

# Now You See It, Now You Don't

By Barbara Rose. Published in 2014

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*Art is magic... But how is it magic? In its metaphysical development? Or does some final transformation culminate in a magic reality? In truth, the latter is impossible without the former. If creation is not magic, the outcome cannot be magic*  
- Hans Hoffman

Tony DeLap is unique in that he has been associated with not one but with so many of the dominant trends of the late-twentieth-century abstraction: minimalism, optical art, primary structures, hard edge painting, California light and space, and site-specific sculpture. His work intentionally eludes categorization. Though he has been linked to the major movements of the sixties, he has never sought the immediate visual impact that characterizes the art of that decade. His object constructions, paintings, and sculptures are personal and quirky—not generic or formulaic. They are not instantly assimilated, but take time to understand, experience, and explore.

There is a discernable logic to the evolution of DeLap's style. However, the reasons he changes scale, medium, materials, and technique—always within the context of a geometric consistency—are not programmatic. Consequently his works are not predictable or even serial. DeLap is an intuitive, intellectually curious experimenter rather than a conceptual, goal-oriented strategist, which means the outcome of his process is always a surprise. This has worked against him, as has his decision to remain in California, because the art market does not appreciate unpredictability, geographic detachment, or work that is not immediately digestible by a public with an increasingly shorter attention span.

Born in 1927 in Oakland, California, Tony DeLap grew up in the Bay Area and saw the Golden Gate Bridge being built when he was a child. He remained in the Bay Area during his formative years. His father was a trial lawyer and a state senator in Contra Costa County and was known for his meticulous practice and impeccable ethics. His mother was a product of stolid Pennsylvania Dutch stock.

As a child he carved bars of soap, borrowed from his aunt. He was constantly carving and creating, so when his aunt ran out of soap, she contacted his mother and offered to buy him more. Like many children, he also made model planes and ships and crafted miniature animals. Most importantly, he was already tinkering with magic at age nine when he became hooked on the illustrated manuscripts from the Tarbell Course in Magic. His fascination with the mysteries of magic, however, did not keep him from excelling in athletics. In high school he was the captain of the track team, although his ambition was not to be a sports star but perhaps a tumbler or juggler.

As a freshman at Menlo Junior College in Menlo Park, DeLap was already interested in design and architecture. In addition to his other activities, he found time to take a night class at the Academy of Art in San Francisco. During this time, he enjoyed the nightlife of San Francisco, where he performed a magic show at Coffee Dan's. He went on to study painting, illustration, and graphic design at various schools, including Claremont Colleges. At Claremont his painting teacher was Henry Lee McFee, a friend of George Bellows and a sophisticated landscape and still life painter who taught the principles of Cézanne and cubism.

In 1957 DeLap moved to San Francisco, which had become a centre for the counterculture. He found an apartment on Telegraph Hill and paid rent by working part-time for commercial design companies in San Francisco and in Los Angeles, designing sculptural elements that could be broken down and put up again elsewhere, an experience that would prove useful later in life. He continued to paint and draw in abstract-expressionist style related to the reproduction he saw in New York art magazines.

Around 1960 DeLap began to explore the spatial conundrums and visual interactions that are typical of all of his work. He began to make collages composed of found objects, incorporating clippings from magic catalogues. Most of these found drawings were anonymous, and the imagery was generic. His first small pieces, done in San Francisco in the 1960s, were objects that were freestanding like sculpture, yet functioned more like painting in that their three-dimensionality was incidental. The materials in these early works included wood, canvas, and glass.

As these shaped object sculptures grew in scale and complexity, he added Plexiglas, chipboard, and black tape used over the edge to contain the contents. Some incorporated metal kitchen molding purchased at a Japanese hardware store near his studio on California Street. These pieces came out of painting and assemblage, yet they existed in three-dimensional space so that you could walk around them. The double-sided glass boxes, which permitted their contents to be viewed from both sides, had a dot or a small X at the centre. The later works, where he added words, were only fully understood when you walked around and saw the other side. DeLap likes to quote the magician who at the beginning of a card trick says, "Think of two cards... and forget one." Thus memory is involved in visualization because you must remember what you have already seen to relate it to what you are now seeing. This lends yet another level of complexity to the problem of both conceptual and visual interpretation.

These early rectangular tabletop objects featured a painted, stepped low relief on both sides that was sandwiched between glass panes. They also involved word play. For example, one piece had the letters F O U R in the four corners, while on the other side the letters D O T S were similarly arranged. (The letters themselves came ready-made from an art store.) Four Dots and related works of the early sixties set up a multilevel continuity between the two sides. Inside the black box there were a dozen or more receding steps leading into a transparent omega point where one could see through to the opposite side, which was identical in structure.

DeLap made a number of four-letter word boxes in which four letters were placed in the four corners of the box. For example, the Mona Lisa had the letters M O N A in the corners on one side and L I S A on the other. Others include Ping Pong, Time Bomb, hard Sell, and Hard Edge. The painter Agnes Martin, who became a good friend and champion of DeLap, particularly admired these boxes.

A lasting influence of DeLap's training in Claremont was the emphasis on the value of the finely crafted and handmade. He had always been involved in making things and loved refinishing vintage cars as a young man. DeLap's interest in architecture was always keen. He had once thought of being an architect and had in fact designed several buildings. The indigenous California bungalow style, brought to its heights by architectural greats Greene and Greene in Pasadena and the early modernists such as Gill, Schindler, Neutra, and Frank Lloyd Wright, contributed to DeLap's

visual vocabulary and sense of solid structure.

The year 1961 was an important moment for DeLap because of his attendance at the Aspen Design Conference. The conference was a revelation; suddenly he was in a world of great designers, architects, and filmmakers in a setting that stressed a collaborative structure with which he was more comfortable. He could imagine a career in which he could perhaps practice all these disciplines. After the conference, he continued to experiment in all these fields. In 1962 the rectangular word boxes gave way to a series of geometrically shaped object constructions combining painting and sculpture. The materials used included glass, Plexiglas, wood, canvas, and sandblasted aluminium, sprayed with flat lacquer paint. With a band saw and a few other woodworking tools, he started making the double-sided sculptures.

That year DeLap was asked to teach at the College of Arts and Crafts—now known as California College of the Arts—in Oakland, California. During this time his collages included works made from scrap materials he found in the trash depots of South San Francisco or San Rafael waterfront, as well as puzzle boxes collaged with clippings from cheap magic catalogues. Most of these catalogue drawings were anonymous with generic imagery. He also used drawings like this later for the Magic Portfolio of Thirteen Magic Tricks, first printed in 1966 and reissued in a new edition in 1991.

At Scripps College, DeLap took a class by Whitney Smith, who was a “Case Study House architect.” As part of the class, he visited various architectural projects throughout Southern California. He was thrilled by the design of the concrete brick Millard House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in Pasadena. He remembers that the sun coming through the house’s perforated concrete bricks, visible from both sides, was an inspiration for the early double-sided box sculptures.

The last two years in San Francisco were very productive. DeLap made relief paintings like Irish, which combined canvas with a stepped-down centre form made of chipboard. He also began making small diamond-shaped constructions using steel and aluminium. After finding a metal fabricator in Emeryville, California, he was able to make larger sculptures. One of the early large works, Ka, was shown at Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles and later in the landmark Jewish Museum show Primary Structures in 1966 in New York. Another large-scale fabricated steel sculpture with fibreglass of this period was Houdini. The mold for this work was stepped-down cut-wood sections and the finished reverse was sprayed fibre-glass, painted in a single colour. Another example of this type of work was the 1964 hexagonal cast piece titled Fawkes.

### - California State of Mind

*Happy are the painters, for they shall not be lonely. Light and colour, peace and hope, will keep them company to the end of the day.*  
- Winston Churchill

By choice DeLap has spent his entire life based in California, first in San Francisco and then in Southern California, teaching at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). He chose to live in the small, conservative, family-oriented beach town of Corona del Mar rather than joining his contemporaries in Venice, the hippie community nearer the Los Angeles galleries and commercial centres. In San Francisco in the early sixties, DeLap was already at the centre of the avant-garde, showing at Jim Newman’s Dilexi Gallery. The Bay Area at the time was a centre of experimentation and excitement in all the arts. Agnes Martin, who had seen DeLap’s diamond-shaped sculptures at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, admired DeLap’s work and recommended it to her New York dealer, Robert Elkon. DeLap had ten exhibitions with the gallery, but Elkon was a European gentleman and a connoisseur rather than an aggressive international salesman like his close friends Leo Castelli. DeLap received favourable reviews, but he spent a minimal amount of time in New York, never cultivating the favour of leading critics like Clement Greenberg.

In 1964 DeLap married Kathy Campbell. Kathy was a Canadian and had grown up in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). Kathy’s family had a beach cottage near Vancouver and the DeLap family continues to spend several months there each year. As a boy Tony had enjoyed exploring Canadian wilderness with his father. Later he became increasingly interested in Native American art, especially the totem poles of the Haida of the Northwest Coast. Awarded a University of California regents grant to document the extant poles in British Columbia, he photographed a group of Haida totem poles still standing in their original location on Anthony Island, in the Haida Gwaii islands off the northern coast of British Columbia, where he also made many drawings. The totem poles he photographed are covered with low relief imagery that refer to the life stories of the clan. The cutting tools used by the Haida were simple and handmade. DeLap found that “the beauty of these ‘primary structures’ graces a forest in the most extraordinary way. Complex and traditional, the cutting was magnificent. When a pole fell, it stayed. There were many tribe carving totem poles from southern BC to Alaska, on the mainland and on some of the islands. I preferred the Haidas because of the complexity of carving, and they were very sparse with paint. They were sculptors in wood.” The combination of surfaces, the quality of the bare wood, and the delicacy of the incised figuration fascinated him.

Coincidentally, the totems of the Northwest Coast Indians were also highly valued by Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman and Donald Judd. They were impressed not only by their aesthetic interest and high degree of craftsmanship, but also by the fact that this was an American art free of any European influence. In the late sixties DeLap would make a number of vertical sculptures that recall the form and scale of totem poles.

Although the new California art was strongly associated with the Ferus Gallery, DeLap’s first commitment in Los Angeles was to show with the Felix Landau Gallery, where his future friend John McLaughlin also showed. Had DeLap exhibited with his friends and colleagues Larry Bell and Craig Kauffman at the legendary Ferus Gallery, his work might have become more nationally known. When Landau, who was Viennese, moved back to Europe in 1971, DeLap felt free to show with his friend, the brilliant and eccentric LA dealer Nicholas Wilder, who died too young to do much for his artists, although many, like Walter De Maria, Richard Tuttle, and Bruce Nauman, did achieve great international renown.

### - Best Kept Secret

*I see painting as an evocative magic, and there must always be a random factor in magic, one which must be constantly changed and renewed.*  
- William S. Burroughs

The University of California, Irvine (UCI) campus was inaugurated in June of 1964 with much fanfare by then President Lyndon Johnson. The first

classes were held in October 1965. John Coplans, head of the new art department, hired the most brilliant and creative local artists and instituted a program that brought visiting artists, writers, and historians from New York. At UCI the visual arts were part of the larger School of the Arts, which included writing, film, photography, and the performance arts. There were no artificial barriers among the various creative arts departments because the campus was so new. In the sense UCI in the late sixties and early seventies resembled the interdisciplinary organization of the Bauhaus in Germany in the thirties, as well as Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina, in the forties and fifties.

Coplans lost no time hiring Tony DeLap as the first full-time studio faculty member. In 1965 Tony and Kathy moved from San Francisco to Corona del Mar, a beach town not far from the Irvine campus. DeLap had met Coplans. Later the influential editor of *Artforum*, while they were both teaching in San Francisco. Coplans became DeLap's most enthusiastic supporter. He included DeLap in exhibitions he curated and wrote enthusiastically about his work in February 1964 *Artforum* article titled *DeLap, Space and Illusion*<sup>1</sup>. The cover of the fledgling magazine, which was still being published in San Francisco, was DeLap's *Milo*, a 1963 purple, hexagonal, free-standing painted construction. Coplans' article was a paean of praise for DeLap's recent exhibition at the Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco. He accurately described DeLap's dilemma as working in two different styles, on the one hand expressionist collage and the other hand a hard-edged, purist geometric style.

For Coplans, DeLap's glass boxes resolved the dilemma: "This untenable polarity of styles has been resolved... with the new body of work marked by so startling a delineation of ideas and so striking an economy and clarity of means that one is immediately compelled to pose the question—how, in so short a space and time and by what means has DeLap arrived at this mature vision?"<sup>2</sup>

In 2011 the Getty Trust sponsored a series of ambitious historic exhibitions titled *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945-1980*, a multiveneue art collaboration held in more than one hundred museums and galleries, documenting the explosion of creativity in and around Los Angeles during the post-war years. PST turned the spotlight on California artists in a way that dramatically changed contemporary art history. Suddenly New York was no longer seen as the unique centre for important art. Post-war artists working in California were appreciated as equally, if not more, inventive. As its contribution to the vast array of PST shows and events, the Laguna Art Museum presented a show titled *Best kept Secret*. The idea was a collaboration of Bolton Colburn, then the director, and DeLap, who acted as a consultant for the show.

The exhibition documented the extraordinary achievements of the faculty and the students of the art department of the University of California, Irvine, a major centre of experimentation and dialogue in the late sixties and early seventies. The show also revealed that the best-kept secret of all was Tony DeLap, whose students at UCI included James Turrell and Chris Burden and whose friends included his former student John McCracken and the other brilliant UCI faculty artists such as Craig Kauffman, Robert Irwin, Vija Celmins, Larry Bell, John Mason, and Ed Moses.

### - *Specific Objects*

*Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colours—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface. Obviously, anything in three dimensions can be any shape, regular or irregular, and can have any relation to the wall, floor, ceiling, room, rooms or exterior or none at all. Any material can be used, as is or painted.*<sup>3</sup>

- Donald Judd, 1965

The context of DeLap's work was not that of his own generation but of that of his colleagues at UCI. DeLap was already a mature and accomplished artist when Coplans hired him in 1965. That year Donald Judd included DeLap, along with Larry Bell, Robert Morris, John Chamberlain, Frank Stella, and Yves Klein, in his historic article *Specific Objects*. In this influential essay, Judd defined a new category of art that denied the illusionism of painting in favour of the literal three-dimensionality of objects in real space.

This brought DeLap to the attention of East Coast curators and his work was shown in the two most influential exhibitions of the mid-sixties: *The Responsive Eye*, curated by William Seitz, that launched "op" art at the Museum of Modern Art, and became the canonical exhibition of minimalist sculpture. DeLap's piece looked appropriately elegant and minimal in the show that included, in addition to Judd, Anthony Caro, Tony Smith, Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin, Ellsworth Kelly, Carl Andre, Anne Truitt, Ronald Bladen, Robert Morris, and Sol LeWitt.

*The Responsive Eye* and *Primary Structures* were arguably the definitive exhibitions of the sixties. Tony DeLap was the only artist who had work in both shows. Once again he found himself in what appeared to be a stylistic double bind. Was he a painter or a sculptor? Increasingly it appeared he was a sculptor; although, again, he had many parallel interests. Early on, Coplans warned DeLap that his constant experimentation and refusal to turn out works in series would damage his career. But his process of acknowledging dualities within his art, and perhaps even in his own personality, defines the zigzag trajectory as well as the originality of DeLap's work. To be true to himself and in order to go forward, he was forced to jettison aspects of his previous work. Later he would come back to some of these early concerns to explore them more fully. This process of assimilation and purification continued throughout his life. For example, during the early sixties, while he was making collages and object sculpture, he was also painting canvases like *Gherkin* (1961), which he did not show and whose perceptual implication he returned to a half-century later.

The originality of the painted objects that Coplans praised was a result of the synthesis of DeLap's various talents and interests. Like sculpture, these enigmatic objects exist in three-dimensional space; however, their painted contents offer a concrete spatial recession made literal by the stepped-down parallel cut-out forms based on the technique of the architectural model making. The collages had been encased in glass rather than being framed in the usual manner; now DeLap filled the glass containers with clean, hard edged forms that stressed not tactile surface but a variety of complex optical illusions. This issue of the frame would also be taken up again in paintings made in the 1970's.

At UCI, Coplans assembled a diverse group of artists and teachers, including visiting faculty of which I was a member, teaching a trimester a year from 1967 to 1971. It was an amazing experience for everyone involved. Because Irvine was the newest branch of the University of California state system, there were no calcified rules to follow. This offered tremendous freedom to students and faculty as well as a certain Dada quality to the

1 John Coplans, *DeLap, Space, and Illusion*, *Artforum*, 1964

2 *Ibidem*

3 Donald Judd, *Specific Objects*, *Arts yearbook*, 1965

improvised atmosphere. Author and Buddhist scholar Peter Clothier described the Irvine campus in 1969: "It looked like some futurist outpost set in isolated architectural splendour among the barren hills of the Irvine Ranch." Physically the sprawling new desert campus was so bizarre Clothier toyed with setting a science fiction novel there "in which the aggressively philistine nouveaux riches inhabitants of a nearby walled city—they were just beginning to dot the distant hillside - would be pitted against a last, ragged remnant of hippie poets and artists... a kind of 'Mad Max' of Orange County style."

In 1971, eager to take advantage of the freedom of unhampered improvisation, my colleague Moira Roth and I organized a Duchamp exhibition in the campus museum, accompanied by a weeklong symposium of international Duchamp scholars. When it came to planning events for the associated festival, I thought it particularly appropriate to ask Tony to do a magic performance. I knew of DeLap's involvement with magic because he had invited my young son and me to the legendary Magic Castle. Entrance to the Victorian mansion in Los Angeles was limited strictly to members who passed an examination to the Academy of Magic. The unlikely turreted stone building had no visible entrance, but when the password was given to an attendant owl, a sliding door magically appeared, permitting entry. My son, who had been restive with boredom, was fascinated. For the festival, DeLap did several performances, but the official public act was billed as *A Spatial Occurrence, the Levitation of a Human Being*. The entire project was a collaborative affair between faculty and students. The act, in which DeLap caused a woman to appear to float freely in the air (he had borrowed the necessary equipment from Magic Castle), was a sensation. The installation played with the projected transparent and solid forms, as well as a real human body. DeLap felt that confounding the viewer's sense of perception was in line with Duchamp's concerns. If the hand were quicker than the eye, then perhaps the eye needed training in perception to be up to the task of separating illusion from reality.

### - *Floating Ladies and Twisted Sculptures*

*Art is the method of levitation, in order to separate one's self from enslavement by the earth.*

- Anaïs Nin

The early seventies were also the beginning of DeLap's illusionistic suspended beams and "floating ladies." These were sculptures and performances—inspired by levitation and suspension—that combined magic, illusionism, and actual solid-wood beams. In 1974 he constructed a 40-foot-long outdoor sculpture, which has been recently restored, in front of the Orange County museum of Art (OCMA). Titled *Floating Lady*, it has a steel frame covered in yellow cedar and each end rests on a concrete block. The beam is balanced on a diagonal rather than horizontally, which causes it to mysteriously twist in space.

The twisted beam recalls concerns of earlier works he had done. Taking a particular wood form and slicing it in half, he ended up with two identical pieces, which were thinner than the original form. These became the first "twisted sculptures," which were actually begun during his last year in San Francisco. The twisted freestanding sculptures comprised a series named after Charlie Chaplin's short silent films like *Mabel and the Wheel*, *Triple Trouble*, and others. These were fabricated in aluminium and the colour was baked on commercially.

DeLap has never sought to be obscure nor to offer arcane theoretical explanations for his work. His geometric objects, paintings, and sculptures may look simple and direct, but in fact they are based on subtle and complex visual illusions, avoiding easy explanation or narrow categorization. This constant play between apparent simplicity and actual complexity creates a tension that keeps spectators interested, but at the same time uncomfortable. On one level the work is stable and fixed, but on another it is difficult to nail down the slippery forms as static and unchanging. To instil doubt—even to mystify if necessary to keep the spectator's attention - is part of DeLap's intention.

The complexity and originality of DeLap's work can be explained by the dual nature of his background and career. Torn at first between graphic design, architecture, painting, and sculpture, and then later with academic minimalism and complex experiments with perception, DeLap faced the dilemma of a split identity if he continued on a dual path. Duchamp resolved this problem by creating alter ego in the coy feminine persona Rose Sélavy. DeLap's doppelgänger was the most famous magician in American history, Harry Houdini, who was actually a Hungarian rabbi's son whose real name was Erik Weisz. To identify with Houdini is to begin with the double deception of a real person with a fake name borrowed from another real person (the nineteenth century French magician Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin). But the creation and the subsequent unmasking of deception are central to DeLap's practice. He may fool the eye, but at the same time he permits the attentive viewer to unlock his illusions through careful observation.

Like Houdini, the master of escape, DeLap makes works that deliberately escape the fixed boundaries of categorization. In a mass culture that exalts recognizable brands and has lost the conception of personal style, Tony DeLap disappears behind the magical illusions of his art. His own personality is in a sense as "invisible" as the magician's sleight of hand. Yet his style as an artist is recognizable because of his consistent formal vocabulary, his geometric and mathematical structures and his definition of painting and sculpture as literal objects in the real world. The reason DeLap is harder to understand than it may seem is because he does employ types of illusions, but not to create fictive space, which is the basis of illusionism in art. DeLap's use of illusion is that of the magician: a way to keep the audience amazed, transfixed, and involved in solving the virtual puzzle.

In the early sixties he exhibited a sculpture in San Francisco at the Dilexi Gallery titled *Houdini's House*, which consisted of two pieces whose size was between human scale and architectural maquette scale. Later, in 1967, he made a sculptural installation by the same name for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's landmark exhibition *American Sculpture in the Sixties*. In his 1999 exhibition at OCMA, DeLap projected an image of a levitating woman onto a glass wall, where it fractured and multiplied as it reflected onto the structure's other metal and glass panels. The polished opaque painted panels acted like mirrors with complex reflections appearing and disappearing. He did not deny that his inspiration was the room of mirrors scene in Orson Welles' movie *The Lady From Shanghai*, in which reflections of Rita Hayworth can be seen from many points of view.

Once he began teaching at Irvine in 1965, DeLap rented a studio in the small, light- industrial district in nearby Costa Mesa, which was composed of boat builders, auto restorers, et cetera. DeLap was one of the first to use industrial materials and techniques, which became the hallmark of the LA "finish fetish" movement.

In Costa Mesa, DeLap duplicated in Plexiglas the forms that he had previously made in aluminium. He also made aluminium pieces that were sand-

blasted and then machined to perfection by a machinist. Later, John Coplans and DeLap hired John McCracken, who had been DeLap's student in San Francisco, to teach at Irvine. DeLap let McCracken share his studio space and McCracken helped DeLap build and finish fibreglass works like the "twisted" Charlie Chaplin pieces, in larger versions, such as *Modern Times III*. McCracken began making his plank pieces, which were simple minimal forms. DeLap continued making more complex works that involved a challenge to visual perception that he had worked out in drawings. The insistence on slowing down the process of visually understanding the piece separated him from minimal artists, leaving him isolated from what was then proclaimed the new style.

These materials and methods continued until about 1971, when DeLap became interested in painting again. This new interest was jump-started when he discovered a new way to make a shaped canvas constructions anchored by a hyperbolic paraboloid edge. He shaped the wood around the painting so that it cut back into the wall behind the painting. The hyperbolic form worked as a Mobius band, a circular band whose edges reverse so there is no inside or outside edge. The example DeLap gives of this form is the fanned shape that is made when a deck of cards is twisted.

Returning to painting in the seventies, he adopted a monochromatic palette, maintaining that he intended to use color as if it were a material in order to preserve the physical, literal qualities of painting as an object with no illusionistic space. To heighten its objectness he incorporated the wooden frame into the shaped painting. The issue of the frame—as a way to keep painting from acting as a figure against the background of the wall—became paramount in the seventies in New York. DeLap was one of the few, if not only, West Coast painter to attack this issue.

In a sense he was prepared because of his interest in a wide variety of media and in the experiments of the geometric Constructivists who stressed logic and structure. He has said that the Hungarian Constructivist György Kepes' book *Language of Vision*, first published in English in 1944, was especially important to him. "It was like a Bible to me. It was a new world that I almost felt I must have had something to do with." he was also very taken with the Parisian posters he saw on his trip to Europe in 1954, especially those of the great graphic artist Cassandre, whose trademark advertisement for Bugatti cars still hangs in DeLap's house. The stylized Deco lettering was based on streamlined geometric shapes that dispensed with gothic flourishes.

DeLap was not the first artist to be interested in modern typography and design as potential sources for abstract art forms and compositions.

Graphic art treats illusionism differently than painting because it does not pretend to convince the eye there is something behind the plane, but rather simplifies images to their flat planes and curved volumes, which create the appearance of volume. There is never an intention to fully convince us that the form is real in real space. Rather than relating rhyming elements within the pictorial field, the basis of Western painting that lasted through cubism, graphic design has a different concept of design that is based on filling the page with a singular, strong image.

### - *Up Against the Wall*

*Those edge-paintings of mine: when you look at them, there's always something hidden*  
- Tony DeLap

The UCI levitation performance brought DeLap back to painting. If *Floating Lady* was the ultimate illusion in three-dimensional space, the challenge now was to deal with the problem of pictorial illusion. In the early eighties he painted a group of more or less rectangular, medium sized monochrome painting like *A New Kink* (1981) and *Sleightly Square* (1982). Looked at frontally, the works appear to be hung parallel to the wall. However, on further investigation one sees that although the left edge is glued (figuratively) to the wall, the rectangle opens slowly into a dark diagonal interior so that the right edge is about six inches from the wall. In other words there are two different and contradictory readings of the work, one an optical, distant flat plane and the other a physical and intimate close-up view of a plane set diagonally to the wall. This was an illusion Malevich played with in *White on White* that DeLap now made literal.

Malevich described his white square on a white ground as expressing the feeling of fading away. DeLap made canvases that confused the eye even more. Whereas Malevich desired a free-floating "non-objectivity," DeLap focused on making paintings that, as much as they seemed to float, were also literal objects. Their literalness, however, was not that of minimal art or the classic monochrome painting hung squarely on the wall. His rectangular monochromes were not what they seemed when looked at only frontally.

The paintings of the later eighties, like *Lortini* (1986) and *Empire* (1989), incorporate shapes made of light wood and are clearly indebted to Constructivism in their geometric clean lines. Yet they are also concerned with the literalism of the shaped canvas, which was the American Interpretation of Constructivism. The forms are geometric but often a section of the familiar circle or square has been removed or in some cases extended beyond ordinary geometry into some fantasy of Flatland, a book popular with artists at the time that describes a place where everything is flat. In these paintings DeLap redefines drawing not as depicted contour but as literal edge produced by the wood molding that follows the contours of the painting. In some works the wood actually cuts into the painted areas and becomes a shape itself.

DeLap did not arrive at a minimalist statement as a reaction to the illusionism of painting but rather through his attraction to the architecture and graphic design. From the outset DeLap's work has presented spatial conundrums and visual interactions. He is constantly inspired by many visual encounters, which he translated into his own vocabulary of forms. For example, he has always been intrigued by Edward Hopper's 1951 masterpiece *Rooms by the Sea* (see following page). He has a reproduction in his studio, which he examines from different angles. Turning the painting upside down, the form of the light coming in the window can be read two different ways, as folding forward or backward. DeLap is convinced Hopper was aware he was creating the dual illusion. This magical inversion of the two parallelograms of light is for him what the painting is really about, regardless of whether it is abstract or realistic. He holds Hopper in highest esteem because of Hopper's capacity to treat architecture as abstract form DeLap cites *Nighthawks* (1942) as another Hopper exercise in a dual reading of spatial constructs, which is one of his own goals.

With his many interests, DeLap is drawn to hybrids of the arts, to ideas and forms that cannot be fixed or pinned down. He had fluctuated between painting and sculpture, using elements of one discipline in the other. The title of a 2007 acrylic painting on canvas and wood, *Eucre*, refers to the card game of choice for many of the early-twentieth-century magicians whom Tony admires. Their use of illusion, deception, and misdirection, is also part of an artists' toolbox. Like many of the artist's painting/sculpture "hybrids," *Eucre* continues the surface of the work across the canvas, into the edges. The viewer must move around the work to experience the complete image.



Unlike Jo Baer's abstractions, which activate the framed edges of the paintings, DeLap's edges are sculptural. In the hybrid paintings that go to the wall, when observed frontally, the edges are hidden. In a black and white painting, the canvas with its curved edge suggests the image is turning the corner and that perhaps we are looking at a three-dimensional object like a book. In other works, what you thought were planes and hard edges become sliding slants and carves of wood; trapezoids are revealed as small square canvases, rendered simply in two colours. At this point, we are entitled to ask what the difference is between optical illusion and prestidigitation - sleight of hand. An optical illusion fools your eye; the sleight of hand disorients and makes you question your own perceptions of what has transpired. Here the important word is "transpired" because the optical illusion is immediate; the sleight of hand takes time to prepare the audience, to set up the props, and to perform the mystifying trick, which sticks in memory because it seems insoluble.

The concerns with optical tension as pictorial illusionism—or the lack of which his small geometric paintings of the early sixties, like Gherkin, expressed - could now become the basis for an even more complex vision of what painting can do. "I do not know Jo Baer but I did know of some of her work. I liked her work with the edge. However, I believe she did not disturb in a physical way the edge, but only with paint. It seems we were both interested in having the content of the work at the edge of the painting".<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes the shape is rendered in two dimensions, as an illusion of that twisted form.

By combining contrasting colour fields - something he avoided in the past - he added subtle textures that extend beyond the picture plane. The interplay of colour with his characteristically intricate theatre of shadows provides far more drama than you might expect from works that still remain true to the minimalist creed. By painting colour bands sliding off the surface and slipping around the framing edge to occupy the side of the stretcher as well, DeLap sets up a visual paradox that combines elements of Russian Constructivism with the mysteries of sleight of hand. The latest paintings represent a notable, if logical, change of direction, once again demonstrating that there really is no such thing as a "typical" DeLap work, only typical DeLap visual reasoning.

DeLap draws a great deal: almost every work has a preliminary drawing or a set of drawings that describe the shape and means of construction. DeLap is a talented and original draftsman who has always made drawings a central focus of his works. These have come out of books and catalogues on magic, and ephemera of any kind pertaining to the subject. The magic drawings began when he was a teenager and copied drawings of hands doing card tricks. He has done many different kinds of drawings, from the architectural drawings and collage to the "magic" drawings, as well as extraneous drawings of landscapes and common objects like seashells, flowers or rocks.

The painting constructions all had full-size drawings as their starting point. However, sometimes they changed during construction. As he explains, "I love drawings. They can be quickly changed. They can surprise me. Going through my favourite drawings at a later time, I can get excited about things I did not recognize when I did them. Drawings are sensual: they can be any size. I would probably rather do drawings than most any part of the art making. I have always liked drawing when travelling the out of doors, the still life in a room, or new ideas to work on when back in the studio".<sup>5</sup>

There is also a full-scale drawing for each painting. The revisions are made in the drawings so that the painting will have a fresh, clean surface with no visible brushstrokes. The largest drawings were destroyed, which DeLap now regrets, since they had documented the process and revisions of the paintings. In the drawings, he could express the painterliness rejected by his minimal sculptures and shaped paintings.

Edge or contour in these works is not drawn or depicted; instead a literal line is formed by the wooden frame that encloses the shape. The eccentric shapes whose frames becomes part of the work have pieces of wood of varying sizes that push them forward from the wall in a way that makes it difficult to locate them in space or to identify the origin of their geometric sections. They seem to present visually impossible situations that suggest Kurt Gödel's famous "knot" which cannot be resolved by logic. This becomes a puzzle that keeps the viewer intrigued.

### - Illusions vs Anti-Illusions

*A black and white cow is both two-dimensional and three-dimensional. To see the whole cow—all the changes in pattern, colour, and space—you need to move around it*

- Tony DeLap, 2010

In 2000 DeLap had his first major retrospective at the Orange County Museum of Art, curated by Bruce Guenther, which permitted a review of what he had done in painting, sculpture, drawing, and prints. (DeLap is also a formidable printmaker, although less known for this activity.) In a review of the OCMA show, Leah Ollman described the work in the Los Angeles Times: "Canvas sculptures hanging on the wall, paintings in the round— what exactly are Tony DeLap's artworks? DeLap has made a career out of subverting conventions and defying expectations, so the prospect of categorizing his work is thankless and largely also moot." Works "can be zingers, emitting the temporary jolt of a one-liner. Or they can fester and linger in the mind with the cryptic elegance of a Zen koan."

The impression is that it is not this and not that, and in fact what is it and what the imaged as the mind is pitted against the eye, the visual evidence against the conceptual categories. This is the tension that DeLap's hybrid forms set up. Yes, the objects are beautiful, but they are also increasingly maddening as he becomes more adept at creating this subtle but unnerving tension.

The basis of Western painting is to trick the eye into believing there is space behind the picture plane. Light/dark contrasts, for example, make figures appear as sculpture with volume. The most convincing illusionism of three-dimensionality, however, is perspective, which creates this illusion that there is space behind the picture plane. Illusionism is a kind of magic in that it tricks the eye into believing something that is not true or factual. Illusionism is a representation of a thing, never the thing itself. As the modern mind became more sophisticated, this disjunction began to be experienced as an unbearable falsehood which art, in order to be honest, needed to reject.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the author, Corona del Mar, April 2013

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

In the dialogues with Socrates, comprising the *Timaeus* and the *Symposium*, Plato outlined the concept that material reality was in fact a mere shadowy reflection of higher truths, ideal geometric forms composing an upper, ideal world. DeLap's forms are not based on any Platonic ideal geometric forms nor are they abstraction from nature or attempts like Kandinsky or Klee to mimic the emotive abstractions or rhythms. In his literalness, DeLap has a typically American relationship to geometric abstraction, which is very personal and subjective, and often derived from everyday forms. Ellsworth Kelly, for example, based shapes on the silhouettes of things seen. For example, the window of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris inspired one of Kelly's most famous early paintings. The curved sections that make up a baseball are the origins of many of Myron Stout's abstractions. Frank Stella based paintings on the silhouette of smoke rings and the rapid curves of racetracks. Al Held's abstractions of the early sixties were based on the shape of letters of the alphabet. DeLap, too, was drawn to the idea of letters or words as objects. However, he did not enlarge the size of his paintings to have the impact of billboards.

Because his aesthetic originates in objects, and because he is also a sculptor, DeLap has a novel conception of pictorial space. He makes a clear distinction between the public and the private, the intimate works demanding close inspection and the large outdoor pieces intended to mark and draw attraction to a specific site. Although his is basically a studio practice, he has always been interested in large-scale public art. Designed in 1983 and installed in 1989, the 40-foot-high painted steel sculpture *The Big Wave* spans Wilshire Boulevard at the 3200 block in Santa Monica. Commissioned by the City of Santa Monica's 1% for Art Program with contributions from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Santa Monica Arts Foundation the wave-shaped overhead sculpture represents the gateway to Santa Monica. A restoration was completed in 2010, when the piece was repainted and the fibre optic lights were replaced with more sustainable LED lights.

### - *What You See Is Not What You See*

*Practicing is a lot like the bank. If you don't put anything in, you won't get anything out.*

- Dai Vernon

Beginning in the late sixties, DeLap began spending more time at the magic Castle, becoming close friends with Dai Vernon, known as "The Professor" because of his dexterity with the sleight of hand. Vernon had studied art as a young man and came out to many of DeLap's exhibitions. He was especially famous for having fooled Houdini with a trick in which he removed the top card of the deck and placed it second from the top, then turned over the top card to again reveal the original card. On Dai Vernon's 80th birthday in 1974, DeLap brought a deck of cards he had recently designed and one of his students, Jay McCafferty, brought a black-and-white video camera. Video was a new medium for artists and DeLap is proud of the footage McCafferty made of DeLap interviewing Vernon. He performed classic magic acts like false shuffles, cups and balls, cards up the sleeve. He also told stories of gamblers, tricksters, magicians, and was an expert on the art and philosophy of magic.

To relax, Tony DeLap often practices or performs card tricks. This interest in what is perceived as opposed to what is actually evident in a painting like the 2009 *Notaria*. The monochrome green canvas is almost square, and indeed appears square when viewed frontally from a distance. However, on close inspection one sees that it is attached on the left at an angle so that one edge is flush with the wall while the others arch gradually out into space. The upper right corner of the canvas defies both the viewer's visual perceptions and their expectations of the nature of a canvas hung on a gallery wall. To see *Notaria*, one must move closer to the work, moving around, investigating the work's edges, and noting the effect that each divergent view has on the whole. The colour shifts in density: what seems floating becomes solid, and what appears straight-edged is actually skewed. Thus expectations are contradicted by reality in a subtly dramatic reversal that has both aesthetic and expressive effect.

Earlier we remarked that a main reason that a sleight of hand magic tricks interested DeLap was because they trick the eye accepting a situation that does not correspond to reality. That there is something suspicious about the practitioner of such confusion is long standing. The connection between the creation of illusions and magic link the artist with the figure of the trickster throughout history. The ancient god Hermes Trismegistus, or Hermes the trickster, is an alchemist, a magician who creates false illusions. Similarly, magicians play with the perception of their audience, misdirecting attention from their wily prestidigitations, but satisfying the crowd when producing the missing coin. Artists, who use illusion to engage the viewer, are involved in a similar balancing act, challenging the viewers' perceptions by demanding suspension of disbelief required to see three dimensions on a two dimensional surface.

DeLap has played with various perceptual enigmas involving spatial displacements throughout his career. Around 2008 he began a series of apparently simple rectangular paintings with flat blocks of colour invaded by bands of colour. Sometimes ribbons of paint overrun the unpainted tinted canvas, which ordinarily would function as background. The palette of these paintings is a vivid green and red but once again colour is limited to denoting space rather than evoking emotion. The bright, flatly painted hues are combined with white and black, contrasting with the tinted tan canvas.

Originally, when he started painting on linen, DeLap left the unpainted linen its natural colour, using acrylic paint for the image. Recently he has begun tinting the linen canvas in a darker hue. He maintains that it recalls the wooden edges of earlier paintings without adding a separate material to the painting. In these recent paintings, DeLap uses white glue or a matte medium mixed with acrylic paint to stain the linen canvas a darker shade.

Most of these recent rectangular linen canvases are stretched on aluminium frames, which he started to use for larger works where weight was an issue. Sometimes he mounts his canvas on wood to emphasize its objectness. A few small works are linen glued to sheet aluminium, then stained and painted. They are engineered to project less than an inch off the wall. In the 2009 *Right Guess*, the rectangle is unaltered, but DeLap paints planes of colour on the surface, which interact with each other, as well as with sections of exposed raw linen to appear to flip back with flat coloured bands that only appear to be cut off in space.

Even DeLap's drawings address illusionism. In one drawing, for example, a black, white, and green square is sketched against a grid. The drawing also depicts its cast shadow, including the intended cutback edge to be found in the completed [painting]. DeLap says, "Unlike the stage magician, I want to expose the trick, show where the edges go, reveal a different surface. But knowing the trick does not finish the viewer's experience".<sup>6</sup>

Once again, DeLap manages to disappear behind his art; his personality is “invisible” like the magician who suddenly vanishes before us.

His works have no visible brushstrokes to remind us of the artist’s hand. Indeed they seem realized all at once, as if effortlessly. In fact, DeLap carefully applies many layers of paint until he can create a surface with a sheen that contrasts with the light-absorbent canvas, which he leaves bare in recent work, which nevertheless does not obliterate its texture. DeLap’s images metaphorically escape their literal bounds—they jump around the corners, making you wonder where they start and where they end, in the manner of a Mobius strip.

DeLap’s conception of illusionism, however, is diametrically opposed to that of Frank Stella, for whom he found a studio near his own in Costa Mesa in 1967 while Stella was briefly in California. As opposed to Stella’s legendary “what you see is what you see,” DeLap is convinced that illusion is inevitably part of perception. From the outset, DeLap created works that can be seen in at least two different ways, depending on the point of view of the spectator. With this in mind, he constructs his spatial relationships in a way reminiscent of sleight of hand magic—that is, now you see it, now you don’t.

### - *Abstraction and Ornament*

*True ornament is not a matter of prettifying externals. It is organic with the structure it adorns, whether a person, a building, or a park. At its best it is an emphasis of structure, a realization in graceful terms of the nature of that which is ornamented.*

- Frank Lloyd Wright

The history of abstract art conventionally begins with Kandinsky’s on-objective forms, which are related to music and inspired by mystic visions. The strictly geometric art of the Constructivists can similarly be seen as the manifestations of an ideal Utopian order free of any connection to reality. Thus mysticism and idealism are generally identified as the origins of abstraction. But the fact is, abstract art has another point of departure in the utilitarian practices of graphic design and ornament. Both employ geometry: graphic art in the form of lettering and ornament in its relationship to architectural embellishment and textile design. The French art historian Gladys Fabre was among the first to explore the connections between the decorative arts and the fine arts in the catalogue of the 1977 Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris exhibition of the historical antecedents of Constructivism and concrete art. Her essay analyzes the influence of applied art of geometric abstraction with examples of the relationship between design, pattern, and abstract painting.<sup>7</sup>

New scholarship has given increasing attention to the importance of ornament as a source for abstract art. David Morgan writes in *The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornament from Kant to Kandinsky*, how ornament became a primary avenue by means of which abstraction became understood as a non-representational image what opened the way to abstract art. According to Morgan, by the end of the nineteenth century, a discussion of the ornamental or decorative introduced into critical discourse the idea that the visual arts could operate in a fully artistic way without employing representation.

Tracing the history of assimilation of the abstraction of ornament into the vocabulary of painting, Morgan points to the groundbreaking essay *Vorbegriffe zu einer Theorie der Ornament* by Karl Philipp Moritz<sup>8</sup>. In the early 1790s, Moritz applied this principle to ornament and broke down the traditional distinction between the decorative and the fine arts. Moritz discussed how the frame functioned in terms of the isolation of the image.

This unity of image and frame originally associated with the concept of the ornamental typifies DeLap’s compositions. He does not make complex wooden containers for his painted shapes in order to give them a look of fine finish, but rather to specifically identify them as self-sufficient and self-enclosed. DeLap’s radical redefinition of the frame as part of the structure of the shaped painting, contiguous with its contents, thus resolves the basic problem of shaped canvases, which is that they may be read as figure-ground relationships with the wall on which they are hung acting as background.

The incorporation of frame into the work itself begins in DeLap’s earliest shaped object paintings, which are influenced by mandalas in their stepped-down, central image. Concentric images appeared to float visually inside the outer frame because they were sandwiched between pieces of glass. The glass was fitted to the frame so it appeared you were looking at a structure floating in space because visually it did not touch the frame. Yet they were clearly autonomous works unrelated to anything except themselves. Some of these early pieces resemble architectural ornament in their symmetry and clarity of contour. Indeed DeLap own a piece of a Frank Lloyd Wright building, and considers it to be a treasured artifact. Similarly his appreciation of the lettering of an artist like Cassandre relates his work to the origins of abstraction in graphic script. His appreciation for these less considered sources of abstract art contribute to the originality of his work, which draws on many disciplines to distil them into painting and sculpture.

### - *Illusion as Metaphor*

*Reality is merely an illusion, although a very persistent one.*

- Albert Einstein

That things are not as they seem and that reality is other than appearance are philosophical issues connected at their most profound levels to mystical revelation. For example, the first mention of the “floating woman” image is the description by Saint Teresa of Avila of her recurrent experiences of levitation. The question of whether the inexplicable is a mystical reality or simply an illusion created either by hallucination or trickery is as old as human consciousness itself. Of course the last thing the pragmatic American Tony DeLap would admit to is an involvement with mysticism. Yet he has always been fascinated by the mysterious. One begins to suspect his life-long involvement with magic is not just a hobby.

Indeed magic functions for him on many levels. For example, it permitted him to overcome a basic shyness and reticence and to perform (however

<sup>7</sup> Gladys C. Fabre, *De l’enseignement des arts appliqués à l’avènement de la forme pure, in Aspects, historiques du constructivisme ET de l’art concret*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, exhibition catalogue, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> David Morgan, *The Idea of Abstraction in German Theories of the Ornament from Kant to Kandinsky*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Summer, 1992).



anonymously) in public. As a professional magician, he has the satisfaction of knowing whether he has performed a trick properly, a sense of confidence that no artist can experience and that makes it easier, perhaps, to take risks in art.

When DeLap met the geometric painter John McLaughlin, who had settled in Dana Point not far from Corona del Mar, he at last found a kindred spirit. McLaughlin's pared-down paintings of vertical bars of a single colour on white canvas were related not to reductive, literalist minimalism but more directly to Mondrian's concept of abstraction as a form of meditation. McLaughlin preferred the Asian to the Western aesthetic and at one time had a gallery of Japanese art. His experiences in Asia were significant for the development of his style, which was based on the Japanese system of Notan. Using Notan principles, McLaughlin stressed the relationship between solid and void and filled the entire space with simple forms that divide the canvas field rather than using the visual rhyming of shapes on a ground that defines Western painting. The Zen masters taught that spaces between objects could be more important than the objects themselves in facilitating meditation.

In his fundamental concerns one could perhaps define DeLap as a mystical artist—his affinity for McLaughlin's aesthetic and his interest in mysteries would suggest such a conclusion, as would his preference for a quiet life of contemplation and reflection. Indeed when asked why his art appeared to be minimal, he answered, "When you look at the water, there's nothing there. Water is really serene, metaphysical, Zen-like and poetic."

Moreover, DeLap's conception of illusionism is related to that of magic as opposed to pictorial precedent. Like the visual arts, the art of magic (and it is often defined as an art, sometimes with derogation as a "black" art) has its own history. This history is linked with the ancient mysteries of the occult. Minimal art is so dedicated to exposing visual illusions as fictive that it is surprising to find that DeLap, often described as a minimalist, is interested in relationship between art and the ineffable and the immaterial.

On a recent visit to his studio in Corona del Mar, DeLap showed me a book on the architect Le Corbusier and the occult that fascinated him. The text examines Le Corbusier's debt to Freemasonry - its configurations, associations, and its dream of spiritual redemption through ideal spatial arrangements. While modern painters were seeking salvation in Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Blavatsky, and Rudolf Steiner, Le Corbusier saw in the enigmatic geometric symbols of Freemasonry a metaphor of architecture's role in culture as a redemptive force.

Like Le Corbusier, DeLap used geometry as a basis for his work, but his use of geometry is structural rather than compositional as it is in abstract painting. This is one reason his works inhabit a space between painting and sculpture, as well as sharing certain characteristics of structural integrity that are the basis of architecture. The way in which DeLap's constructions intersect and often combine elements from the three branches of the visual arts defines their originality and singularity. This also accounts for why DeLap eludes the categorization that would have permitted his work to be more comfortably assimilated. While superficial artists jet the globe to claim the limelight, Tony DeLap has deliberately remained under the radar, quietly working nonstop in his peaceful Corona del Mar studio. As much as his art may have changed and grown, DeLap remains a peaceful, quiet, thoughtful man, who seems the incarnations of equanimity and good humour. He has been married only once, to his wife Kathy, with whom he has two grown children and three grandchildren. His friendships are warm, lifelong associations. He is an intellectually curious and voracious reader and a pillar of the community. He has never outrages the bourgeoisie.

Rejecting the machine-made impersonality of the factory for the humanity and precision of artisanship, DeLap has always thought of his work and not of his career. Because he has refused to outsource his work in order to create large quantities of serial works, the art market, which requires quick turnover to justify expensive promotions, has not pursued him. Despite this, Tony DeLap is one of the most original figures to emerge in the sixties and he continues to push the tradition of geometric abstraction into the future. His achievement will remain in the history books long after those seeking fame through sensation have been forgotten.