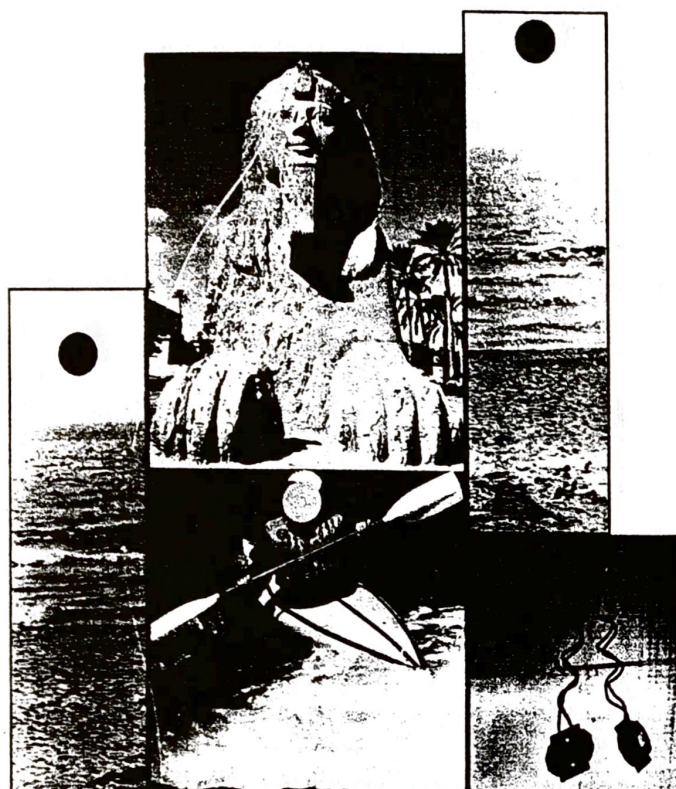


A pioneer of contemporary Conceptual art, John Baldessari has spawned a generation of artists more famous than himself.

This month, Los Angeles honors one of its neglected sons.

deconstructive criticism

by Hunter Drohojowska



John Baldessari stares at the litter of photographs and drawings tacked to the wall of his Santa Monica studio. Though the artist is usually involved in a plethora of projects, these represent a benchmark in his career—posters for his first retrospective, March 25-June 17, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; the cover of the first comprehensive book on his work (Rizzoli); and a handsome edition of prints. "It's been a long enough apprenticeship," he notes with a smile.

At age 58, this retrospective is a definite triumph, validation from the city that once ignored one of its most important sons. Despite annual exhibitions in Europe and New York, Baldessari wasn't rep-

resented by a gallery in L.A. until Margo Leavin stepped in six years ago. Paradoxically, this belated appreciation of his work burgeoned only after his students from the California Institute of the Arts—Eric Fischel, Matt Mullican, David Salle—garnered critical kudos and museum shows of their own. But Baldessari realizes that the art world operates in frustratingly elusive ways and one of the strategies of his art—in which photographs are combined, often to reveal potential allegories—has been to address the twists of fate inherent to that unpredictable realm.

The retrospective begins in

1966, when Baldessari abandoned the brush for photographs and text on canvas. In 1970, he made the transition official by destroying 13 years of paintings in a public performance, then storing the cremated remains in a book-shaped urn. His rebirth as one of the pioneers of the Conceptual art movement is manifest in a career of videotapes, books, installations and photomontage. "The world constructed by the media seems to me a valid 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."

Using film stills from forgotten movies to create an obstacle course of multiple readings, Baldessari is an intellectual Cubist. Instead of

disassembling visual volume and space, he deconstructs an image of his own making, interpreting it from psychological, metaphysical and philosophical vantage points. "I try to get my work to resonate with my understanding of the world. It's paradoxical, full of ambiguities. A cigar can be more than it is or it can be just a cigar."

In this dialectical swamp, viewers do well to surrender rather than struggle for definition. *Sphinx* of 1988, for instance, brings to mind the famous riddle addressing the stages of man. The ancient Egyptian monument, in this case, is an impermanent sand sculpture that divides a photograph of sky, ocean and beach. The suggestion of play and danger is reinforced by the bot-

tom image of a man in a kayak. The dangling electric switch on the lower right suggests the whole arrangement might be altered with a click. "It concerns the instability of something considered stable," explains the artist. "It shows that things can change in an instant."



Baldessari's *Sphinx* (far left) and *Earthquake* (left), both of 1988, use cropped and combined photo images to create visual and verbal paradoxes. Their meanings are slippery and intentionally oblique.

