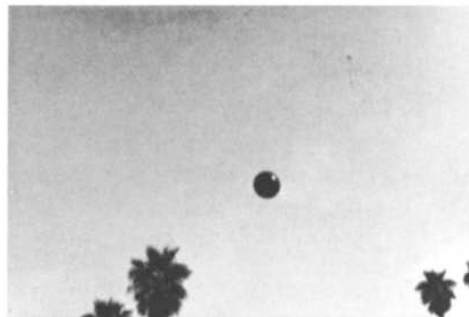


Winer, Helene. "Scenarios/Documents/Images I." *Art in America* (March 1973), p. 42-46

Scenarios / Documents / Images I

John Baldessari and William Leavitt, whose work appears here, and Allen Ruppersberg and William Wegman, whose work will appear in the May-June issue, all share a disinterest in perpetuating the evolutionary tradition of modern painting and sculpture. Instead of conducting any internal dialogue with the nature of these media, their range extends to photographs, film, videotape, postcards and words—selected primarily for their ability to convey the artists' ideas. All use words as well as images. Sometimes they confine themselves completely to language, which is used with a license not possible in literary disciplines. Short captions, puns, integral titles, anagrams and poems abound. A comedic element lurks in all the work, though apart from out-and-out sight gags, the levity is not always comprehensible. As is generally true of comedy, some hard truths lie just below the surface. The surface, in the case of all four artists, is generally appealing. One can either approach it at that level, or slip under it to engage more serious ideas.





William Leavitt, *Portrait of a Dog*: o/c, 16 x 20", 1972.

John Baldessari's films, photographs, videotapes, paintings and semisculptural pieces place these media at the service of an impressive body of ideas that have to do with gathering, sorting, recording and reorganizing information. Piece by piece, the results build into a cumulative system through which certain themes can be traced. Ideas are primary; indeed the wide range of means through which he implements them is a significant indication of his priorities in approaching his work.

Defenestration, on the next page, is a good example of the way a fresh notion combines with others that run through his activities. The work apparently began with Baldessari's interest in the word itself. He chose to throw colored sheets of cardboard out of the second floor window of his house, thus literally demonstrating the term, performing an action, and doing a kind of step-by-step painting. A number of his pieces involve things floating, falling or suspended in the air. One series of photographs shows a ball suspended in the air at various heights and distances. All the balls are aligned on the same horizontal, disposing the photographs at various levels along the wall. This use of arbitrary, witty systems to order material is a repeated theme.

One of Baldessari's most ambitious and risky efforts is the videotape *Baldessari sings Lewitt*. Seated and holding a sheaf of papers, he proceeds to sing each of Sol Lewitt's thirty-five conceptual statements to a different pop tune, after the model of *Ella Fitzgerald Sings Cole Porter*. What initially presents itself as faintly humorous, gradually becomes a struggle to convey Lewitt's statements through this arbitrary means.

John Baldessari, *Ball Alignment* (from series of 9 photos), 1972.





Since the late sixties, William Leavitt has been presenting fragments of outdoor and indoor locations either in full-scale constructions or in simply executed watercolors and drawings, often accompanied by descriptive statements.

The drawings and paintings are stylistically neutral, and the constructions appear to be unmanipulated settings made from the actual materials used in the "real" original. Despite the fact that the works are eminently tasteful and serene, all of them are purposefully noninterpretative. Leavitt is painfully exacting about the construction of each piece, for his intention is to relate a story or set a scene precisely without actually presenting all the particulars. Although details are carefully selected, there is no sense of esthetic rearrangement.

Unlike stage sets or illustrations, each piece is in itself a fiction based on certain romantic attitudes to real places, social strata, styles and taste. There is a kind of appreciative acceptance of a variety of lifestyles. Settings and details manage to convey a great deal of information about time, place and cast of characters. A piece comprised of a map, watercolor details of three "sculptures" on the grounds, and a written description of the house and its occupants, embodies many of the elements he relies on to articulate his ideas. The recent *California Patio* is an interior wall with sliding glass doors, framed by drapes, leading out to a flagstone patio with tropical plants and garden light. Another recent work is simply a corny oil painting of a dog with photo-portrait background sitting on an artist's easel. It shows with what exact discretion Leavitt can induce parts to indicate a whole. Its interpretation is wholly dependent on its placement. Since it calls up a kind of gallery other than the one in which it will be shown, it makes one gallery space "quote" another in a precise and witty pun.

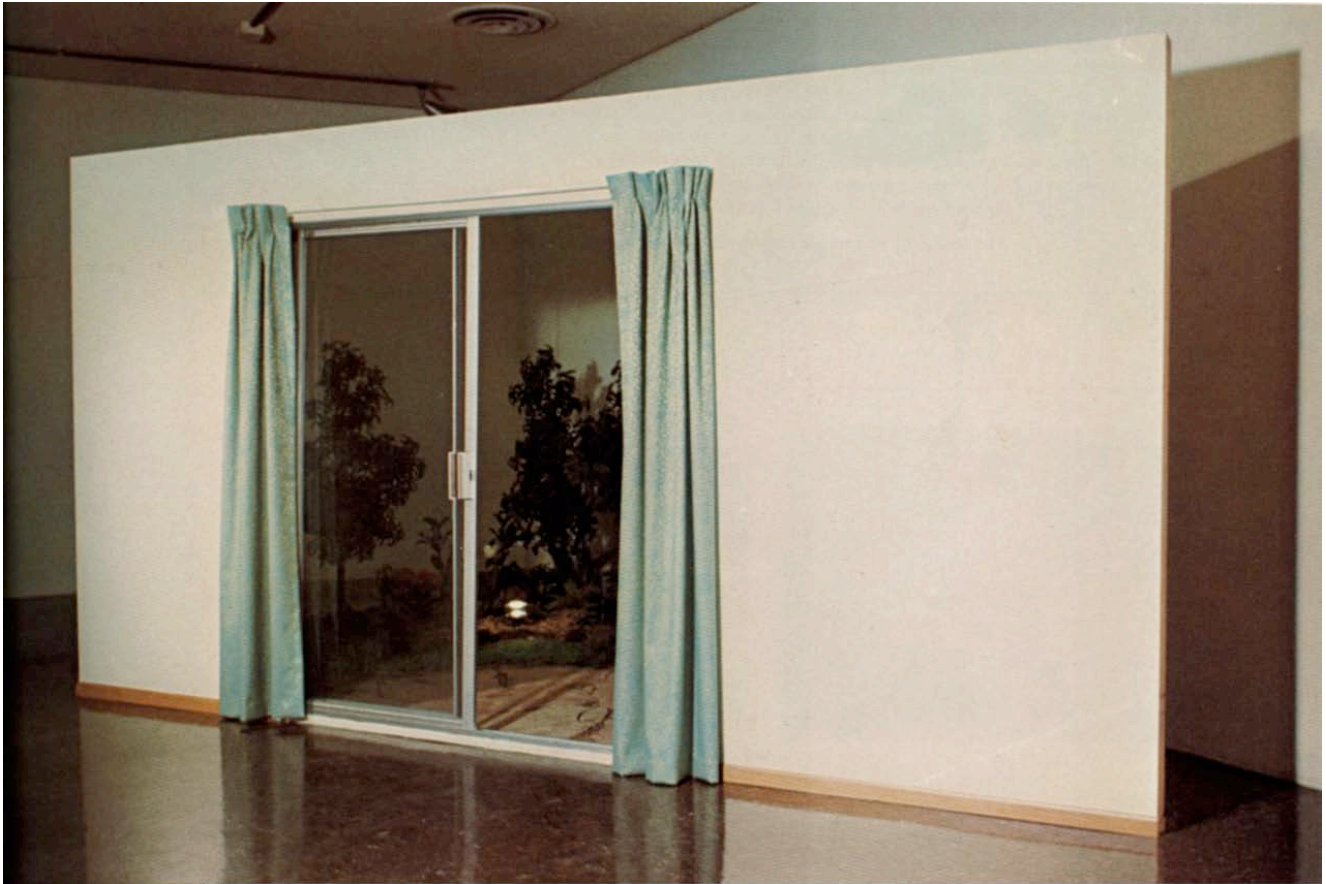
One might think that these situations indicate lifestyles Leavitt sincerely fancies. Familiarity with the body of his work clarifies his involvement with the subtleties of "style" as it develops in particular environments.

Left: John Baldessari, *Defenestration* (from series of 5), 1972.

Opposite page: William Leavitt, *California Patio* installation and text, 8 x 7', 1972

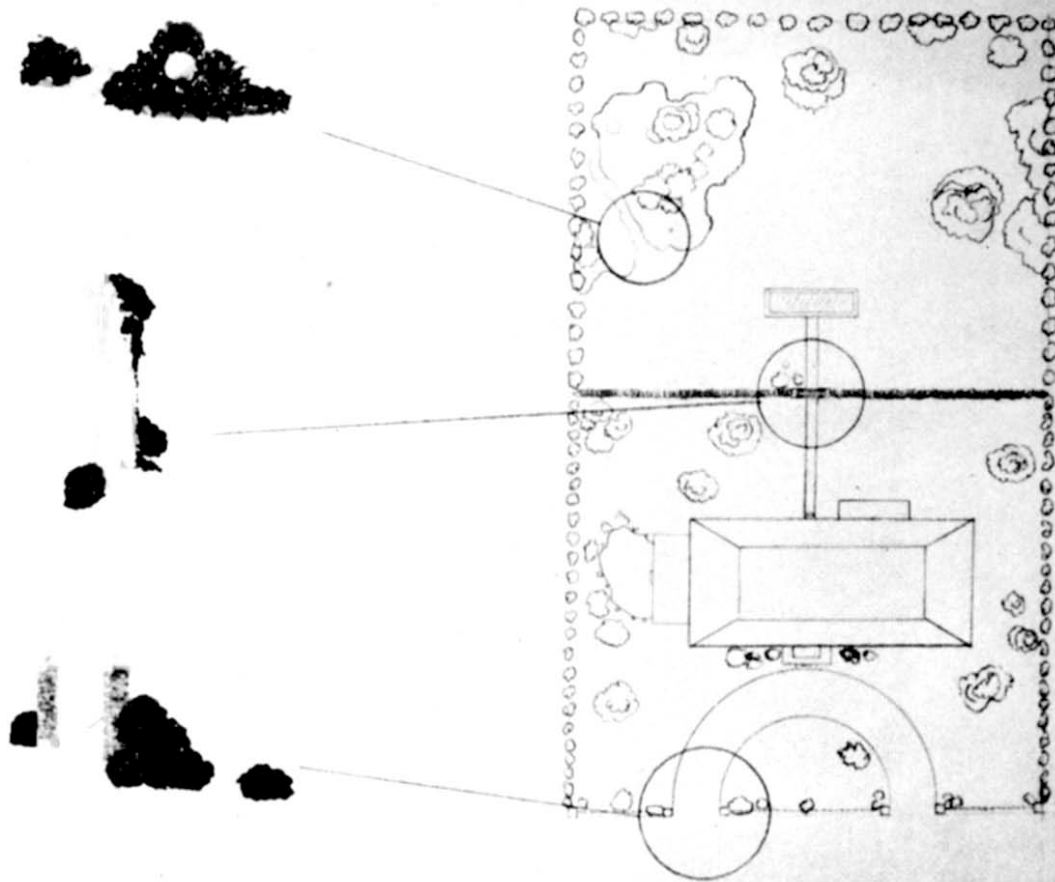
Overleaf, left: William Leavitt, *Estate and Grounds* watercolor and text, 17 x 22", 1970

Overleaf, right: John Baldessari, three parables.



It is evening in the backyard and garden of a contemporary hillside home in Southern California. There is a swimming pool, a flagstone patio, a redwood fence, some lawn and the usual tropical landscaping of succulents, ferns, leafy plants and flowering shrubs. The beauty of the scene is most evident at this time of day when the combination of lighted pool, soft garden lights, black sky and the lights of surrounding homes comes into play.

On this particular evening a small cocktail party is being held on the patio adjoining the house. The guests are all close friends of the host and hostess. Their presence adds the elements of motion and sound to the setting; the men standing near the edge of the patio engaged in relaxed conversation, while the women sit in a loose circle of garden chairs arranged on the lawn. Now the hostess comes out through the sliding glass door to announce that a light buffet supper is ready inside.



CHALK LINE ESTATE WITH THREE SCULPTURAL DETAILS

William Smith '70

The house and grounds, of which these sculptures are a part, are located in an exclusive residential district of a large city in the Eastern United States. The estate was built in 1928 and has changed little since that time. It was occupied by the original owners until 1955 when it was sold to a pediatrician and his family, who now live there alone as their three children have since married and moved away.

The architectural style of the house can best be described as Georgian; a large two-story dwelling made of red brick with white concrete trim. There is also a three-car garage on the left of the house that was added in 1939. The semi-circular drive is not paved, but rather is covered with gravel as both owners preferred the softer and warmer feeling of an unpaved driveway. The extensive grounds, though not exceptional in their design, have been well executed and nicely maintained. They remain beautiful to this day.