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Tweaking Tradition, Even in Its Temple

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Tweaking Tradition, Even In Its Temple

If "John Baldessari: Pure Beauty" is any indication, the Metropolitan Museum of Art may finally be catching up to the 21st century. Granted, the museum

has never met a century whose art it hasn't embraced. But its relationship to the latest thing has often felt forced and out of it. Not so with its full-dress, lucidly installed retrospective of the art of John Baldessari, a tall, laconic Conceptual artist from California who turns 80 next year. The show may reach back nearly five decades, but it still has a hip quotient that is unusually high for the Met, given the expanses of hard-core Conceptual Art at its center — texts, photographs, jokes, philosophical propositions, video, art about art and



COLLECTION OF NABIL AOUAD, LISBON

John Baldessari: Pure Beauty
"Noses & Ears, Etc.: Blood, Fist and Head (With Nose and Ear)," from 2006, is in this show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

more photographs — and the noticeable lack of conventional painting and sculpture. Subtitle aside, the show is not, on the whole, a traditionally pretty sight. Visual pleasantry — which is nothing to sneer at — has never been Mr. Baldessari's main goal. His work amuses, unsettles, questions and makes you look twice and think thrice; laugh out loud; and in general gain a sharpened awareness of the overlapping processes of art-making, art viewing and art thinking.

It is notable for its drolleries of language and image, occasional descents into outright corniness and flat-footed insistence on randomness, coincidence or uninflected information as the artist's main compositional options. It is also remarkable for its early grasp of the role that photo-

graphs — both found and made, still and moving — could play in opening art to the outside world and to the strangeness of everyday life, and for its determination that the viewer participate in the process of creating a work's meaning.

Mr. Baldessari's art is saved from its own rigors by his love of color, born of his beginnings as a painter, and his passion for film, or at least the film stills of obscure B-movies, to which he seems to have been led by his pursuit of photography in all forms. These elements converge with a surprisingly triumphal sweep in the show's final gallery-



A PAINTING BY ELMIRE BOURKE

RINGIER COLLECTION, ZURICH

ies in the large, handsome reusable photo-montage installations that he has developed, with increasing complexity and hand-painted bits, over the past quarter century.

Organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Tate Modern in London, and overseen at the Met by Marla Prather, senior consultant in the Met's department of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art, the exhibition occupies 11 galleries with more than 120 works from 1962 to 2010. Given Mr. Baldessari's cerebral mind-set, this sometimes verges on relentless.

You get a good dose of this mind-set at its strictest with the show's first work: "A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation" made in the late '60s. A landmark of Conceptual Art, this text painting in black on seven gray panels narrates its own life and exhibition history, starting with its inception ("June 19, 1968 Idea Conceived at 10:25 a.m.") and its initial public showing, in Mr. Baldessari's first gallery solo, also in 1968, at the Molly Barnes Gallery in Los Angeles. The work was painted and has been amended by various professional sign painters, its size increasing with its exhibition history. (A panel was added to accommodate the listing of the current show.)

Mr. Baldessari was a prime mover in the Conceptual Art revolution, when the art object was in disrepute and ideas were pre-eminent. But this exhibition establishes him as more than that. It reveals his career as a vital, unbroken through line from Pop to 1970s Conceptual Art to 1980s appropriation art, a movement that is unthinkable without his unusu-

"John Baldessari: Pure Beauty" is on view through Jan. 9 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 533-7710, metmuseum.org.



LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART COUNCIL FUND

Photography, color and the movies are all well represented in John Baldessari's "Pure Beauty" retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Above, "Heel" (1986), gelatin silver prints with tint. Below, "Man and Woman With Bridge" (1984), gelatin silver prints suggesting a classic cinematic image. Left, "Commissioned Painting: A Painting by Elmire Bourke" (1969), part of a series based on photographs.



COLLECTION OF MELINDA AND EALAN WINGATE

ally direct influence. (Several 1980s appropriation artists like David Salle, Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican and Troy Brauntuch were his students at the California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s.) Mr. Baldessari managed this span partly by being 10 years older than most Conceptualists. He was born in 1931 (a year after Jasper Johns) and was already making art when most of his artistic peers were barely in high school.

The show unfolds in three acts, beginnings with a gallery of early Pop-oriented, proto-Conceptualist work from the 1960s that will take many people by surprise for the evocations of nearly contemporary art by Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg and the precocious king of Los Angeles Pop, Ed Ruscha. (The 1963 grid of photographs titled "The Backs of All the Trucks Passed While Driving From Los Angeles to

Santa Barbara, California, Sunday, January 20, 1963" presages Mr. Ruscha's well-known book of photographs, "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," from 1966.)

In "Bird #1," from 1962, Mr. Baldessari paints a headless bird over a large printed image of one intended to be part of a billboard. (He had a friend in the business.) More baldly, "Autotire," from 1965, consists of an unaltered close-up of a tire tread, also from a billboard.

Just at the moment when the art critic Clement Greenberg was campaigning for the flatness of the picture plane, this work confronts the viewer with a mute, implacable image of flatness, industrial style. The next gallery includes a text-painting of a quotation from Greenberg about the instantaneousness of aesthetic judgment — which is considerably slowed down here by the reading process.

The show's first act concentrates on Mr. Baldessari's gradual leave taking of painting and his embrace of photo-based works. In 1969 he commissioned paintings from commercial artists, each based on a photograph he took of his hand pointing at this or that. My favorite is "Commissioned Painting: A Painting by Elmire Bourke," which centers on a paint-splattered surface that resembles a work by Jackson Pollock. The three examples here quietly satirize Photo Realism's celebration of exacting technique by demonstrating that it was available for hire.

There's a similar frisson — this time directed at the early alone-in-the-studio videos of Mr. Baldessari's fellow Conceptualist Bruce Nauman — in the 1971 video "I Am Making Art." It shows Mr. Baldessari standing in front of the camera assuming different poses and saying, "I am making art" with each shift of his hand or elbow.

Mr. Baldessari's excursions into Conceptual photography leave few stones unturned and are consistently amusing. He excels at playing photography off reality; a rudimentary example is a 1973 series of found photographs of natural disasters displayed in frames that are askew, even though the images are not.

His affinity for color is evident in two works from the '70s, the wonderfully dumb "Floating Color," for which he photographed big sheets of colored paper tossed one at a time from the second-story window of his house in Santa Monica, and the 33-minute video "Six Colorful Inside Jobs." "Jobs" is an unvarying overhead shot of a person painting the walls and floor of a small room, first red, then orange and so on through six main colors of the spectrum.

In 1975 Mr. Baldessari began to leave Conceptual Art behind, apparently becoming fascinated with how movie stills, amended with shapes of bright color, could be used to structure meaning in ways porous enough for viewers to add their own. Wordless except for their often useful titles, and gray except for their startling bits of painted colors, these pieces fully exploit and usually satisfy our tendency to read narrative into every image that comes our way, a skill developed in no small part by watching movies.

At times I half-jokingly thought the show might have been better subtitled "Fun With Photography" or "I Survived Conceptual Art." But in the end a kind of pure beauty does accrue. It is the beauty of economy that we perhaps more often associate with mathematics, and the purity of an artist who has never seen himself as the center of his art. It is not, contrary to expectations, a modest achievement.