

Knight, Christopher. "Face of Change." *Los Angeles Times*, 28 June 2010, p. D1, D8.



ART REVIEW

FROM 1974: "Portrait: (Self) @#1 as Control + 11 Alterations by Retouching and Airbrushing" is part of the LACMA exhibition.

# Face of change

LACMA views Conceptual artist John Baldessari, who helped to open new terrain.

**CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT ART CRITIC >>>** As an artist, John Baldessari has worked in the gap between paintings and camera images for the last 45 years. Visit the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's big retrospective of his marvelous rummaging around in that fissure and two things come into focus.

First, the gap is a strange and often very funny place to be.

And second, when Baldessari identified and began to map its largely uncharted terrain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, partly inspired by the work of Ed Ruscha, he helped pry open an unexpectedly vast territory now comfortably occupied by countless artists internationally. Baldessari, who was born in San Diego and works mostly in L.A., is arguably America's most influential Conceptual artist.

On one side of the chasm is painting, a rich and fantastically flexible medium with which artists have concocted pictures since time immemorial. Baldessari, now 79, started as a painter. But his work did not begin to mature until he began to examine just what that meant in contemporary terms.

A large, off-white canvas dated 1966-68 starts with the following words, spelled out in black acrylic lettering by a commercial sign-painter whom Baldessari hired for the job: "Semi-close-up of girl by geranium (soft view). Finishes watering it — examines plant to see if it has any signs of growth, finds slight evidence — smiles."

There's more. As you finish reading, it slowly dawns that Baldessari is painting a picture in your imagination — something like a domestic scene by Vermeer, perhaps, or maybe Chardin. Or even a Hallmark greeting card.

Yet it's also a picture whose invocations of nature and formal aesthetic development are [See Baldessari, D8]

# An overhaul of ideas

[Baldessari, from D1] made in cinematic terms, like a movie scene. There's no camera anywhere in sight, and not even an artist's hand. There are only signs of an avant-garde painting — acrylic, canvas stretched on a rectangular frame and a form that looks nothing like a painting had ever looked like before.

Nearby, a similarly dated and lettered canvas, this one black on putty gray, is headed, "A painting that is its own documentation." Every time it is publicly displayed, the location and date are added by a sign painter at the bottom. That's the entire image.

Over the last 42 years, four more canvases were added to the original to accommodate 23 other museum exhibitions — including London's Tate Modern and LACMA, joint organizers of the current show. (Curator Leslie Jones did the LACMA duties.) Looking at the list, I recall seven earlier instances in which I saw this painting and begin to consider how the simple, or maybe not so simple, fact of viewership helps to create what we think of as a work of art, and especially important art.

Who's making this painting? The artist, the sign painter, museum curators, viewers like me or the culture at large? If the answer is "the culture at large," its attention sharply focused by an artist who can engage another person's skill, then obviously a major overhaul was needed for conventional ideas about what a painting is.

Baldessari undertook it. In 1970 he gathered up almost all the art he had made between graduation from art school in 1953 and the start of the word paintings in 1966 and took it to a mortuary crematorium. Everything was incinerated. Some ashes were interred in a book-shaped bronze urn, and a paid death notice was published in the paper. RIP, John Baldessari, painter.

His primary tool for the overhaul that followed was the camera — still, film and video. In works like "Align-

## TIPS FOR ARTISTS WHO WANT TO SELL

- GENERALLY SPEAKING, PAINTINGS WITH LIGHT COLORS SELL MORE QUICKLY THAN PAINTINGS WITH DARK COLORS.

- SUBJECTS THAT SELL WELL : MADONNA AND CHILD, LANDSCAPES, FLOWER PAINTINGS, STILL LIVES (FREE OF MORBID PROPS --- DEAD BIRDS, ETC.), NUDES, MARINE PICTURES, ABSTRACTS AND SURREALISM.

- SUBJECT MATTER IS IMPORTANT: IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT PAINTINGS WITH COWS AND HENS IN THEM COLLECT DUST --- WHILE THE SAME PAINTINGS WITH BULLS AND ROOSTERS SELL.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

**ADVICE:** A 1960s acrylic on canvas is a piece in the show organized by LACMA and the Tate Modern.

### John Baldessari: Pure Beauty'

**Where:** Los Angeles County Museum of Art

**When:** Through Sept. 12. Closed Wednesdays

**Admission:** \$12

**Contact:** (323) 857-6000 or [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

ing: Balls," camera pictures like those implied in the cinematic "semi-close-up" work came to the foreground. And yet painting remains a focus.

Forty-one ordinary color snapshots are lined up on the wall in "Aligning: Balls." Each shows a ball that Baldessari tossed into the air and randomly photographed. A straight chalk line on the wall links the 41 snapshots. They are not lined up according to the picture's framing edge, however, but according to the location of the ball within the

frame. The balls are aligned in a horizontal row, which means that the snapshots are all askew. The jagged row of pictures looks like a little earthquake has shaken things loose.

What does this have to do with established ideas about painting? Well, with the feminist art revolution then in full swing, identifying "balls" as traditional art's hidden organizing principle makes for a great, damning pun.

Plain color snapshots rather than exquisitely printed black-and-white photographs also undermine art's conventional deference to craft. That's the manual skill with which photographers had sought to compete for artistic legitimacy with painting for generations — to no avail.

Finally, early 1970s abstract painting was obsessed with the problem of the canvas edge, of where and how a composition was located in relation to a painting's physical form. Baldessari, with none of his snapshot edges "properly" aligned, pushed the painterly is-

sue into his own work. Eventually it would blossom into "shaped photographs."

As I say, the gap between paintings and camera images is fertile territory. Baldessari explores it in sometimes delightful, sometimes poignant, usually surprising and inventive ways throughout more than 150 works in this endlessly rewarding show.

A video has him setting obscure Conceptual art pronouncements to popular tunes. A couple of photographed thugs appear menaced by a big, tilted white square collaged to the surface, picturing a hostile, fearful reaction to abstract art. Found photographs, otherwise unrelated, are linked together by common subject or form to create epic narratives — as bonkers and remote as the mythological paintings that decorate Baroque ceilings.

A big portrait photograph of a woman, her eyes bleached white and her mouth agape, is juxtaposed to a list of descriptive if contradictory words — "aghast," "terrified," "enchanted" — that all impossibly apply to her facial expression. Common assumptions that a portrait reveals an inner essence are shot down with a Battle of Bunker Hill ferocity: Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes.

Why is the painting-camera gap where Baldessari toils so fertile? Before the media age, when pictures meant paintings, their rarity made them powerful and astounding. Today we're so inundated by a nonstop flood of camera images that we're largely insensible to them. Images wash over us, like the weather, so paintings have lost their once-singular ability to galvanize.

Using paintings' historic raw materialism as a guide, Baldessari finds ways to jam the whirling camera-circuits. His best work stops us short, allowing us to see things with fresh eyes.

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