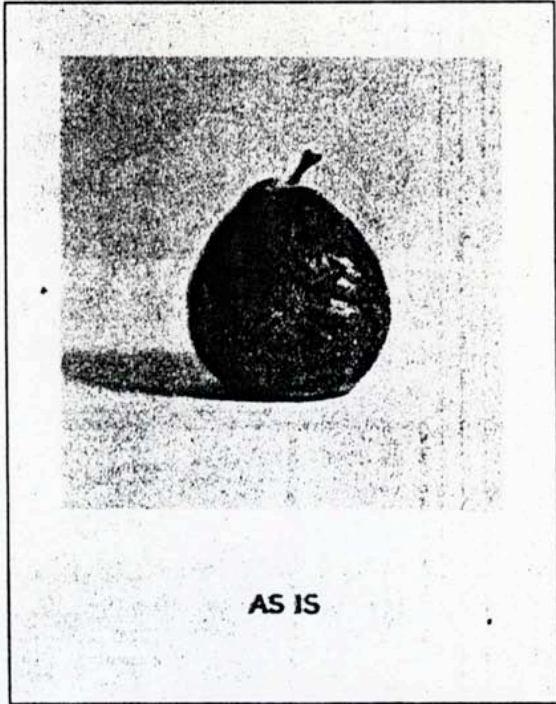


Knight, Christopher. "An Enlightened Twist on Tradition." *Los Angeles Times*, 30 April 1997, p. F1, F5.

**ART REVIEW**



**AS IS**

Margo Leavin Gallery

"As Is" is part of the John Baldessari show.

## An Enlightened Twist on Tradition

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**By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**  
TIMES ART CRITIC

**J**oining an image to a text has been a staple for art-making for more than 25 years. As a technique it has a history, a tradition, a legacy. It isn't fresh or surprising.

Text-and-image art doesn't make gallery-goers do a startled mental double-take, demanding that they question their self-satisfied art assumptions, the way it did when it first arrived on the scene in a big way in the later

1960s and 1970s. Today, it possesses the venerability of age.

John Baldessari's new text-and-image paintings at Margo Leavin Gallery dance lightly on that edge of venerability, creating in the process several moving, often poignant, sometimes even elegiac works of art. The 65-year-old artist was among the innovators who first made the genre a force to reckon with; now, he's returned to a format he developed in 1967, as if the dogeared conventionality of image-and-text today offered a new, as yet unexplored twist.

The 13 paintings at Leavin are all the same size—75 inches high, 60 inches wide. Painted stark white, each canvas features a black, carefully lettered caption beneath a single square image.

The words were rendered by a commercial sign-painter, while the images—based on black-and-white studio photographs taken by the artist—were printed on the canvas at a commercial ink-jet printer in Santa Monica. The large-scale ink-jet method, which is now a standard technique for printing billboard advertisements, can be surprisingly subtle.

The range of grays possible in the finely calibrated spray of black ink dots against a white ground is lush and sensual. The resulting picture seems ephemeral—a fragile mirage that dissolves into abstraction the closer you get to it.

Baldessari's photo-images are simple: a pear, three tomatoes, a dumbbell, a handful of marbles, a book, a lamp. So are the captions: *As Is*, *That Always Happens*, *True to Form*, *There Isn't Time*.

Juxtaposing an image with a text inevitably coaxes forth a narrative relationship between them. In these quietly handsome paintings the stories seem preoccupied with thoughts of chance, fate and mortality.

"*As Is*" shows a pear and its long shadow. The pear, an inescapably human form, is in the earlier stages of deterioration. Its skin, grown just a bit too large for its decaying

innards, has begun to wrinkle and pucker. An image of ideal beauty just passing from the scene, the aged fruit sits in splendid isolation as an object of scrutiny—as is.

"*Strange Devotion*" shows an iron dumbbell, "*True to Form*" an enigmatically sealed box. "*There Isn't Time*" focuses on a wooden matchstick, its black tip the pictorial bull's-eye of the painting: Have the heat and light burned out, or has the match not yet flamed?

"**O**ne Is Civilized and Knows What Is What" shows an ordinary table lamp, mundane version of the ancient symbol for enlightenment. Reflected in the lamp's fat, round base is—what? Is that the artist with his studio lights and camera, taking the solipsistic picture that you now see?

Baldessari's familiarly wry sense of humor is much in evidence in this show. "*That Always Happens*" presents a plastic flowerpot from which a dead plant protrudes, its withered, dried-up stem snaking outward to meet your incoming gaze. A blunt declaration of inevitable mortality meets an exasperated sense of resignation, familiar to those not possessed of a magically green thumb.

The captions to this series of paintings come from Goya, the great Spanish painter and graphic artist whose famously dark, brooding but analytical engravings,

"*The Disasters of War*," chronicled the Napoleonic occupation of his homeland. Baldessari's use of a commercial ink-jet printer slyly recalls his Enlightenment predecessor's mastery of etching and engraving, the small-scale media of multiple reproduction available in his day.

But there's something else about these pictures that resonates against Goya, an artist who was trained in the courtly style of 18th century Spain, but who, later in his long life, looked steadily inward to explore personal fantasies and reflections. In these paintings Baldessari has recovered a conventional text-and-image formula—now a courtly style for the end of the 20th century; but, he's put it to the poetic service of human drama and acutely observed character.

Goya was one of the first great subjective artists in the modern sense. If Baldessari's art goes to great lengths to seek out impersonality—sign-painter lettering, billboard reproduction, photographs that resemble product imagery—it's nonetheless deeply personal in tone and feeling. These are paintings that are not paintings, while they also strive for what great paintings always offer.

■ *Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-9131, through May 31. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*