

Pagel, David. "It's time for lots of close-ups." *Los Angeles Times*, 13 April 2007, p. E20.



JOHN BALDESSARI *Margo Leavin Gallery*
UPSIDE DOWN: *John Baldessari inverts a nose.*

It's time for lots of close-ups

John Baldessari's new inkjet prints of enlarged and altered B-movie stills are among the most concise — but not the simplest — of his long and distinguished career as the classiest clown of California Conceptualism. Unlike its New York counterpart, the California school of "idea art" never let solemnity get in the way of dumb fun, which turns out to be a lot smarter than it seems.

Baldessari's 15 pieces at Margo Leavin Gallery feature the faces of anonymous actors, most in close-up and most blown up to larger-than-life proportions. A few appear individually, their tightly cropped profiles occupying nearly all of the picture. Most come in pairs or groups of up to

eight actors, all staring into one another's eyes. A handful of the images include other elements to suggest such settings as a zoo, doctor's office, bodybuilding competition and formal ball.

In the past, Baldessari has cropped, juxtaposed and altered the colors of images, sometimes blocking out faces with solid discs of color and limiting his image-doctoring to the spaces around the figures. In his new pieces, he goes to work on the actors' faces, becoming the visual equivalent of a nose-job doctor.

Using common computer software, Baldessari flips noses upside-down. He does the same with ears, sometimes turning them backward. He highlights some noses and ears with pastel tints and leaves others to merge seamlessly with their surroundings.

Described in words, Baldessari's alterations sound too stupid to take seriously. But visually they work. And the curiously engaging results sustain second, third and fourth looks. Something uncanny is afoot, even though it is impossible to believe without seeing it for yourself.

Think of a face as a movie. Generally speaking, the eyes and mouth are the stars who carry the story by expressing emotions. The ears and nose, while useful for sensing things, are far less expressive, more like background details or the supporting cast.

Baldessari zeroes in on these differences. Like any great comedian, he takes them beyond the comfort zone, but not so far that his characters become freakish or unsympathetic. On the contrary, their expressions are so convincing that their upside-down noses and backward ears can almost be overlooked. Empathy is all the stronger for being unexpected.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603, through May 5. Closed Sundays and Mondays.