

Knight, Christopher. "From 1,000 words down to one." *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 2005, p. E24-25.

From 1,000 words down to one

Put some words next to a photograph, and the immediate inclination is to read the words as a caption that clarifies the picture. In the 18 new works by **John**

Baldessari at Margo Leavin Gallery, that tendency prevails — before slowly falling apart. As it does, blind assumptions are giddily upended.

The series is titled "Prima Facie" — from the Latin for "first face," meaning at first sight — and each work pairs a black-and-white photographic head shot on the left with a single word in black type against white on the right. A sleek young woman with her head tilted slightly up and an unreadable expression on her face is paired with the word "cool." An older man with his eyes averted to the side is paired with "suspicious." A bubbly blond wearing a feathered hat and a wide grin is paired with "sunshiny," and so on.

Some works include as many as five pairs of portraits and words. The pairings seem to talk with each other: a "dorky" young guy and an "annoyed" woman (his mom?), or a flurry of elaborately emotional people who are "unctuous," "ecstatic" and "cynical."

These found portrait heads are closely cropped. All they wear is their facial expression, while minimal composition and lighting is all that's left of the original context. Baldessari always works with found photographs, rather than ones he's shot, which gives each character a sense of being at once an individual and an Everyman. The urge is strong to read "sunshiny" as a description of the quintessential bubbly blond or to assume that "suspicious" is a character trait of any man with averted eyes.

Logically, though, there's no reason to do so. Baldessari makes the word and picture equivalent in size and placement; they're on equal footing. Hierarchies collapse. Habit — or mundane prejudice — is exposed.

First sight gives way to second and third. All the chosen words are adjectives, and as an adjective the term "prima facie" means "evident without proof or reasoning." The paired image and word begin to wrestle with each other for influence, but the match is more like the WWE than Olympic wrestling — an amusing species of theatrical play.

Words, which first seemed to color the black-and-white portraits, are as easily given shape by the highly particularized look on a person's face. At the same time, the word and the picture might each be autonomous, pulling us in directions we really

should resist.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., West Hollywood. (310) 273-0603, through May 14. Closed Sunday and Monday.