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**John Baldessari**  
*Hope (Blue) Supported by a Bed of Oranges (Life): Amid a Context of Allusions*  
 1991  
 Tate  
 © 2009 John Baldessari  
 Photo © Tate



**John Baldessari**  
*Pure Beauty*  
 1966-68  
 © 2009 John Baldessari  
 Photo by Tim  
 Highswander/Imaging 4 Art.com



**John Baldessari**  
*Econ-o-Wash, 14th and Highland, National City, Calif.*  
 1966-68  
 Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery  
 © 2009 John Baldessari  
 Photo courtesy Baldessari Studio

At last: We can now know for certain that John Baldessari has not made any boring art. The assignment given to students of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1971, to write repeatedly on the gallery walls the phrase, "I will not make any more boring art," has become Baldessari's signature statement. It was hung as a banner in Venice last summer when he won the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Biennale.

A few months later, the most recent and the most comprehensive of his many retrospectives, "John Baldessari: Pure Beauty," opened at the Tate Modern, which co-organized the show with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. With 180 pieces, now on view at LACMA through Sept. 12 before traveling to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Oct. 20, it is considerably larger than Baldessari's 1990 retrospective in L.A. at the Museum of Contemporary Art. At that time, Baldessari's use of found film and publicity stills, juxtaposed in unconventional arrangements, was seen correctly by many as inspiration for the legions of young artists using appropriation strategies, many of whom had been students of Baldessari at California Institute of the Arts.

In the intervening two decades, Baldessari has come to seem no less influential as his work appears less confined by the rigors of Conceptual art as conceived originally. In 1984, Lawrence Weiner told me that Baldessari was "one of the few humanistic and intellectual artists in the United States. John is *most* pure because he understands that art is based on the relationship between human beings and that we, as Americans, understand our relationship to the world through various media. We think of any unknown situation in terms of something we've seen at the movies. . . John is dealing with the archetypal consciousness of what media represent, using the material that affects daily life." He added that Baldessari is "moral, responsible -- a Calvinist artist."

That view of the artist seems even more accurate today when standing before a wall entirely covered with large framed stills, a three-ring circus of pictures from 1991 titled: *Hope (Blue) Supported by a Bed of Oranges (Life): Amid a Context of Allusions*. Two silhouetted figures colored ultramarine blue lie atop a photograph of a market stall filled with oranges. One figure's hand appears to reach into a toy elephant's trunk in the adjacent picture while on the other side, the Three Stooges, their faces blocked by Baldessari's well-known dots of primary colors, stare out from behind an elaborate picture frame. Above, the stills show a



**John Baldessari**  
*Man and Woman with Bridge*  
1984  
Melinda and Ealan Wingate  
© 2009 John Baldessari  
Photo courtesy Gagosian Gallery  
/ Photo by Robert McKeever



**John Baldessari**  
*God Nose*  
1965  
Private Collection  
© 2009 John Baldessari  
Photo courtesy Baldessari Studio



**John Baldessari**  
*Bloody Sundae*  
1987  
Private Collection  
© 2009 John Baldessari  
Photo courtesy Baldessari Studio



**John Baldessari**  
*Junction Series: Landscape,  
Seascape, Prisoner, and  
Acrobats*  
2002  
Collection of Edward Israel  
© 2009 John Baldessari  
Photo courtesy Margo Leavin  
Gallery

wrapped gift being presented, a dancing girl's skirt whirling out from her bare legs, a cowboy hunkering with his gun aimed at her, another holding a coiled lariat and staring at an entirely separate photograph of a pay telephone next to a photographic black vertical rectangle. (Critic Christopher Knight was looking at it with me, and cited the connection to Warhol's 1961 painting of an old-fashioned upright telephone next to a solid black vertical panel.) At the base of Baldessari's composition are men wearing hazmat gear, a skeleton being examined and a long, narrow field of military maneuvers covered in the color green with a single red circle floating above it. All of these contemporary media stills coalesce as a mural-sized composition with a complexity of meaning revealing the artist's enduring fascination with dualities such as heaven and hell, joy and sorrow, life and death. The panoply of references to art history, literary and historical allegory are neatly balanced by this visual extravaganza.

While the retrospective incorporates sufficient early work to demonstrate a trajectory of intent, it remains focused and demonstrates Baldessari's sophisticated methods for revisiting favored subjects over nearly half a century including ongoing philosophical speculation and visual analogy. Whether these stem from his early interest in the seminary or his study of art history, it is clear that Baldessari stands at a bemused distance from his own line of inquiry so that absurdity and contradiction may proceed unimpeded. His position may be rhetorical but the answers usually lean towards vaudevillian.

One aspect of his work has emerged that was not clear during his first retrospective here. Now considered one of the most influential and internationally known Conceptual artists, it is equally true to say that his earliest work was conceived in the context of the obsession with craft that characterized the most popular of the Los Angeles artists in the 1960s: the pristine vacuum-formed wall reliefs of Craig Kauffman, the prismatic glass boxes of Larry Bell, the miniscule dots of color painstakingly painted on white panels by Robert Irwin. It was called "Finish Fetish" and nothing could be further from it than Baldessari's decision in 1966 to hire a sign painter to letter texts in black capitals on off-color canvases. The simplest of these states "Pure Beauty," an astute choice for a work entirely divorced from the artist's hand. No craft went into the making of this art and furthermore Baldessari is confronting his viewers with an outrageous demand. It is down to them to decide the meaning since this assertion of "pure beauty" is absent from the painting, while being the putative goal of much artistic effort over the centuries.

Further evidence that Baldessari was thinking, at least, about not being a regular at Barney's Beanery, nor racing motorcycles like



**John Baldessari**  
*Portrait: (Self) #1 as Control + 11 Alterations by Retouching and Airbrushing*  
 1974  
 Glenstone  
 © 2009 John Baldessari



**John Baldessari**  
*Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*  
 1966-68  
 Broad Art Foundation  
 © 2009 John Baldessari  
 Photo courtesy Broad Art Foundation



**John Baldessari**  
*Wrong*  
 1966-68  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
 © 2009 John Baldessari



"John Baldessari: Sediment" at Margo Leavin Gallery

Billy Al Bengston, nor surfing like Ken Price, lies in Douglas Eklund's essay in the show's excellent catalogue. It features a little known photographic essay from the same period, the mid-'60s, of Baldessari wearing a denim jacket with a motorcycle gang-style emblem on the back -- a skull over paintbrushes instead of cross bones -- that states defiantly: "Born to Paint." Even then, Baldessari sought to make fun of the enormous chasm that existed between his introspective and cerebral nature and the expectations of the brawny, pugnacious L.A. art scene.

After Baldessari had relinquished any hope of continuing his earliest efforts as a painter, he embraced the use of photography, though not with the technique of a professional. Driving around his native National City, a down-market suburb of San Diego, he held the camera out the window of his truck and randomly photographed the stucco buildings and street signs. He projected them onto a photo-emulsion spread on canvas and developed the pictures in big vats in his converted movie theater studio. Then he hired a sign painter to letter locations beneath the blurry black-and-white images: "Econ-O-Wash 14th And Highland National City Calif."

While doubtless indebted to Ed Ruscha's books of black-and-white photographs of parking lots and apartment buildings completed a few years earlier, Baldessari insisted on the use of stretched canvas as the signifier of "art." He was determined at that time to see how much could be eliminated from a work of art without losing its identity.

In keeping with this purge mentality, Baldessari stopped painting in 1966 and had most of his earlier pictures cremated in an official procedure in 1970. The ashes in a book-shaped urn and the memorial bronze plaque are on view like holy relics in a Plexiglas vitrine.

Two large galleries feature the many ways in which Baldessari then turned to photography and video in the 1970s, and they reveal a closet formalist relying on aspects of chance in composition. In the 1980s, when Baldessari began working in earnest with old film and publicity stills, his consistent interest in narrative and formal arrangement gained in visual wealth.

The show includes a few early paintings that survived cremation, including the droll *God Nose*, a divine white schnozzle and a puffy cloud floating on a ground of cerulean blue, which demonstrates both his early interest in theology and the dry humor that seeps from around the edges of even his most serious art.

Cut to the most recent work in the retrospective: *Brain/Cloud (Two Views)*: with *Palm Tree and Seascapes*, a molded white foam-and-resin relief of a human brain extending about three-feet from a solid blue wall. In the context of this retrospective, it is obviously a





**John Baldessari**  
*Foot and Stocking (With Big Toe Exposed); Kim (Edition of 45)*  
2010  
Gemini G.E.L.



The John Baldessari iPhone app  
for ForYourArt

massive reiteration of the colors and forms in the much earlier painting. The brain floats like a cumulus in the sky while on either side, walls are covered by large photo-murals of the blue sea and sky, one of which is bisected by a palm tree. On the wall facing the brain is a grainy black and white, time-delay video of the brain as visitors walk or stand in front of it. The viewers looking at the brain don't initially realize that the brain is recording them, making them part of the process. Could this elaborate piece created specifically for his retrospective be anything but the artist's self-portrait? For four decades, Baldessari worked and lived in a studio just a short distance from the Pacific seascape of Santa Monica, himself a giant brain processing information and transforming it into his art.

As homage to Baldessari, three Los Angeles galleries are hosting shows of his work. Margo Leavin features recent paintings executed in black, white and gray that portray only the shapes of selected elements from a photograph with identifying captions, such as *Elton John's Smile and Portion of Shirt*.

Gemini G.E.L. is showing his most recent prints, photographs of the individual big toes of his studio assistants, each poking out from a black sock. And Mixografia shows a series of handmade paper pieces based on the alphabet that demonstrate his humor even in the title, *ABC Art*, a reference to an early designation of Minimalism. Baldessari has had a career-long interest in pushing the boundaries of printmaking and has worked with both publishers over the years to continue this quest.

Finally, new technology boundary was broken by a commission from Bettina Korek's *For Your Art* website for a Baldessari iPhone app. With his usual wit and insight, Baldessari contributed a 17th-century still life by Abraham van Beyeren. Viewers can rearrange the 38 objects in the painting (to offset the frustration of not being able to make phone calls thanks to ATT's terrible service). Baldessari wisely points out that "still lifes are about the fleeting things in life." A perfect sentiment for a retrospective.