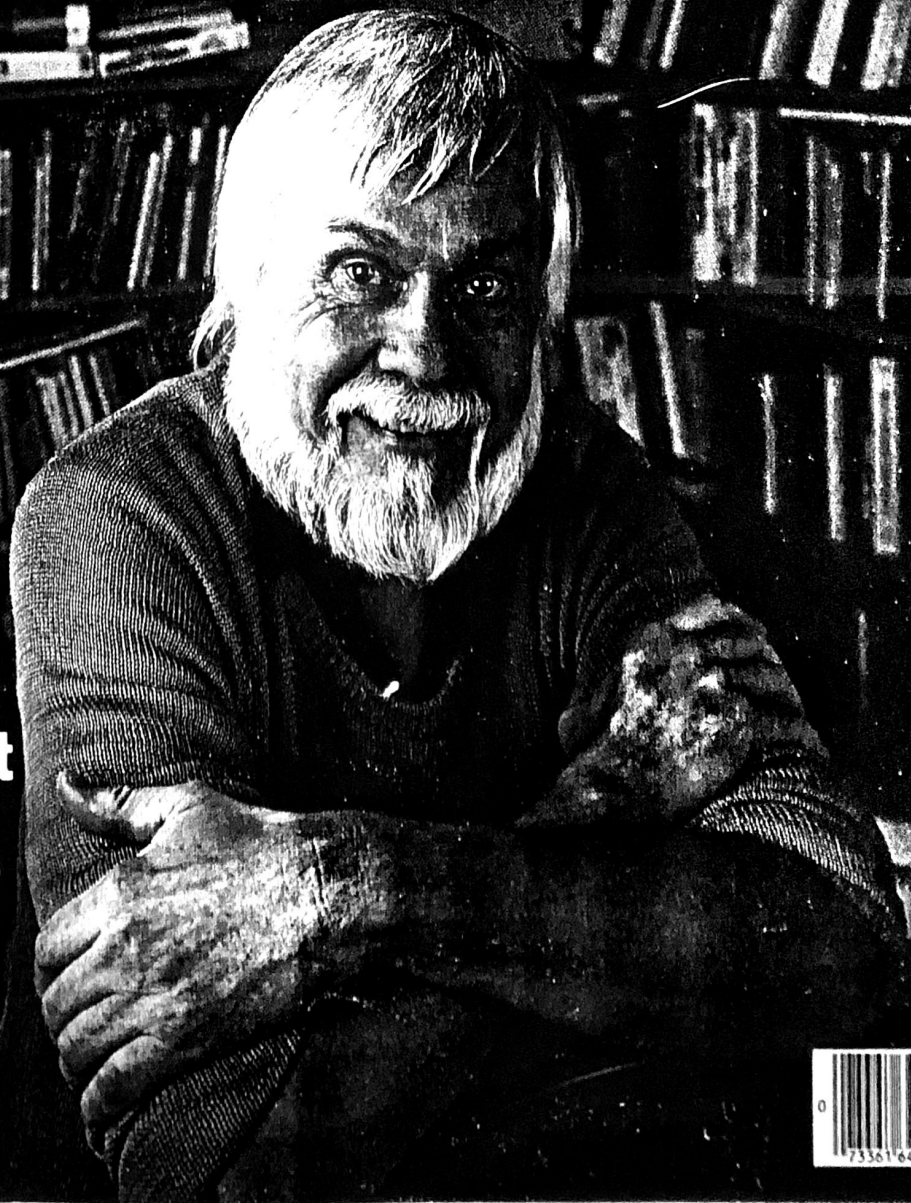


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**John Baldessari:
No More Boring Art**

**Abstraction Makes
a Comeback**

**Robert Irwin's
Visual Wonderland**

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NO MORE BORING ART



By Hunter Drohojowska

'I'm constantly playing the game of changing this or that,' John Baldessari says, 'asking you to believe the airplane has turned into a seagull and the sub into a mermaid...'

THE ARTIST HAULED OUT PAINTING after painting, leaned each against a packing crate and gleefully kicked his foot through every canvas. Portraits of friends, studies of pine trees, landscapes, still lifes, a few abstractions, Pop-style paintings on scraps of billboard—13 years of accumulated work, now in ruins, was taken from the Jewish Museum to a mortuary and cremated. The ashes, in a book-shaped urn, were interred behind a bronze plaque that read: "John Anthony Baldessari, May 1953-March 1966."

That gesture of destruction, performed in 1970, established Baldessari as one of the first Conceptual artists. He rapidly earned international attention and respect by advocating the supremacy of idea over execution in art.

"I stopped painting because I feared I might be painting

for the rest of my life," Baldessari recently said. "After a certain period of time, one knows how to make beautiful things."

"First, I had the idea of making each painting into a microdot and mailing them to my friends under the postage stamps. But I thought it would be more phoenixlike to rise from the ashes. It seems a little weird now, but at the time it seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do. I felt wonderfully free."

Baldessari, 54, sipped a Scotch during a rare break at the Santa Monica studio he has called home since 1970. The absence of paintings or sculptures in the vast warehouse reflects his "post-studio" esthetic. Floor-to-ceiling shelves sagging with books line the walls of three rooms. Filing cabinets complete the decor. Behind the photography darkroom is a tiny bedroom, where a Sol LeWitt drawing hangs like a crucifix over the bed. Baldessari was preparing for a



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trip to the Paris Biennale, where several of his pieces were to be shown. "I travel so much, people in New York often think I live there. According to my American Airlines statement, I flew 40,000 miles last year."

Baldessari was one of the first artists to legitimize the fine-art use of imagery drawn from popular media: television, movies, newspapers and advertising. He shows annually at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York and often in Europe. But in Los Angeles, his hometown, people can still be heard to ask: "John who? Oh yeah. The tall guy with the white hair who goes to all the openings." His show at the Margo Leavin Gallery in 1984 was, in fact, his first solo show in that city since 1970.

Given this state of things, why does Baldessari stay in Los Angeles? "A sense of permission," the artist says. "There's a daffy quality of 'why not?' Also, I need to be a little bit angry to work, and I'm usually the angry. It's

not a pretty city. I get angry at artists for being so dumb, and that makes me work. I'm angry at the chauvinism of L.A."

Baldessari stands a lanky six foot six, distinguished, even professorial, with his white walrus moustache and beard. His blues eyes, however, are as mischievous as a child's, and his hands look surprisingly delicate as he turns the pages of a catalogue from his retrospective at a German museum. He points to an illustration of one of his favorite works, *Concerning Diachronie/Synchronous Time Above/On/Under (with Mermada)* (1976). It is composed of six movie stills: floating at the top are an airplane and a bird; in the middle are two shots of a lifeboat, entering by the one on the left and leaving by the one at the right; and floating on the bottom are a one-man submarine and a mermada.

"I wanted the work to be layered, and wish that you would have trouble understanding it," Baldessari explains.

"I wanted all the intellectual things going, and at the same time I am asking you to believe the airplane has turned into a seagull and the sub into a mermaid during the time the motorboat is crossing. I am constantly playing the game of changing this or that, visually or verbally. As soon as I see a word, I spell it backward in my mind. I break it up and put the parts back together to make a new word."

Baldessari, who once thought of becoming an art critic, clearly has a writer's sensibility, so his parables work on a literary as well as a visual level. They serve as contemporary fairy tales, subtly injecting myth, allegory and metaphor into the avant-garde context. Baldessari began to work with photos and text in the late '60s. At that time many artists had decided to abandon the production of objects as a reaction against the heroic stance of the Abstract Expressionists and as a rejection of what was seen as the rampant commercialization of the art world. As an alternative, Minimalists embraced pure form and Conceptualists such as Baldessari chose pure content.

In the early days, Baldessari was occasionally criticized for being insufficiently "pure." But his friend and fellow Conceptualist Lawrence Weiner has described him as "one of the few humanistic and intellectual artists in the United States. John is *most* pure because he understands that art is based on the relationship between human beings and that we, as Americans, understand our relationship to

the world through various media. We think of any unknown situation in terms of something we've seen at the movies. That is the basis of our normal mass consciousness and how we see the world. John is dealing with the archetypal consciousness of what media represent, using the material that affects daily life. High art is useful to society and helps people understand and relate to the world." Baldessari seems to need to feel that his art has some useful purpose. As Weiner puts it, he is "moral, responsible—a Calvinist artist."

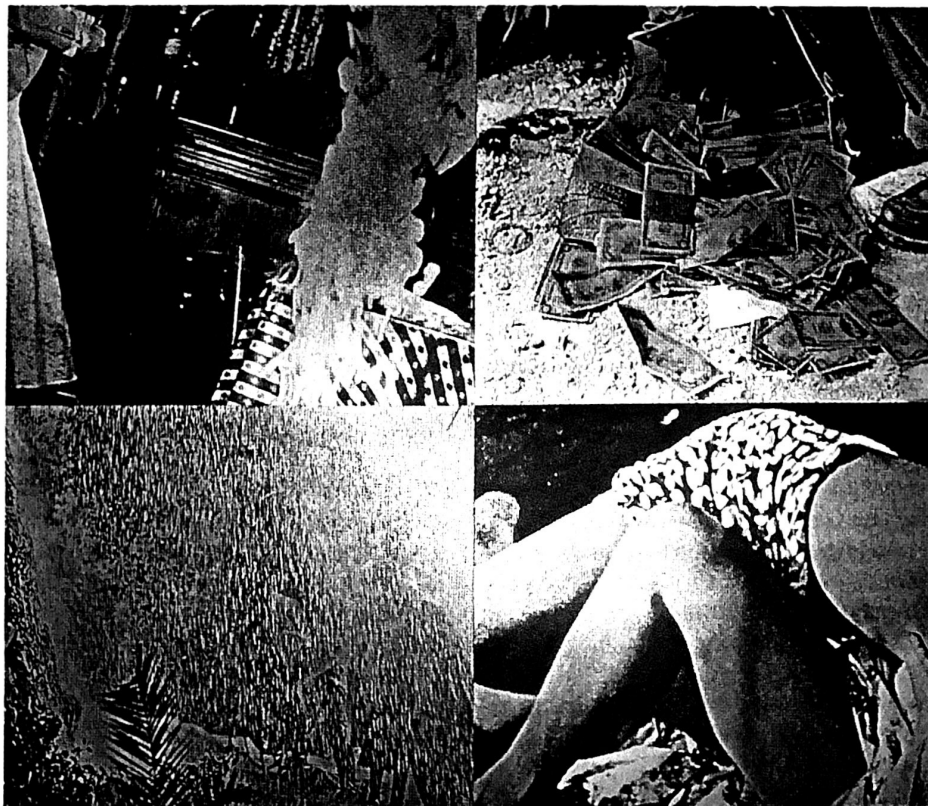
Baldessari pops a slide into a desktop viewer. The screen glows with a composite of black-and-white movie stills, and the artist admits conspiratorially, "I love my titles." *Man with Nails/Car/Reluctant Man* (1984) is a streamlined horizontal triptych of a man with a pair of nails dangling from his lips, a car (an elongated dragster called "Goldenrod") and a man on the edge of a diving board, uneasily pondering a jump. The disjunction in the combination of literal titles and utterly strange and disconnected pictures makes us laugh. As in much of Baldessari's work, the dry wit has a strong impact, leaving the impression that he makes funny art. Baldessari protests, "I think of humor as going for laughs, and that is not my purpose. I see my work as issuing forth from a view of the world that is slightly askew." Each of the images has a symbolic as well as a literal value, as in a visual poem. "I saw that guy with the nails in his mouth as a young soldier



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Midget, Bigman, Octopus, 1984, oil-tinted gelatin silver prints, 38 by 24 inches.

Fire, Money, Water, Sex, 1984. Baldessari reveals intuitive knowledge through media images.



COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY

I wanted to see the night... the young men... the night... the night... the night...

And to see... the night... the night... the night... the night... the night...

And to see... the night... the night... the night... the night... the night...



Michael Jackson... the night... the night... the night...

the night... the night... the night... the night... the night... the night...

the night... the night... the night... the night... the night... the night...

the night... the night... the night... the night... the night... the night...

Fift-Money Water, Sep. 1966. [The text is blurry and partially illegible.]



66-1

ready to crucify someone," he explains. "I wondered how long that habit—putting nails in your mouth—goes back."

Baldessari's composite photographs represent the duality of order and chaos, a fundamental opposition that can be found consistently in his work since 1966. It may be manifested in the dichotomies of heaven and hell, birth and death or love and hate—all fundamental oppositions Baldessari has absorbed from religion. He attended church regularly through his late 20s and once considered abandoning art to accept a scholarship to the Princeton Theological Seminary. He has always been interested in the way the world works.

"Even in freshman philosophy class," recalls Baldessari, who went to San Diego State College, "I remember asking the teacher, 'What is order? And if you know what order is, what is disorder?' He just looked at me, you know, like, this is one of the fundamental philosophical questions coming from this kid. At what point did chaos become order? Or is chaos a different kind of order? Or does it have to be ordered for us to perceive it?"

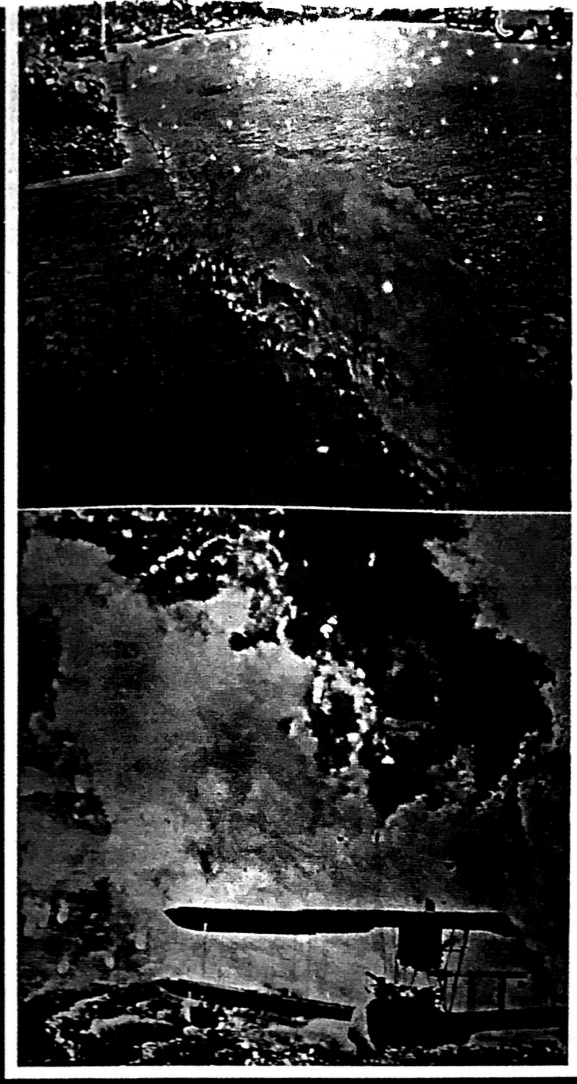
"The larger issue for me is boredom. Geminis are supposed to get bored, and I do hop from subject to subject. It's this feeling of constant dissatisfaction that keeps me from trying to find order. I can endlessly speculate on something that is not conventionally ordered. Like I'm fascinated by the way we say, 'This is not a good painting.' Why not? How inbred are our reasons? In my art, I push that. I constantly qualify things."

Baldessari ambles over to a big box containing file folders full of movie stills categorized from the obvious ("art") to the arcane ("looking up/looking down"). When asked how he selects his images, the artist sighs. "It's a very slow, tortuous, arduous winnowing process that begins with visits to places that sell movie stills. It's a process akin to going to bookstores. It gives me an idea of what's on my mind; it's a way of bringing that intuitive stuff up from below, giving it shape and finding out what it is."

Baldessari also selects his imagery from television. "The world constructed by the media seems to me a reasonable surrogate for 'real life,' whatever that is. I decided that aiming my camera at the TV set was just as reasonable as aiming it out the window," he says.

Curator and art writer Coosje van Bruggen, who is compiling a book on Baldessari's work from 1969 to 1984, says,

COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY



Blue Water/Red Fire, 1984, oil-tinted gelatin silver prints. Each of Baldessari's works is "an invitation to a dialogue."

"He uses movie stills as a code people know to get them involved. But his work is all about balance and the immediate possibility of unbalance, enhanced by the composition. Every single piece of John's work is like an invitation to a dialogue. The things that stay constant are the narrative approach and the use of photography."

If Baldessari's ideas and imagery now have a familiar ring, it is partly because of their far-reaching impact on today's culture. He has been a teacher for virtually his entire artistic career, most significantly since the 1970 inception of the California Institute of Arts in Valencia. Cal Arts, as it is known, has had an influence on contemporary art in Los Angeles and New York disproportionate to its small size and relatively recent founding. Baldessari has played a key role in this process. Many of his students, such as David Salle, Troy Brauntuch, Matt Mullican, Jack Goldstein, James Welling and Erika Beckman, have achieved success. All of them either use photographic imagery in

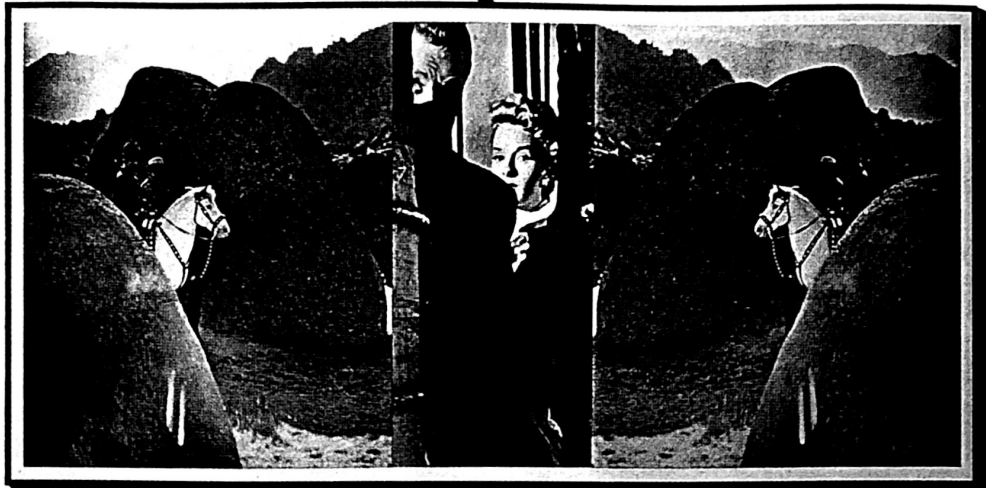
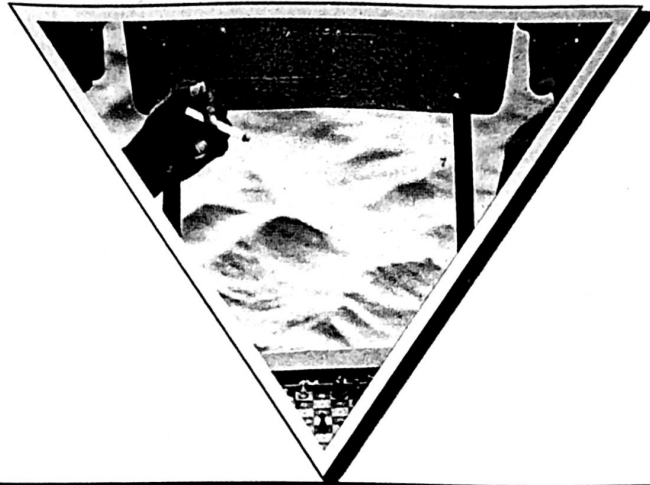
their work or employ the cool, ironic wit that is Baldessari's trademark. The idea of appropriation is as common today as the loaded brushstroke was in the 1950s, and Baldessari was one of the first appropriators.

Unlike many artists, Baldessari cares passionately about his teaching. "I've often felt there's a fuzzy boundary line between my work as a teacher and my work as an artist," he says. "I often think that the art I do is saying, 'Look, this is what I've been talking about.' And when I'm teaching, I'm really doing art. I can be out there to say, 'You might not be as wacko as you think you are. You don't have to do work that looks like everything else. Your own ideas might be okay.'"

Paul Brach, the first dean of the art school at Cal Arts, gave Baldessari his first break. "John was this low-key, bemused man in a two-bit junior college in San Diego, acting as though he was the absolute center of the international art world. He was projecting these clumsy snapshots onto photo emulsion on canvas and having a sign painter letter the description underneath. I wanted someone who could open the students up to what critic Harold Rosenberg called the de-definition of art. John started a course called 'Post-studio Art.'"

Baldessari gave the Cal Arts program a good dose of East Coast intellectual style, even though he didn't make his first professional visit to New York until 1970. "One of the

Black & White Decision, 1984. Baldessari sees his work as "issuing forth from a view of the world that is slightly askew."

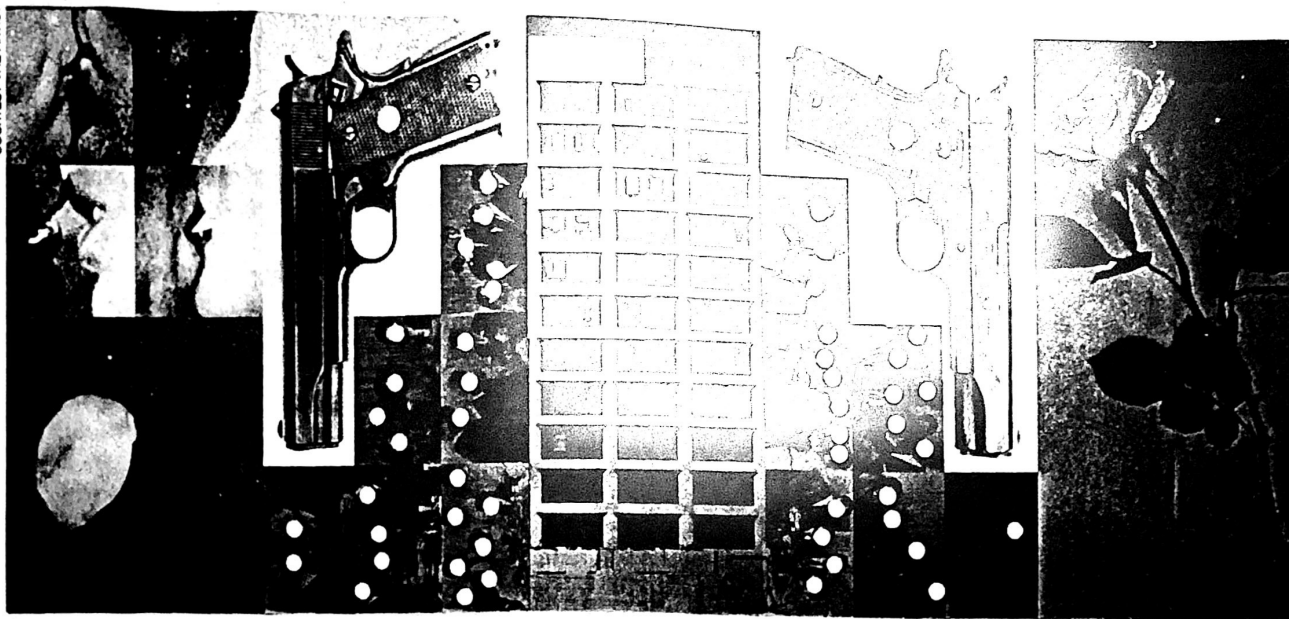


COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY

Kiss!Panic, 1984. Each of the images in a work by Baldessari has a symbolic as well as a literal value.



COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY



Buildings = Guns = People: Desire, Knowledge, and Hope (with Smog), 1985, a 192-by-450-inch installation at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, that consists of color as well as black-and-white photographs.

things I worked for at Cal Arts was to break the stranglehold of the L.A. esthetic. I constantly pushed to hire not from L.A. but from New York and Europe—to bring in an alternative esthetic.” Baldessari pauses for emphasis. “Now that’s a battle that’s been won, but you can’t believe what it was like. There was only one way to think, and that was dictated by the Ferus Gallery.” (Ferus, widely considered the first legitimate gallery for contemporary art in Los Angeles, was founded in 1957 by curator Walter Hopps and artist Ed Kienholz. Among the painters and sculptors showing there were Kienholz, Robert Irwin, Wallace Berman, Billy Al Bengston, Ken Price, Ed Moses, Craig Kauffman, John Altoon, Jay De Feo, Larry Bell and Ed Ruscha.)

“In the 1970s we were bringing out artists who are known now but were formative then: Doug Heubler, Joseph Kosuth, Robert Smithson, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren, Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Sol LeWitt. All at my invitation. Another thing I did was to tell my students to move to New York.”

Baldessari’s conviction as a teacher/role model stems from his own long search as a young artist for such guidance. He was born and raised in the modest community of National City, just south of San Diego. His parents were immigrants—his mother was Danish, his father Austrian—and there was little encouragement for his interest in art. “I always felt like a pariah doing art, and I felt I should be doing something more socially useful,” he confesses.

Moreover, in the 1950s San Diego was provincial in its attitudes toward produc-

ing art. Many teachers seemed to be painting in the style of Picasso’s *Guernica* period, filtered through the Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo. “A peer of mine called it ‘shower-curtain spiky art,’ ” laughs Baldessari. The master of this style was Rico LeBrun, who had disciples all over the state.

“The first time I got any sort of suspicion that I could do anything was around 1954, when my instructor talked me into entering a large juried exhibition that was part of the National Orange Show at the state fair in San Bernardino. That was the thing you did in those days. I entered a still life painted à la Cézanne.” Baldessari rummages around in a box of old slides and puts one into the viewer: a still life of a spiky little potted plant, carefully painted in tones of brown and gray. “I got my first review in an art magazine, in *ARTnews*, by Jules Langsner. I was floored. I thought, well, maybe I’m something other than ordinary.”

That is exactly what Baldessari turned out to be, though not for another ten years. After graduating from college, he joined the legions of high-school art teachers who painted in their spare time. “My life consisted of sending in slides, then sending in paintings, then getting the paintings back. I did reasonably well. ‘Artists from Southern California,’ ‘Artists from California,’ ‘Artists from the Southwest,’ ‘Artists from the Northwest,’ ‘Artists from the Western States,’ ‘Artists from the Southwestern States.’ I was in all of those shows. But I didn’t know how paintings got into galleries or museums, because none of my models—my teachers—were showing in galleries or museums.



Chimpanzees and Man with Arms in Arc, 1984. “At what point did chaos become order? Or is chaos a different kind of order? Or does it have to be ordered for us to perceive it?”

I knew there was information I didn't have, but I didn't know how to get access to that information."

With characteristic determination, Baldessari began a quest. He systematically, if naively, began searching out the meaning of art and the role of the artist. In 1957 he enrolled in a summer course being taught by Rico LeBrun at U.C.L.A. "I knew he must be an artist because everybody was talking about him." LeBrun spotted the younger artist's talent and advised him to quit teaching and go to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles for graduate work.

At that time, Otis was one of the last art academies where students drew and sculpted from the model. Again there was an exhibition, and again Baldessari was singled out by a critic, who wrote, "It's nice to know that someone in L.A. knows how to draw."

"That was it. I stopped drawing and dropped out of school," recalls Baldessari. But the seeds of his future were planted. He went back to National City in 1961, married a schoolteacher, painted and taught. "My fate was almost sealed," he says. Then he began taking photographs as notes for his paintings and pinning up his writings around the studio. "Paul Brach once saw my library and said, 'You import your culture.' He was right. I live in my head. I enjoy raw information."

In 1965, after years of showing slides around galleries, Baldessari was finally scheduled for a show. The gallery went bankrupt before the opening. Instead of despairing, Baldessari felt liberated. "I gave up all hope of showing," he says, "and thought, what the hell. Since nobody cares, why do I have to cosmeticize everything by translating it into painting? Why can't I use straight information? Straight photography?" This was the epiphany that changed his life.

Baldessari walks over to a corner of the studio and pulls out the first of his Conceptual paintings, just a photo with text. He used to drive around National City snapping pictures at random without even looking at the subject. After developing them directly on the canvas, he had the address

or description of the scene lettered as a caption: "Looking East on 4th and Chula Vista," for example.

"It seemed more like the truth. Landscape paintings are idealized. Telephone poles, telephone lines—that's real. I wasn't traipsing around the woods looking for the perfect spot. I was making art out of where I was, in National City."

His next series eliminated the photographs and simply appropriated texts from art books. In his favorite piece from that period in the mid-1960s, he appropriated a scene from D. W. Griffith's film *Intolerance*, labeling it "Semi-Close-Up of Girl by Geranium (Soft View) Finishes watering it—examines plant to see if it has any signs of growth, finds slight evidence—smiles—one part is sagging—she runs her fingers along it—raises her hand over plant to encourage it to grow." As in so much of Baldessari's art, fiction is somehow made true. "That piece resonates within the way I wish all my pieces would," he says.

Around that time, a number of dealers—Nicholas Wilder and Richard Bellamy among them—allowed that Baldessari's paintings were interesting but confessed they weren't sure what he was up to. A show of Baldessari's word paintings was finally scheduled at the Molly Barnes Gallery for one week in 1967. Coincidentally, Kosuth's first show opened that same night at the Eugenia Butler Gallery right down the block. Both were reviewed in *Artforum* by Jane Livingston. Baldessari's career was launched.

During those early years, Baldessari had other people execute his work. "I was finished with painting. I was attempting to make something that didn't emanate art signals." Perhaps his most famous gesture was an exhibition at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1971. Unable to travel there, he had students execute the show by writing repeatedly on the wall: "I will not make any more boring art."

Baldessari winces at discussing his private life. He has two grown children, a daughter studying math at Berkeley. *Hunter Drohojowska is an ARTnews correspondent in Los Angeles.*



The Baldessari billboard, Man and Woman with Bridge, 1983, constructed for Minneapolis' ArtSide Out exhibition.



Concerning Diachronic/Synchronic Time: Above, On, Under (with Mermaid), 1985.

and a son who wants to be an artist. He and his wife recently separated. "I've never talked much about my private life," he admits. "I can make sense of my art much better than my life. I never wanted to talk about my feelings, but now I see that as a weakness."

It is more than a coincidence that Baldessari's pieces from 1981, the "Vanitas" series, are concerned with loss, separation and mortality. Photographic still lifes, they are based on the 17th-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings, wherein each object is symbolic of the transience of human life. But Baldessari hasn't lost his sense of humor. In one picture, a flashlight stands in for a flickering flame.

"I was getting more concerned with content over form in art," says Baldessari. "I thought it would be interesting to zero in on the emotional meaning in the work. I decided to explore it through art history in still lifes, where a glass of wine or a clock wasn't just something to paint but meant something. I started with a series called 'Seven Deadly Sins, Seven Virtues.' I liked the idea that one could describe and dissect vices and virtues so exactly then, whereas now things get so muddy. Could you imagine Dürer doing a study called *Anxiety* or *Repression*? I'm beginning to think about my interior life. I realize that life has something more than a cerebral side. There's an emotional side that I'd always kept under wraps. I now have to be laboratory and subject.

Baldessari feared his career would end with the advent of the new figurative painting. "I thought that when Minimal

and Conceptual art began to wane, I would wane with them—like when the king dies and all the slaves get buried with him. But somehow I got through the gate. I felt like a person who has been revived: there's almost an obligation to use your life correctly. I'm really trying to *listen* to myself rather than just think about what I *should* do. That's why a lot of my work these days looks introspective, even impenetrable. Yet many think it's my best."

One recent piece is *Black and White Decision*, which was hailed as a "masterwork" by Los Angeles *Herald Examiner* critic Christopher Knight when it was shown in Los Angeles. A triangular black-and-white photograph of two men playing chess is mounted point down atop a rectangular triptych of cropped movie stills. On the left, Hopalong Cassidy, in black clothes on a white horse, and his sidekick, in light clothes on a black horse, lie in wait behind a boulder. A flopped version of this photo is placed on the far right, so that both cowboy couples look at a center photo of an anxious man and woman peering from behind two oil drums. All of Baldessari's work has to do with decisions, but, as Knight points out, these situations are of a particular kind. The chess players, the cowboys and the cornered couple are all deciding what move to make to outwit their opponents. "The situations that they're in evoke decisions based on logic, instinct, and, above all, on the desire for survival," Knight wrote. Such a description could well be applied to the situations in which Baldessari finds himself. ■