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Turning Gray to Black and White

Artist John Baldessari simplifies his message with 'Goya Series' inkjet paintings on canvas.

By Kristine McKenna

When artist John Baldessari revisited his early work during the run of "National City," an exhibition of his art of the '60s and '70s presented last year at San Diego's Museum of Contemporary Art, he was reminded of a good idea he'd had awhile ago. Realizing it was in sync with a direction he had been considering for his work, he decided to develop it further.

"That show included a work from 1968, 'This Is Not to Be Looked At,' which was the title of a work in Goya's 'Disasters of War' series," the 64-year-old artist explains during an interview at his Santa Monica studio.

"I loved Goya's titles for the works in that series. They were so ambiguous it was as if they had a life of their own, and I'd always wanted to go back and use more of them and pair them with my own images. So this body of work is sort of like unfinished business."

Baldessari's "Goya Series," which opened Saturday at the Margo Leavin Gallery, consists of 16 inkjet paintings on canvas with hand-painted text, and signals a turnabout of sorts for the artist. Just off a plane from Paris, he shared his thoughts about this new work, Marcel Duchamp, beauty and glamour:

Question: Is "The Goya Series" entirely a result of running into that painting from 1968, or were other things pushing you in this direction?



KIRK MCKOY / Los Angeles Times

BACK TO BASICS: "I've always been suspicious of the rarefied, beautiful object," says John Baldessari, whose "Goya Series" is on view at Margo Leavin Gallery. Below: "It Serves You Right."

Answer: There was more to it than the "National City" show. My work had been getting increasingly baroque in its use of color and elements of drawing and painting.

I felt it was getting too retinal and found myself longing to do something really simple, so I decided to do a body of work in black and white that presented a single image, as opposed to several. I decided to use text, which was something I hadn't done in a while, that the works would be on canvas, which is a material I hadn't used in years, and that I'd shoot the photographs myself rather than appropriate them. I've been in a Beckett mood—probably because I just read the new Beckett biography [James Knowlson's "Doomed to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett"]—and the whole idea was to move in a reductive direction.

Q: You explained that in choosing things to photograph for this work, you made a point of avoiding anything glamorous. What distinguishes a glamorous object from a non-glamorous one?

A: Spam isn't glamorous but a steak is, so perhaps it's a question of rarity. I've always been suspicious of the rarefied, beautiful object—probably because I was schooled in Minimalism, which tried to convince everybody that "decorative" was a dirty word, and have always found conventional beauty too easy.

If you've gone through all the steps required to become an artist and you can't achieve something conventionally beautiful, then something's wrong, because it's almost unavoidable—it's just the nature of the practice. The context of art has beauty built into it because of the attitude we bring into that arena.

We seem to be coming around to exploring beauty again too. I teach at UCLA, and I've noticed lots of students producing work about relationships, love, loss—the kind of dear diary stuff that was absolutely forbidden when I was a student. This soul-baring style is probably a backlash against the politically correct doctrine that dominated the early '90s.

Q: You're one of many artists who cite Marcel Duchamp as a seminal influence. What was Duchamp's central contribution to art of this century?

A: Duchamp, along with John Cage, established the idea that anything is possible, that there's more to art than making things,

and that an artwork that exists only in the mind can be legitimate. How many people sit around listening to Cage's music? Not many, yet his influence is huge. Who understands Duchamp's "Large Glass" by looking at it? You have to read volumes to get it—the point being that these artists took art into an entirely new dimension.

Q: What's the most significant difference between art of the 20th century and all the art that preceded it?

A: My point of entry was the '50s, when artists like Jackson Pollock were espousing the idea that art wasn't obliged to continue being what it had been. From there, we slid into a period of cynicism and irony that culminated with Warhol, who said you needn't bother making art—just manipulate people, then come up with some work later. Then it was on to Conceptualism, which was about artists making decisions and getting other people to execute the pieces, which was followed by the slacker disillusionment that set in after the '80s.

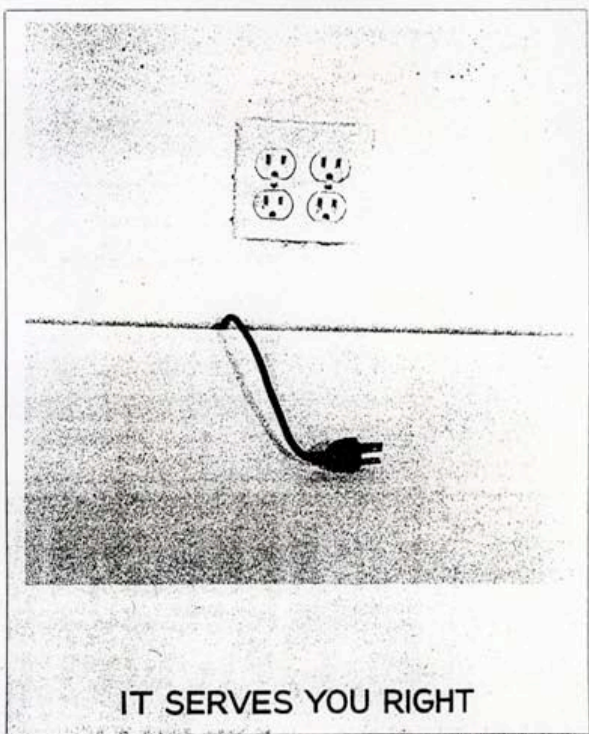
Q: This sounds incredibly downbeat! Ingmar Bergman once commented that "art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship." One could make the case that aside from the advent of mechanical reproduction, the biggest difference in the 20th century is the absence of the church as a unifying force of moral authority. A shared notion of God was certainly the rudder that guided most art throughout history. Do you agree?

A: Perhaps, and that may be what I'm sensing in the work I'm seeing by students at UCLA—this suspicion that we might've thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

Q: Can you recall the first artwork that ignited your imagination?

A: I didn't grow up with art, so the first time I even saw any was when I took a beginning art class at San Diego State. All of a sudden I'm seeing all these slides, and I remember really hating Matisse. I told the instructor as much, and he replied in a Texas drawl, "Mr. Baldessari, I venture that by the end of this course you'll really like him," and he was right. The following year I was copying Matisse paintings, and he was the first artist I really loved—he was able to make things look so simple and so beautiful at the same time.

Q: Your career was launched with a vehement rejection of painting, yet in a recent interview you talked about painting in a way that



suggested you feel decidedly nostalgic about it. Have your feelings changed?

A: Sol LeWitt once said, "Everybody thinks I like work that looks like mine, but I'm only interested in seeing work that *doesn't* look like mine."

I've always loved painting, and, yes, I do get nostalgic when I smell turpentine. I have a better grasp of what's happening in European painting than what's going on in America, however, because it's been awhile since anyone did a good survey of American painting. Moreover, New York is much more interested in painting than L.A. is.

I discovered just how uninterested L.A. is when I tried to get stretcher bars made for this new work. There was a certain kind of stretcher bar I wanted, so I called Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, who's a painter, and asked him who made them. He told me he ordered his from New York, and after we both checked around a bit, we concluded nobody makes them here—and that says something. New York is good at painting; L.A. excels at etcetera.

Q: When was the last time an artwork moved you to tears?

A: That's only happened once in my life; the first time I saw Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie-

Woogie." I was so embarrassed because my eyes actually misted over. I looked at it and thought, "If I could just do this once, I'd be a happy man."

Q: A central theme in your work is the compulsion to create meaning. Why do we struggle to organize day-to-day reality, and random data, into systems and patterns with larger meanings?

A: That question has always fascinated me, and it's been the bedrock of my art. As soon as you put two things together, we want to make a story out of it. When a videotape runs out and there's snow on the screen, why do we look at the snow until we see images in it? Look at the patchwork apparatus of the mind as it makes dreams, cobbling things together from the past and the present into a crazy quilt. Who can explain any of this?

When I was a teenager and I first saw images of the Holocaust, my life was permanently scarred. How can you create meaning out of such an event? It is the unthinkable, and it's like trying to understand infinity—you get a headache even trying. And the only way art can be of use in this regard is as a tool to sensitize people. If people's nerves are a little exposed, then maybe some truth can slip through the

cracks. So, perhaps the artist's job is nothing more than to keep the wound of consciousness open and raw. □

■ John Baldessari's "The Goya Series," Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd. Through May 31. Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (310) 273-0603.

Kristine McKenna is a regular contributor to *Calendar*.