

The Illusions and Anti-illusions of Tony DeLap

(Published in *Orange Coast* magazine in 2000.)



A Spatial Occurrence

Tony DeLap may be the best-known unknown artist in Southern California. Mention his name to art connoisseurs abroad, and you're likely to hear about his numerous critical accolades and worldwide reputation. Yet, here in Orange County, DeLap has labored in near-anonymity for the past 40 years.

"Not a lot of people like my art," says the 72-year-old artist, sounding not the least bit disappointed or deterred.

That state of affairs may be about to change. The Orange County Museum of Art is mounting a major retrospective of his work—90 works in all—between October 14, 2000 and January 14, 2001.

If you go, prepare to be challenged. For DeLap is a master of what's called minimalism—works that are deceptively simple in form and color and almost totally lacking in feelings and emotions. "It's a lot to ask people, 'Do you like that red shape on the wall?'" says DeLap—but in fact, his works have been widely admired. DeLap has exhibited in hundreds of museums and galleries, including The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Jewish Museum, all in New York; the Smithsonian Institution, the Art Institute of Chicago, and The Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The current retrospective at OCMA is unique in presenting an overview of his entire body of work, from 1961 to the present.

As I drove to DeLap's Corona del Mar studio, I wondered if the artist would be as understated as his work. I was greeted by a grandfatherly man in an ironed blue shirt,

gray pants, gray hair, goatee and granny glasses. He's a husband, father of two grown children, amateur chef and fisherman—but most of all a magician. As he showed me around his two-story studio—the first floor work area cluttered with tools and sawhorses; an orderly gallery-like space upstairs—he encountered a deck of cards sitting on his drafting table, waiting for a willing audience. In short order, in his hands, spades became clubs, while hearts appeared, seemingly out of nowhere.



Fawkes

The artist's "shaped painting"—he refers to them as "hyperbolic paraboloid"—change shape as the viewer moves and have titles—"Houdini," and "The Great Escape"—that are clearly homages to the conjurer's art.

And yet, they're not. DeLap explained that while magic is the art of illusion, minimalism is the art of anti-illusion. What you see—and *only* what you see is what you get. Or, as DeLap says, "A work of art is a thing in itself."

Within that rigorous definition, DeLap has been able to work steadily for almost a half century, turning out a steady stream of paintings and sculptures that are so unusual in shape, structure and construction that they almost defy description.

While some minimalists even rejected the actual process of building works of art, DeLap has almost always constructed his own works—sawing, stretching and painting canvasses; experimenting with structures and materials, including wood, metal,

fiberglass, molded plastics and fabrics; producing freestanding aluminum and fiberglass and resin sculptures; as well as wall-mounted, low-relief, mixed-media constructions.

I asked DeLap why he continues to work in a minimalist mode, years after it has ceased to be the *de rigueur* art movement.

His answer: he has spent his whole life living on or near water. "When you look at the water, there's nothing there," he said. "Water is really serene, metaphysical, Zen-like and poetic." A good description of his art.

This veteran water-watcher was born in Oakland in 1927, and witnessed the construction of the Golden Gate bridge from his front porch. In the '50s and early '60s, DeLap worked at various jobs, including trade show exhibitions and freelance graphic design while working on collages, painting and sculpture at night.

He became an art professor in San Francisco, then landed a job at UC Davis. In the mid '60s, he came to Orange County to teach art at UC Irvine (he's since retired).

Before he built his current studio, DeLap rented a large work space in Costa Mesa, near crafts and construction shops. He learned from his neighbors, and evolved as a craftsman as well as an artist.

The artist's "shaped painting," he refers to them as "hyperbolic paraboloid," change shape as the viewer moves and have titles, *Houdini* and *The Great Escape*, that are clearly homages to the conjurer's art.

And yet, they're not. Tony DeLap explained that while magic is the art of illusion, minimalism is the art of anti-illusion. What you see and only what you see is what you get. Or, as he says, "A work of art is a thing in itself."

Within that rigorous definition, he has been able to work steadily for almost a half century, turning out a steady stream of paintings and sculptures that are so unusual in shape, structure and construction that they almost defy description.

While some minimalists even rejected the actual process of building works of art, He has almost always constructed his own works, sawing, stretching and painting canvasses; experimenting with structures and materials, including wood, metal, fiberglass, molded plastics and fabrics; producing freestanding aluminum and fiberglass and resin sculptures; as well as wall-mounted, low-relief, mixed-media constructions.

I asked Tony DeLap why he continues to work in a minimalist mode, years after it has ceased to be the *de rigueur* art movement.

His answer: he has spent his whole life living on or near water. "When you look at the water, there's nothing there," he said. "Water is really serene, metaphysical, Zen-like and poetic." A good description of his art!



FourDots

This veteran water-watcher was born in Oakland in 1927, and witnessed the construction of the Golden Gate bridge from his front porch. In the '50s and early '60s, he worked at various jobs, including trade show exhibitions and freelance graphic design while working on collages, painting and sculpture at night.

He became an art professor in San Francisco, then landed a job at UC Davis. In the mid 1960s, he came to Orange County to teach art at UC Irvine (he's since retired).

Before he built his current studio, Tony DeLap rented a large workspace in Costa Mesa, near crafts and construction shops. He learned from his neighbors, and evolved as a craftsman as well as an artist.

Liz Goldner