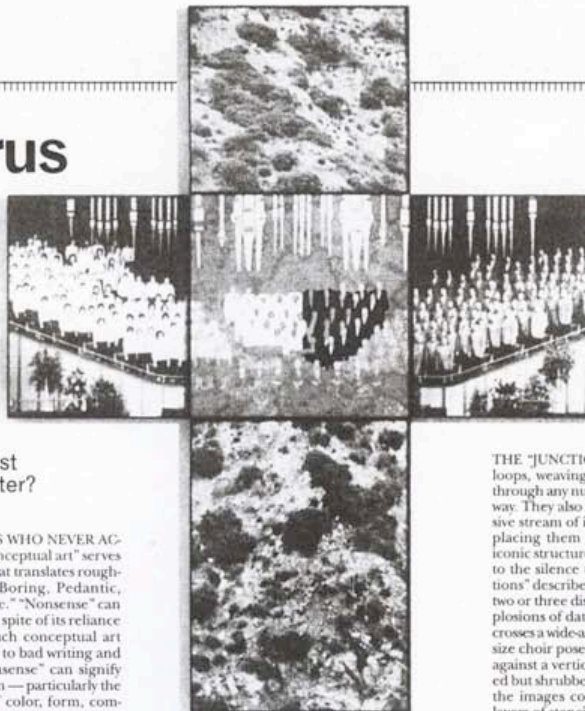


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ART

Baldesaurus
RexINTERSECTION SERIES:
LANDSCAPE AND CHORALE (2002)Painterly conceptualist
or conceptualist painter?
BY DOUG HARVEY

EXCEPT FOR A FEW DIE-HARDS WHO NEVER ACTUALLY LEFT UNIVERSITY, THE TERM "conceptual art" serves as a fairly reliable warning sign that translates roughly as "Keep Away — Here Be Boring, Pedantic, Pretentious, Anesthetic Nonsense." "Nonsense" can mean "verbally unintelligible"; in spite of its reliance on language and literature, much conceptual art (like much criticism) boils down to bad writing and bullying. More important, "nonsense" can signify the absence of sensual information — particularly the traditional artistic vocabulary of color, form, composition, scale, and physical and kinesthetic presence (not to mention the even baser animal faculties of tactility, smell, taste and hearing), plus the suspiciously seductive power of deeply wired preverbal symbolism. And a sense of humor.

Seventy-one-year-old National City native John Baldessari has repeatedly been called "the dean of West Coast conceptual art" — both for his historical association with that early-'70s movement and for his own manifest love of literary, art-historical and philosophical reference. But his art — even at its most austere — is funny, symbolically charged, and often rich with sensory novelty and pleasure. His current exhibit at Margo Leavin, entitled "Junctions and Intersections," ends the five-year drought since his last Los Angeles solo show, the monochromatic inkjets of his *Goya Series*. That muted, elegiac sequence, which paired grainy, forlorn photos of shoes, paper clips and other quotidian objects with text borrowed from painting titles by the gloomy Spanish master, seemed something of a capitulation to the uncomprehending, even hostile reception of his previous body of work, which was as extravagant and painterly as the *Goya Series* was not.

"Junctions and Intersections" appears to seek a middle ground. Apparently having made peace with his trademark photo grid, Baldessari manages to contain the unbridled flamboyance of his mid-'90s experiments within a standardized set of geometric structures — arrangements of large rectangular digital photographic prints into a square with an empty center (*Junctions*) or a cross or H shape (*Intersections*). The photographic sources alternate the familiar anonymous movie stills and news photos with the artist's own panoramic nature shots, mostly of forests and beaches. Usually the imagery contained in one panel spills over into the next, often overlapping with the adjacent image to create a sort of informational moiré. At these points of superimposition, Baldessari adds paint, judiciously emphasizing or eradicating pictorial fragments — a face here, a tree trunk there — in flat, bright, uniform patches of acrylic.

This imposed continuity between isolated frames allows Baldessari to roam even further than usual in the unlikely correspondences he proposes — a pris-

oner being led to his execution is conjoined to a lady acrobat, whose partner stands in a landscape that is both ocean and woods, which rise and mingle with the priest leading the way to the gas chamber. Famous for the similar (if simpler) associative clusters of blowing-up movie stills in his work of the 1980s (and for mentoring a generation of post-conceptual artists as the central figure during the establishment of CalArts' reputation as an internationally important art school), Baldessari is usually mistakenly lumped with the "death of painting" crowd, whose twisted, puritanical take on Marcel Duchamp's call for a "post-retinal" art drained much of the pleasure and most of the non-verbal intelligence from the art experience.

But '80s-style appropriation, deconstructed allegory and pedagogical genealogy are only part of the story. What the purists fail to realize is that Baldessari was always a painter — fascinated by the depiction of space, the arrangement of shapes across the hypothetical grid of human visual perception, the mechanics of perception and cognition, and the intuitions of temporality that extend beyond the singular, frozen image. Like many conceptual artists, Baldessari has been concerned with what can be *left out* of a painting. But where most theory-driven artworks throw the baby out with the bath water, relying on and ultimately reinforcing the manufactured consent and verbal persuasion that officially sanction something as Art, Baldessari understands that the best argument for or against any work of art is another work of art. His process of elimination is ultimately positive, because it always results in a picture that *functions*, engaging the viewer as emphatically as it does the history of art. (It's a little disconcerting that the contemporary L.A. art landscape continues to be ruled by such dinosaurs as Ed Ruscha and Baldessari — the only celebrated young painter whose work seems anywhere as smart and vital as Brad Spence.)

THE "JUNCTIONS" CAN BE READ AS NARRATIVE loops, weaving from nature to culture and passing through any number of incremental hybrids along the way. They also read as frames, dislodging the discursive stream of images and ideas to the periphery, replacing them with a central lacuna, inverting the iconic structure of much of his earlier work, pointing to the silence that defines the notes. The "intersections" describe a jerkier narrative synchronicity, with two or three discrete stories converging in isolated explosions of data. *Landscape and Chorale*, for instance, crosses a wide-angle portrait of a Mormon Tabernacle-size choir posed in front of a huge set of organ pipes against a vertical aerial panorama shot of a desiccated but shrubbery-dotted landscape. At the crossroads, the images collide and erupt into vivid, shattered layers of stencil-like silhouettes in red, green, yellow and white — briefly but irrevocably refuting the narrative self-assurance of both the source images, generating what looks like a half-completed psychedelic silk-screen poster for all the paths not taken, rephrasing the question of who's looking at whom (or what) with a hall-of-mirrors complexity.

This last effect isn't at all unusual in Baldessari's figurative work, which is typically littered with interpenetrating points of view. In "Junctions and Intersections," gauzy unicorns and stuffed birds gaze mutely into the gallery space, a phalanx of soldiers stand at attention with their backs turned to us, concerned onlookers peer into the distance over our shoulders, two men with fully bandaged faces ogle a lurid pink aerobicizer in a perpendicular universe. Most of the people wear some sort of uniform — soldier, prisoner, priest, acrobat, chorister, etc. Baldessari seems to be suggesting an equivalency between complex collective social identities and the generative organic context from which such symbols are supposed to differentiate their bearers. Our attention is drawn to the fact that the polarization of nature and culture is itself a cultural artifact, and not a force of nature.

In his 1998 book *Trickster Makes This World*, idiosyncratic scholar Lewis Hyde traces art to its etymological root *artus*, Latin for bodily joints, and proposes a model of the Artist operating at the point where two different ways of seeing reality connect, the place where power is mediated, where sacred and profane interface, where hierarchical spheres and territories adjoin. Using Duchamp as a model, Hyde identifies the trickster-artist as one "whose mischief keeps the protective barriers surrounding cultural forms porous and open to change." John Baldessari's provocative articulation of unsuspected connections, gaps, hinges and puns in art, culture and the world literalizes this insight and locates it at the center of art practice, lifts the conceptualist and painterly world views that insist on their mutual exclusivity, and lays them atop one another to see if something new and surprising happens. Something always does. ■

JOHN BALDESSARI: "Junctions and Intersections" | AT MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., (310) 273-0603 Through December 7

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