

# EDEL ASSANTI

*DeLap, Space and Illusion* - John Coplans

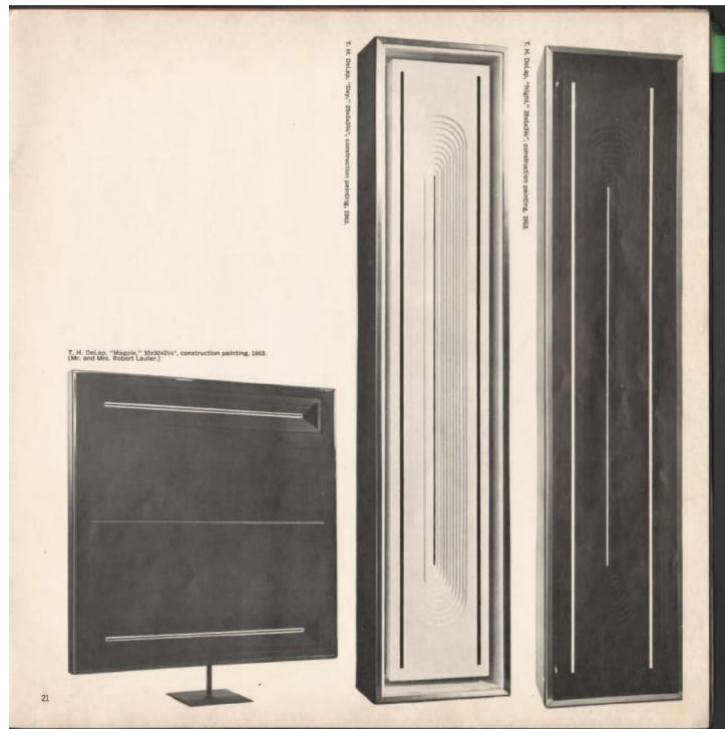
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## **John Coplans - *DeLap, Space and Illusion*, Artforum, 1964**

Tony DeLap's exhibited work over the last few years has consisted of rather small glass-boxed assemblages in shallow relief. Within these works he minimizes attention on the container — later to become one of the most important components of his work—for an imagery consisting of a variety of small objects and cut-outs from printed media mixed with a whole range of ephemeral materials. Manipulated in the abstract-expressionist style reminiscent of de Kooning and Marca-Relli, neither suaveness of handling nor the engaging quality of the materials used could conceal the problematic aspects of this work. Concurrent with these boxed assemblages DeLap also painted (but never exhibited) a small number of fluent and vigorous hard-edge paintings—the canvas entitled “Gherkin” of 1961 is a typical example. This untenable polarity of styles has been resolved in his recent exhibition (at the Dilexi Gallery, December 10 - January 4) with a 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 of time and by what means has DeLap arrived at this mature vision?

From the time DeLap first became interested in being an artist (some fifteen years ago) he supported himself by working intermittently as a designer in architecture and graphics, recently teaching within this area. He had a natural bent in this direction as well as a deep interest, but it was the conceptual methods of working rather than the functional or commercial ends that interested him. This led to the development of a high degree of

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manipulative skills and a critical instinct for the disposition of formal elements. Parallel to this activity as a designer he consistently maintained a concern with painting, working within the abstract-expressionist notion of combining the emotional and intellectual energy of the artist with spontaneity. But his temperamental bias against improvisation (and the current ritualisation of the style) eventually provoked a sense of desperation. Hesitant in his own mind to admit to being either a painter or a designer, he began to realize that his confusion arose out of a conflict of style and temperament. His greatest need was to coalesce ends and means to a more purposeful encounter with his instincts and needs as an artist.

Retaining the format of the assemblages—the glass-fronted container - DeLap purged his work of every element in with his own deeply felt notions. At the same time he introduced and exploited in his new work two fundamental ideas, one normally pertaining to sculpture, the other to painting: the potential of sculptural forms to contact and penetrate space, and the painted forms' potential for illusion and ambiguity. Combined, they are capable of creating a complex visual drama.

DeLap was completely uninterested in any of the programs of the earlier groups working in this area, particularly the Bauhaus drive towards the integration of the arts or the use of abstract art as a component for design and mass production. Mondrian's acuity of vision and intuitive sense of rightness of placement is more important to him, but whatever his stylistic connections to Constructivism, his greatest hero is Frank Lloyd Wright and in this connection DeLap's new work is far more personal, romantic and American than its origins would suggest. DeLap's handling of three dimensional form is unlike that of the relief i.e., sculptural forms imposed on the surface of a picture ground. Instead he converts the rectilinear shape of a ground into a three dimensional form by mounting it on a base and paying equal attention to both sides (rather like a double-faced clock).

The hexagonal shaped "Crow" has both faces sheathed in glass. The inner shape is suspended on a sheet of plastic, the two halves sandwiched onto either side. The edges are well clear of the sides of the container and form a visual channel. The inner shape decreases in thickness towards the centre, a series of modulated cut-out steps leading to the centre-piece, a black dot on a hexagonal mirror. On the outer glass, opposite the black dot, is a white dot. The whole of the inside, including the channel around the inner shape, is painted in a deep saturated purple; the outside rim holding the glass in position is stainless steel, the sides are covered in black plastic. The sheen of the material is glass, stainless steel, plastic, and paint under glass combine to give an unusually sensuous effect. The flooding of light over the colour irradiates the channel and the stepped shape, the steps on one half appearing very dark, on the other, very light. With the slightest shift of the eye position of the observer, the thickness of the shadows and highlights change. The concealed suspension of the centre shape and the ambiguousness of the position of the two dots combine with the play of shadows over the steps to create a series of optical illusions. The total effect is to decrease the limits imposed on three-dimensional form by mass, weight and volume.

DeLap constantly creates effects to heighten the illusionary quality of his forms. In some

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constructions he will paint a vertical or horizontal shape or a large circle repeating the colour at a different depth, confusing the observer as to its position. On those constructions without a glass face, the centre shape (smooth surfaced and stepped) is suspended in a field of toothed canvas painted with one or more saturated and body-less colours, which flicker and pulsate from within. The whole effect is subjective, capricious and mysterious.

DeLap's acuity of vision is not only used for the most rigorous disposition of the elements—a very personal visual exactitude- but each piece is exactly the right scale. His whole art is marked by this sense of critical concern, which, with his immaculate craftsmanship, specifically communicates a feeling of perfection that entrances the eye.