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## Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

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### Art review: John Baldessari at Margo Leavin Gallery

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If you know how to use your imagination, it isn't difficult to look at clouds and see all sorts of things.

It takes a bit more ingenuity to look at the rest of the world and see abstract silhouettes instead of people and objects.

And that's exactly what John Baldessari's new works at [Margo Leavin Gallery](#) do: invite viewers to imagine a world in which we do not immediately know what we're seeing but have to piece together its parts slowly — like a kid sounding out words as he learns to read. It's a fascinating exercise that makes everything slightly strange and significantly more interesting than business-as-usual.

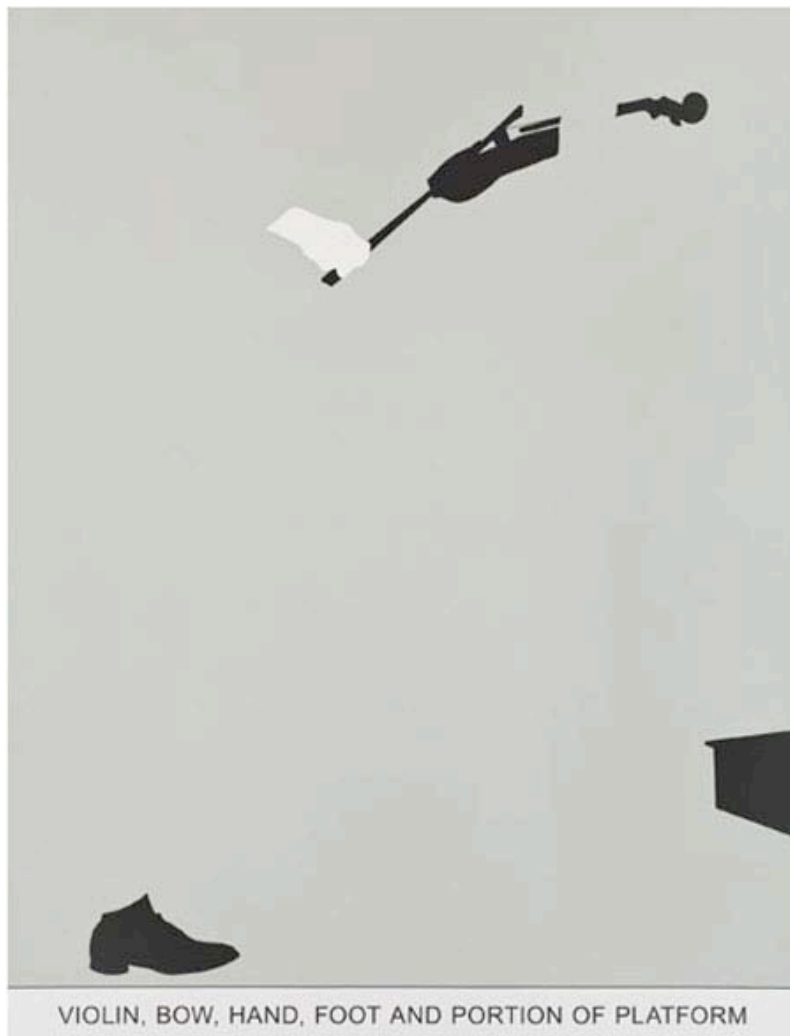
Never a pedagogue, Baldessari makes lesson-obsessed Conceptual art fun. Each of his 11 printed paintings is an oversize flashcard.

On gray grounds appear black or white silhouettes of objects and bodies. But unlike flashcards, which idealize objects by turning them into icons so that they can be easily identified, Baldessari's home-brewed flashcards are based on the way things actually look in the world, where they are seen from odd angles, are partially blocked by other objects or are shrouded in shadows.



ELTON JOHN'S SMILE AND PORTION OF SHIRT

At the bottom of each image he has printed captions that identify the shapes depicted. In one horizontal canvas, two large black lumps and a single, somewhat smaller white blob are labeled “Three Overcoats (Ascending Stairs).”



Sometimes the words state the obvious, as they do in “Sediment: Chain Saw and Two Hands” and “Sediment: Leg and Shirt.” At others they add specific info, as in “Sediment: Elton John’s Smile and Portion of Shirt.” And occasionally they zero in on the difficulty of describing things simply, verbally and visually, as in “Sediment: Hat Rack (With Shadow), Arm and Apron (Portion) and Shadow (Person).”

In every instance, Baldessari’s language games lure the imagination into action by making ordinary images and everyday objects strangely fascinating.

-- David Pagel

**Margo Leavin Gallery**, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., L.A., (310) 273-0603, through July 10. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

[www.margoleavingallery.com](http://www.margoleavingallery.com)

*Images: "Elton John's Smile and Portion of Shirt" (top) and "Violin, Bow, Hand, Foot and Portion of Platform." Courtesy of the artist and Margo Leavin Gallery. Photo credit: Brian Forrest.*

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