DeLap does is superficial. Initially, the paintings appear as flat shapes, but the longer you look, the more the planes begin to separate and sit above and below each other. This is what happens in *Another Way* (2015). At first glance there is a simple black triangle on a white ground, but then layers open up: is it actually a white shape on a black ground? Do the cut-away edges denote another smaller square that hovers above the other elements? Or is the black triangle really a sharp perspective leading us into the centre of the picture? This simple configuration of notched rectangle and flat pools of colour has been pushed to create an illusion of space and depth.

The final trick is in the bands of colour. I am reminded of Mariotte's blind-spot test in which the subject stares at a paper containing two black crosses. By moving it until it enters your peripheral vision, one of the crosses disappears. These paintings have something of that to them; you can't see the whole without a part of them disappearing.

Vortex (2016) forces the eye to flick between the three main elements: the blue rectangle, its white twin, and the cut-away which disrupts our sense of visual balance and keeps us switching back and forth in an attempt to understand what it is we are looking at. At other times these bands of colour suggest depth: there is a thick line in *The Examination* (2011) which seems to stand upright and fold in on itself, while the two ends of the line seem to be as two-dimensional as the surrounding expanses of colour.

Barbara Rose has written about DeLap's conscious concealment behind his pristine canvases³, but nonetheless, a sense of his personality slips out. There is precision, and a dogged insistence on perfection. Sometimes the dichotomy in abstract painting is that it can be both illegible and autobiographical at the same time. We are met with colour fields, shapes, gesture and so on, which can be dauntingly hard to decipher. But at the same time, the very fact that the painter has made these stylistic choices is revealing, almost self-referential. Inevitably, since an abstract painting does not represent a concrete entity, it represents, to a certain extent, its creator. In the case of Tony DeLap, the smart, impeccable paintings truly fox us; but ironically, we can see a sharp, incisive mind at work, and a sense of playful trickery.

1 Barbara Rose, 2014, *Now You See It, Now You Don't*

2 Tony DeLap interviewed in Dale Schierholz's 2014 documentary *Tony DeLap: A Unique Perspective*

3 Barbara Rose, 2014, *Now You See It, Now You Don't*