

# TONY DELAP'S SHAPELY PAINTINGS

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California kin to the Bauhaus tradition, Tony DeLap has worked the Constructivist tradition through the sculptural object into the sublimation of the object in painting.



The paintings which Tony DeLap first showed in New York over a year ago raise worthwhile issues, as much in regard to the problem of provincialism as in relation to the development of DeLap's own art. The provincialism problem is nowadays taken to mean that 1) mainstream art originates in a single metropolitan center, since 1945 New York, and 2) that an artist who works far away, in this case in Los Angeles, can for better or worse be affected only passively or indirectly by metropolitan developments. Obviously this would not be a problem unless non-metropolitan artists expected metropolitan attention—especially if they liked the idea of being provincial—since their needs would be satisfied at home. DeLap's work does belong to a considerable local tradition. Yet it is also interesting in a much broader way, especially by comparison with certain generalized European parallels

rather than New York connections. That too, in turn, has general importance for the extramural appearance and reputation of California art.

In the first place, while DeLap started out in San Francisco, the hard, crisp Los Angeles style of, for instance, John McLaughlin was in the air from the turn of the 1950s onward. Secondly, the cool expressionlessness of DeLap and other Californians may compare with diffused international late Constructivism in Europe. Alan Solomon, in his catalogue essay for the DeLap show at the University of California at Irvine in 1969, argued that in California a tradition of cool abstraction extended continuously from "post-Cubism" onward, since there never was any really thoroughgoing expressionism to interrupt it. While that is a complicated issue, its indication of an alternative, anti-expressionist stream on the West Coast is

provocative.

But perhaps we can go even further, to the point of exploring parallels with European Constructivism, again outside the pull of New York. (One of the most interesting features of provincialism is the way even remotely separate provincial centers can produce comparable dialectical responses to the capital.) Thus DeLap's open cubical sculpture in two parts, called *Houdin's House* (1967), resembles Naum Gabo's illustration of a cube opened up and rebuilt with diagonal interior vanes, as published in Gabo's essay on sculpture as a constructive process in the British *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937). Even the stepping downward and inward of layered recessions, which is almost a trademark of DeLap's, can be found in Viennese *Sezession* design, as in the ceiling of Adolf Loos' famous Kärtner Bar (1907), in the orthodox Con-

structivist sculpture of Max Bill, and in late European Constructivism even today (Karl Gerstner's paintings).

In architectural terms there are established historical links between the two centers. The California architect Irving Gill, whose rounded "Mission" doors and windows established in Los Angeles as early as 1910 a shape vital to much of Tony DeLap's production, shows real affinities with Loos. Reyner Banham cautions in his *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) against confusing the nihilistic "white bald surfaces and forms" of the Viennese with their "quietly affirmative" equivalents in the buildings of the Angelino. Nevertheless, there remains a basic similarity that corroborates DeLap's own Los Angeles style in painting and sculpture. Another Los Angeles link with Central European architectural modernism is the work of Rudolf Schindler, who

came to California with Wright in 1920 after having studied under Otto Wagner in Vienna. Richard Neutra constitutes an even more well-known Germanic connection.

Allen Solomon saw the layered stepping that appears in much of DeLap's work, especially in the early 1960s, as inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's more definitively native architecture, particularly by the decorative reinforced concrete squares that Wright used to face the Millard House at Pasadena (1923). There certainly are formal similarities of that kind, so that even the particular way DeLap's new canvases are shaped—with rounded corners on top—compares with forms in ground plans by Wright, including the Millard house itself. But the analogy with architecture is most important as the general indication of Constructivist affinities (on grounds that all the arts, once "purified," may subsequently interrelate) than as a key to the explication of specific works. Such a generalized Constructivist outlook seems characteristic of DeLap himself: having worked as a designer as well as having been an artist preoccupied by painting/sculpture ambiguities, DeLap has a certain home-grown Bauhaus air.

During the 1960s, after having been more categorically a painter, DeLap produced objects that hover between painting and sculpture. This means that his new works constitute a return to painting per se, even though their shapely physicality may in some degree carry over from the ambivalent objects. Even the rounding of the corners, so essential to the effect of the new paintings, readily traces back to an earlier phase of painting. Compare, for instance, the two circles recessed smoothly behind the edge in *Gerkin*, a painting of 1962.

Between the early and late work the categorical difference between painting and sculpture very much relaxed. Within a year of *Gerkin* came *Maggie* (1963), a "painting construction" 2½ inches thick, mounted, like a sculpture, on a stand. In *Maggie* two inset sculptural channels with stepped-down treatment extend to the same width as a narrow horizontal, Robert Ir-

wine-like line crossing the center of the piece. That work is flat and shallow and deals with linear relationships, yet it is at the same time substantially thick and volumetric enough to stand free on a mount, as sculpture. Such ambiguously Constructivist objects as *Maggie*, however, were in turn followed by unambiguously sculptural sculptures like *The Sorcerer* (1965), which carries forward the stepped device of *Maggie* but without involving the concept of painting. Nowadays, in DeLap's recent works, we have the opposite—real, flat paintings, which also recapitulate the earlier involvement with painting pure and simple.

That the new paintings all have rounded upper corners means, of course, that they are literally shaped, yet their rounding grows logically out of painting proper. They could be compared with New York paintings with rounded (here diagonally opposite) corners, as for instance Kelly's *Yellow Piece* (1966) and a 1973 canvas by Mangold with drawn, rather than cut, ones. Yet even in DeLap's own work the same motif traces back beyond the Kelly, so that even where there are affinities, it is not a question of dependence. (Similarly, the repeated half-round forms of a sculpture by Don Judd called *Bullnose* (1974), hanging suggestively beside DeLap's painting *Maga* (1975) in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, themselves trace back to a type developed by Judd in 1964-65.)

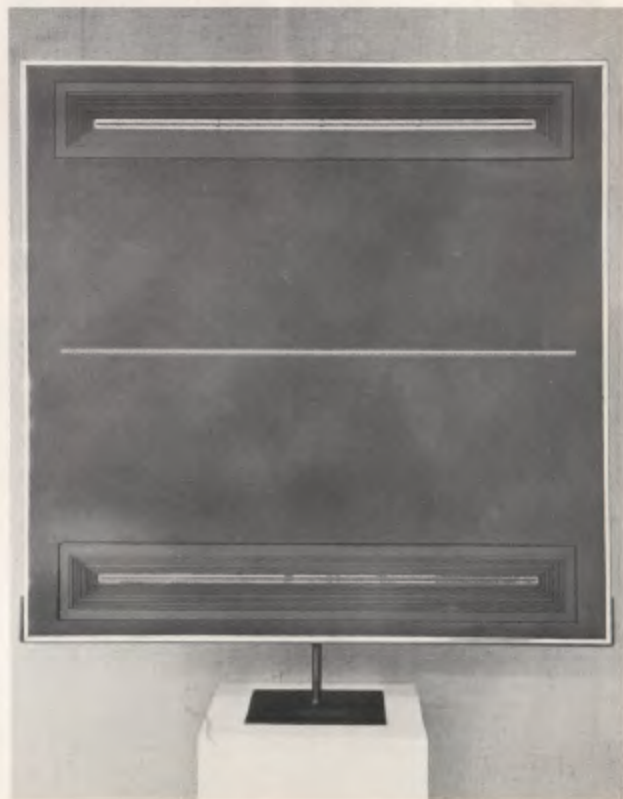
A photograph of *The Sorcerer* standing in DeLap's workshop is informative. We see the large layered sculpture together with

its bent metal maquette on the workbench behind. Both, obviously, have the quadrant-rounded corners of the newest paintings (as both more generally relate back to the recessed circles of *Gerkin*). But even more important, in terms of the shapely, physical corner curves, is an identity, revealed by the photograph, between the rounded curves of both pieces of sculpture on the one hand, and the quadrant-rounded corners of the artist's carpentry tools on the other—the hacksaw, keyhole saw, and brace, especially.

The corners have another interesting consequence. To speak of evidences of Orientalism in West Coast art normally means to point up a sort of meditative element. Often however, California art is most Oriental when it is most native, rather than "delicate" and foreign. Thus, the affinity between the "finish fetish" (even Kustom Kars) and the Japanese lacquer tradition may be more thorough and telling than the privately meditative delicacies of Graves or Tobey. Similarly, DeLap's rounded corners recall what for Roger Fry in the essay "Some Aspects of

Chinese Art" (in his *Transformations*, 1927) was a main characteristic of Chinese, versus Western, formal design: "Chinese rhythm . . . tends to be continuous to avoid sudden transitions of movement. Its basic idea, especially in early art, is that of the square with rounded edges."

The recent works involve the fitted interlocking of "custom-crafted" stretcher parts, with canvas stretched, in upholstery fashion, over each component. The parts fit smartly and elegantly together, with the grooves between them showing as concrete linear inflections in the uniform, sedately automotive (classy, not zappy) metallic-lustrous surface. It could be maintained that these pieces have the bald objecthood of mere furniture, for even the pure cabinetmaking of their stretchers and built-in frames is so essential to the final effect. Also, the bottom of each piece is flat, with the wood frame perpendicular, while, as we follow it up toward the top, the frame twists slenderly back, rather in Danish-modern fashion. However, everything seems to be in the service of the



At right:  
Tony DeLap, *Maggie*, 1963.  
Painting construction, 30 x 30 x 2½".  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lauter.  
Opposite page:  
Tony DeLap, *The Sorcerer*, 1965.  
Courtesy Robert Elkon Gallery.

absolutely flat, continuously painted canvas surface. There is little hint of literal spatial occupancy, despite DeLap's earlier work. To the extent that they are like the "minor" arts, they suggest the flat wall-boundedness of decorative painted panels rather than the sculptural quality of furniture.

Even the craftsmanship adds poetic conviction to the style. The striking analogy between DeLap's tools and the form of *The Sorcerer* and its model confirms a specially handmade, clean-cut, shipshape, squared-away frankness that belongs to DeLap's work whenever it doesn't lapse into the facile elegance of California ultra-finish.

On that score, DeLap's finish is not compulsively puristic. His new paintings are taut and lithe, and have overtones of the practicality found in types of sporting equipment, Klepper kayaks for example. If their format is eccentric, they all still look designed along pseudopragmatic lines, just as the colors of all of them—sedate gray, blue, violet—are like one another. The stretching and framing rigs differ too, but the variation factor is just assertive enough to establish that the single work is not a mere instance of a master design, a view which is in turn supported by both the similarities and the differences in color.

Formal decisions, which in

these controlled circumstances will have the most serious effect on the finished work, are nevertheless made with a pleasant lack of anxiety. For example, in the large diptych called *Rab Mag*, of this year, two large panels interlock problematically but intelligently. In the left-hand panel a notch in the left side continues in, up, around the corner, and along the top to the same length as it extends up the side. This wooden band turning the corner could be likened, in shape and proportion, to DeLap's sculptures of ten years ago, yet here it is locked into the composition of this particular painting, even as against another in the same group. This inset molding relates to the edges of both the left-hand canvas and the diptych as a whole in the following way:

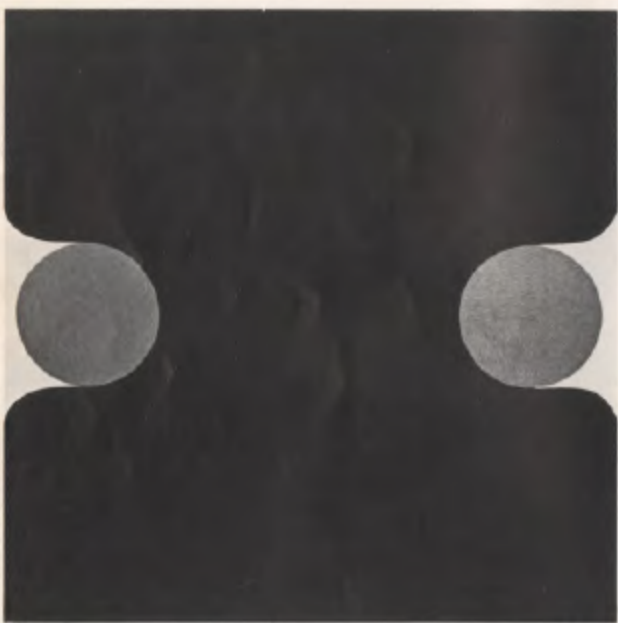
At the right side of the left-hand panel the rim bends out and down, toward the bottom, to just the same extent as on the left, and in mirror image. This means that while the far right-hand edge of the piece, on the right-hand canvas, is also in exact reverse of the notch pattern of the far left, the right-hand canvas itself cannot be symmetrical, although it is necessary to the symmetry of the whole (and although the left-hand canvas has the privilege of being symmetrical and also contributing to the overall symmetry). Hence, one intrinsically symmetrical piece and another intrinsically asymmetrical piece interlock, forming a qualified symmetrical whole relieved and activated by an asymmetrical seam or weld.

While DeLap's involvement

with paintings as objects differs radically from Stella's, our tendency to compare these artists is interesting in itself. One of the ironies of modernism is that the "purification" of painting—that hermetic distillation of the art to the ultimate refinement of exclusive self-reference—calls all the time for comparisons between one artist's work and another's.

In this case, Stella's vast industrially scaled output contrasts with DeLap's lovingly handmade, limited home workshop production. More than that, Stella's productivity is itself in an ironic relation to the romantic sublimity of his art. DeLap's emphasis on personal craftsmanship relates, with equal and opposite irony, to his aircraft-plant emphasis on smooth, anonymous Constructivist perfection. (Just which of them suggests a defense plant after all?) The taste implicated by both artists is, likewise, both similar and opposite: both have been involved with the light-reflective inorganic sheen of metallic paints, but with different sorts of enthusiasm. All this supplies more evidence on the provincialism issue because what DeLap likes is not in itself ultimately to Stella's or New York's taste; he certainly has a sweet tooth for it and converts it readily into art.

DeLap's approach has a kind of florid simplicity, with suave finish overlaying clearheaded shapeliness of form—untroubled but articulate. His recent art is perhaps the fruit of a sublimation of the object, through sculpture, into painting.



At left:  
Tony DeLap, *Rab Mag*, 1975. Acrylic  
on canvas, 6'4" x 12'8" x 3 1/2".  
Courtesy Robert Eikon Gallery.

At left, above:  
Tony DeLap, *Garkin*, 1962. Oil on  
canvas, 42 x 42". Courtesy Robert  
Eikon Gallery.