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AROUND THE GALLERIES

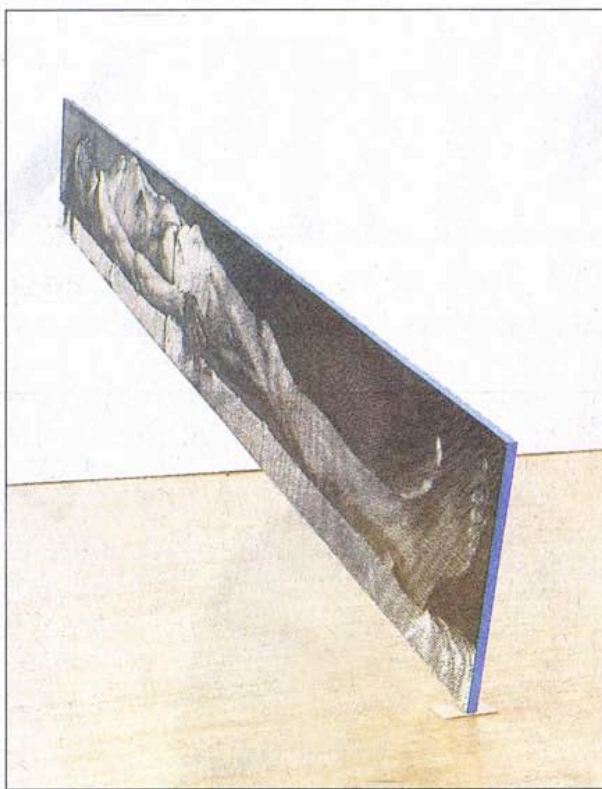
Between relevance, obscurity

DAVID PAGEL

John Baldessari's "Blue Line (Holbein)" is one of the most sharply focused shows of recent memory. It consists of only two pieces, neither very complicated. It's also one of the most moving shows of the season, revealing a side of the 78-year-old artist often overshadowed by the irreverent wit and gee-whizzing of the reconfigured photographs he has been exhibiting since 1969, when he cremated all of his paintings in his possession and started making the hilariously deadpan pictures that would become the trademark of his art and an essential feature of California Conceptualism.

At Margo Leavin Gallery, mortality and memory take center stage while leaving plenty of room for loose ends. Humor and happenstance counterbalance fate's weighty presence because Baldessari's light-handed installation makes a place for quirky coincidences, inviting, over time, serendipitous connections that lead to imaginative leaps. With no-nonsense efficiency and gracious generosity, visitors are given the freedom to embark on freewheeling reflections about art's place in life and the point of it all.

From the foyer, the sky-lit main gallery appears to be divided, right down the middle, by a thin blue line. That line is actually the top



BRIAN FORREST Margo Leavin Gallery

'BLUE LINE': John Baldessari mounts blown-up photos of Hans Holbein's painting onto a panel.

edge of a nearly 18-foot-long panel that leans against the back wall. On each of the panel's two sides, Baldessari has mounted a blown-up black-and-white photograph of Hans Holbein the Younger's magnificently realistic painting, "The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb."

The harrowing intimacy of Holbein's original, painted from a corpse fished from the Rhine in 1521, is kept at arm's length. Baldessari's blurry reproduction evokes pre-digital copies, old-fashioned slide lectures and outdated textbooks.

The comfort of that distance, however, is undermined by the image's odd placement: Tipped at a steep angle, the nearly nude figure seems to be slipping out of the picture, sliding

body language suggests that defiance is an essential feature of being human even if it's the last thing one does. Divinity may be different, but Holbein and Baldessari don't go there, preferring to stick to life (and death) on Earth.

On the rear wall of an adjoining gallery, a video camera projects a life-size image of the main gallery. When I visited, no one else was in the gallery, so I assumed that the image was via a live feed. But then I showed up in it.

It didn't take long to figure out that the feed was delayed. Even so, the impression, of being in two places simultaneously, stuck. Knowing that it wasn't so did little to diminish its intensity. And Baldessari's two-room installation made the 60-second delay seem to be a long time, an expanse in which almost anything could happen.

In the third gallery hangs a wall-size photograph of the ocean beneath a lovely blue sky. As an image, it's not sufficiently gorgeous or dramatic to be postcard material. But seeing it after Baldessari's two-room installation makes you think twice. "Blue Line (Holbein)" makes ordinary moments extraordinary. Whether that has anything to do with divinity, it has been art's job for centuries and hopefully for many more.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603, through March 6. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.margoleavin.com

down the slippery slope that begins in ordinary forgetfulness and ends in oblivion. Made in 1988 for an exhibition in Brussels, Belgium, Baldessari's piece has been exhibited only there. It's not part of his traveling retrospective, currently in London and on its way to LACMA in June.

What's at stake in Baldessari's installation is an image's capacity to come alive in the moment to move viewers, in the here and now, or to disappear into obscurity. If you ever thought that a painting made 489 years ago had nothing to do with the present, examine the figure's agonized face and the fingers of his right hand. Making a gesture often seen on the freeway to express the anger and disdain of exasperated drivers, the figure's