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CALENDAR

ART

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Baldessari plays with puzzles

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to *The Times*

At 71, John Baldessari is making the best work of his career. At Margo Leavin Gallery, his new pictures of people, places and things are also among the best being made by anyone today.

Over the last 35 years Baldessari has established his reputation as the poet laureate of L.A. Conceptualism. Long after that emphatically cerebral approach to art-making grew stale in New York and Europe (not to mention California), he has kept it fresh by never letting viewers forget that art can be at once whip-smart and fun.

In two ongoing series of painted photographs and draw-

ings, Baldessari does for images what crossword puzzles do for words. He compresses loads of otherwise unrelated elements into small spaces in ways that make sense if you know what you're looking for, yet befuddle those unfamiliar with the loose logic that links them.

Each of his nearly 7-foot-square works consists of five, seven or eight rectangular compartments arranged in the shape of a cross, the letter "H" or a tick-tack-toe grid (whose center remains empty). Baldessari fills these tidily framed spaces with two, three or four photographs he shot in color with a landscape camera or enlarged from carefully cropped B-movie stills, which are often, but not always, black and white.

Running vertically or horizontally, each of these digitally printed images occupies three abutted compartments. Sometimes, a single compartment contains a single part of a panoramic image. These read clearly. Most depict the mountains, deserts and beaches of Southern California.

At other times, two photo-

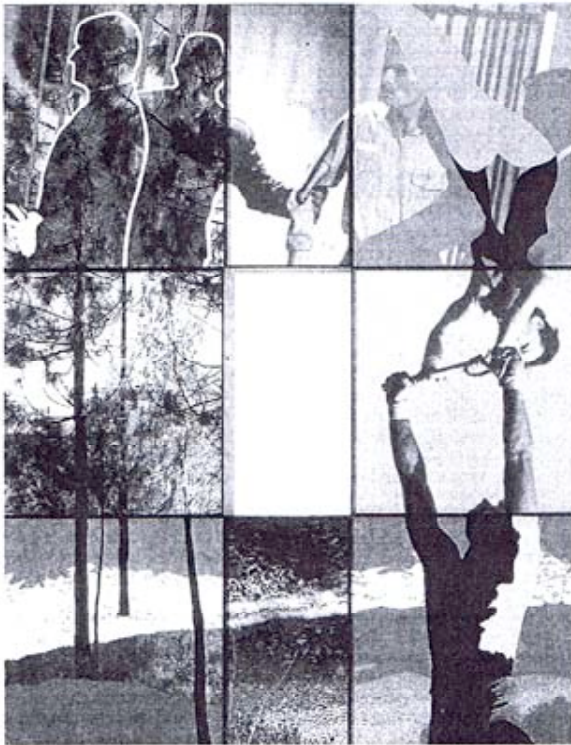
graphs occupy the same rectangle, overlapping to form pictures of anonymous actors in less than memorable movies superimposed over trees, seascapes and other bit players. These are harder to discern. Most have the presence of ghostly collisions between the parallel worlds of long-forgotten dramas and the ordinariness of everyday reality.

Baldessari complicates matters by painting over fragments of the superimposed sections with solid blocks of bright color. Adding outlines and accents, he makes images that combine the playfulness of a kid's coloring book with the finality of a crime scene's taped silhouettes. An in-the-street formalist, Baldessari transforms 3-D illusions into flat paintings that recall the work of artists as diverse as Alex Katz, Roy Dowell, Ellsworth Kelly and Matisse.

Although he sticks with such tried-and-true media as photography and painting, his images are far more sophisticated (and stimulating) than most made with more advanced computer technology. And, unlike crossword puzzles, the answers to the

enigmas his deliciously puzzling pictures embody will not be published in tomorrow's paper. This further distinguishes Baldessari's art from run-of-the-mill Conceptualism, which strives to produce knowledge in a medium more suited to the unpredictability of pleasure.

Margo Leavin Gallery, 812 N. Robertson Blvd., L.A., (310) 273-0603, through Dec. 7. Closed Sundays and Mondays.



Courtesy of JOHN BALDESSARI

JUXTAPOSITIONS: John Baldessari pieces images together in "Junction Series: Landscape, Seascape, Prisoner, and Acrobats."