

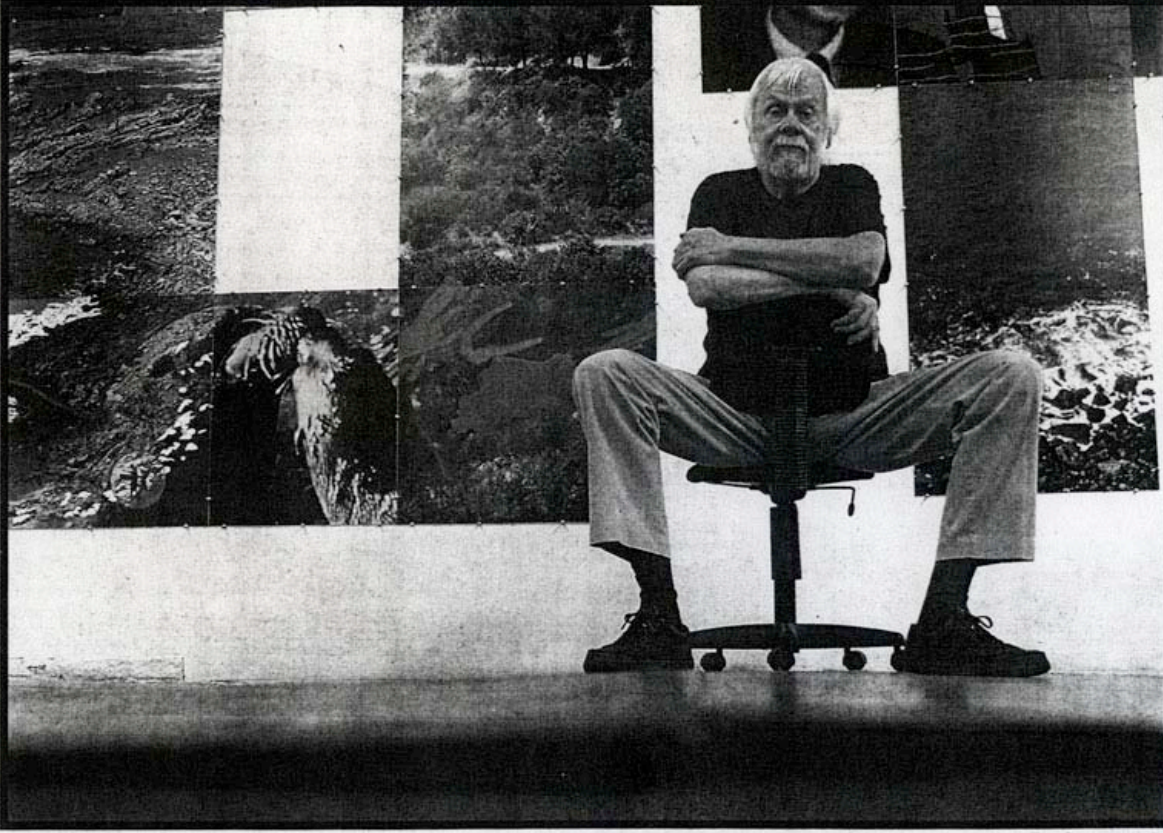
MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

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Knight, Christopher. "Pandora's box, opened." *Los Angeles Times*, 27 October 2002, p. E46-47.

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ART



THE CREATOR: Baldessari sits in front of new works "Junction Series: Seascape, Landscape, Fish, and Seals," left, and "Intersection Series: Seascape With Onlookers (Concerned)," seen here in partial views. "I'm kind of like Dr. Frankenstein," he jokes about his influence.

WALLY SKALLI / Los Angeles Times

Pandora's box, opened

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John Baldessari once proclaimed painting dead. However, his new work acknowledges the medium's renewed significance. So, are his acolytes paying any attention?

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

IN June, a Berlin-based curator named Jens Hoffman opened an exhibition at the Project, a lively gallery in a downtown L.A. warehouse. The show's format was somewhere between a diary and a daisy chain. Over the course of 11 weeks, Hoffman added artists to his show. By the final day, when the gallery space was full and a closing party was held, the curator had chosen 44 entries.

No. 40 was Mark Roeder. His contribution consisted of a short, typed letter. "Dear Jens," it began. "I ask that the following artists' and/or organizations' contributions be removed and further excluded from the exhibition" — whereupon there appeared a list of eight names.

Roeder's cheeky contribution is a classic gesture of Conceptual art — textual, ephemeral, humorous, acutely aware of its context, devoid of visual interest, mechanically produced, eloquent as an idea but not as an object. It embodies many of the hallmarks of work from the Conceptualist upheaval that began to stir internationally in the 1950s and that finally took off in the 1960s and early 1970s. In fact, if a visitor to the Project encountered Roeder's piece and didn't know better, he might have thought it was 1972, not 2002.

Or, maybe even 1971. That was the year John Baldessari, the most important artist Hoffman invited to be in the Project exhibition, completed a now legendary work for a show in Canada. Back then, Baldessari had a simple plan. There were no funds for him to travel to the gallery at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. So, he instructed a group of students there to write: "I will not make any more boring art" on the gallery's walls, over and over, as if they were a class of budding Bart Simpson.

Boring your audience was a cardinal sin, the work declared. Indeed, Conceptual art had been born of a conviction that, after a hundred years of experiment, established modern forms of sculpture and — especially — painting were stuck in a deep rut. Conceptualism, by suppressing art's dependence on physical form, might break up the logjam.

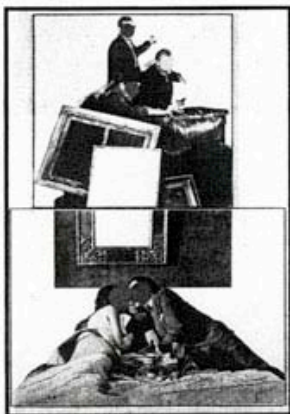
For the Project show, Baldessari assigned the 31-year-old Nova Scotia exhortation once again — but with a twist. This time, it wasn't aspiring young artists who were cautioned, but the exhibition's curator. Hoffman dutifully covered blackboards with repeated promises: "I will never curate any more boring shows."

Baldessari's curatorial tutorial at the blackboard is a partly funny, partly impatient gesture, aimed at prodding the institutional art world. "I think what [Hoffman] was getting at with the show," Baldessari said while munching a tostada at a neighborhood restaurant near his Santa Monica studio the other day, "was finding descendants of Conceptual art and trying to identify that in art here." The problem: L.A. art has left that divi-



Courtesy of John Baldessari

IN CONCEPT: Violating a long list of established rules for good painting, Baldessari introduced "Wrong" (1967).



Courtesy of John Baldessari

EXECUTION: "Bloody Sundae" (1987) is one of the big, photographic composites, made of altered B movie stills, that catapulted his career.

sion behind.

The young Berlin curator wrote at the start of the show's catalog. "One detail about the L.A. art scene I noticed quite early in my research was that painting and sculpture still have such a strong position. . . . I really thought that Conceptual [art] would have washed all of that away."

Rather than embrace his encounter with the unexpected, however, Hoffman averted his eyes.

He included no painters in his show.

The decision is telling. The show reflects an international status quo, which Baldessari's own radical career has been instrumental in establishing.

"I'm kind of like Dr. Frankenstein," the artist, now 71, concedes, simultaneously distraught and amused by the thought. "I didn't know," he deadpans, assuming the croaking, confessional style of the mad scientist in an old monster movie. "If only I had known! I meant well!"

New art in Los Angeles is characterized by its freewheeling pluralism. Meanwhile, Conceptual art isn't what it used to be.

In the '60s and '70s, Baldessari said, "it was a useful term for a lot of artists who were trying to get away from painting primarily, and sculpture secondarily. So then, you knew what Conceptual art meant. It meant you didn't paint."

Painting still bedevils most curators and academics. Baldessari started as a painter, and painting lurks in the wings of much of his art from the past 35 years. It's the unacknowledged elephant in the Conceptual art room.

Rules were made to be broken

BORN in the working-class San Diego suburb of National City in 1931, the son of European immigrants, Baldessari majored in art at San Diego State College, minored in literature and took courses in philosophy. (He remains an inveterate reader today, his studio piled with books.) For a year he studied art history at UC Berkeley, before returning to San Diego to finish a master's degree in art, which he received in 1957.

For a decade Baldessari flailed around artistically. He painted landscapes and gestural abstractions, used photographs as source material, employed billboard fragments as painting surfaces and more. None of it really satisfied him — or anyone else, for that matter. But living in San Diego helped make experimentation possible. He was far from New York — modern art central — and far enough from the nascent art scene in L.A. not to have to concern himself with fitting in. He had nothing to lose.

Equally important, Baldessari taught, at California Youth Authority, in high schools, at the college level. He's been a sought-after teacher ever since, including as a pivotal founding faculty member at CalArts, where he worked from 1970 to 1988, and now at UCLA.

Being in the academy confronted Baldessari with the thorny issue of rules for art. What makes a painting good or bad, enlightening or banal, a success or a flop? Beyond stretched canvas and paint, in fact, what distinguishes a painting from other interesting, appealing pictures and objects in the world? Why was one thing art, and another not?

There were textbooks that laid out answers, and they became source material for Baldessari's unconventional paintings. When combined with his nothing-to-lose attitude, the question of rules became volatile.

Typical is an enticing 1967 canvas titled "Wrong," now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The central image is a black-and-white photograph of the 6-foot-7 artist shown standing before a palm tree. Printed below in black capital letters is the single word, "WRONG."

The text explains the image, as if it were an illustration in a how-to book. It's wrong to compose a photograph by placing a person in front of a tree, because then it looks like the tree is growing out of the person's head.

But that's not all that's wrong with "Wrong." In 1967, it violated a long list of established rules for good painting. The image is photographic, not hand-painted. Nor is it abstract. Color has vanished. The text, which Baldessari hired out to a commercial sign painter, does not actualize the artist's inner life or represent a process of nature. The painting's smallish size does not encompass a viewer's visual field, because it was determined by the size of the door in the van Baldessari used to cart the work to the sign painter's shop. In fact, the only signals left that say "Wrong" is indeed a painting are the conventional materials: Paint has been applied to stretched canvas.

Soon Baldessari dispensed with that too. He began to make text works, shoot videotapes, cut found photographs into provocative shapes and assemble unrelated stills from obscure B movies, which later became big, baroque composites that seem to harbor strange, epic narratives. In the process Baldessari was instrumental in smashing the international painting cartel that ruled Modern art.

Today it's difficult to recall the ferocity of the fight, circa 1970, but Baldessari has a clear picture of the battlefield in his mind. "Graphically," he says, "it was described in the seating at Max's Kansas City" — the era's hip club for artists in New York, where "the painters sat on one side, the Minimal and Conceptual artists sat on another, and the Warhol crowd sat in back."

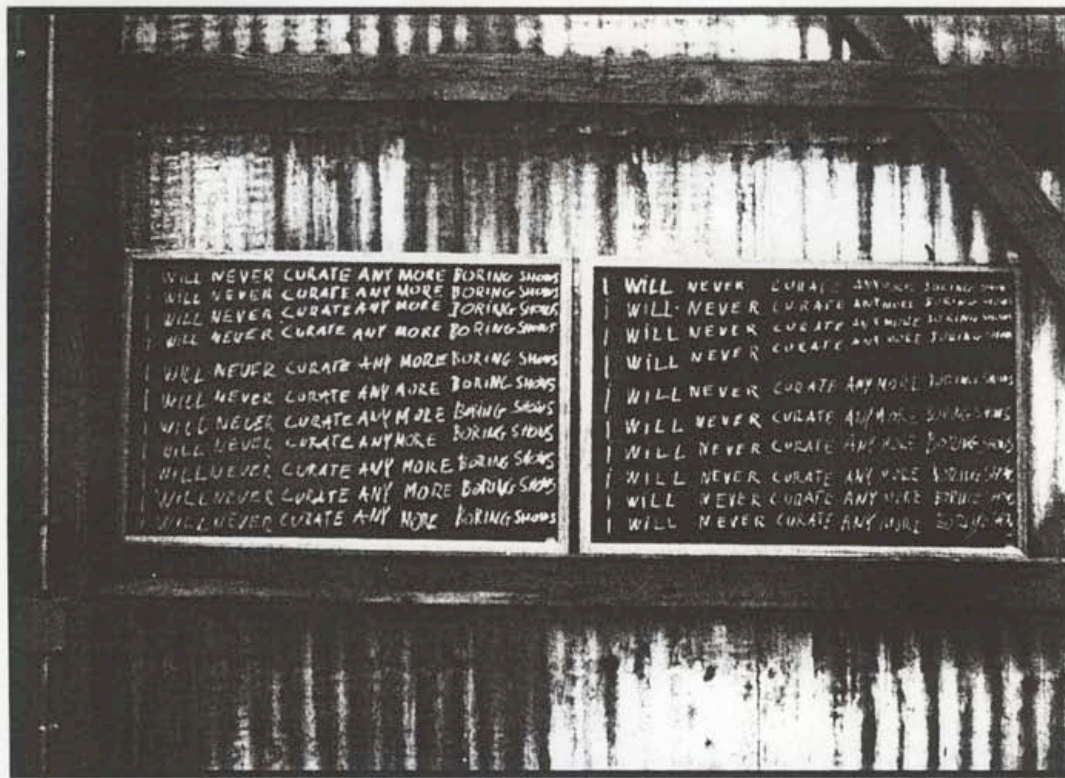
The painters lost the fight. Partly that's because they represented the establishment — which, in the age of Vietnam, civil rights struggles and Watergate, wasn't where an artist wanted to be. Partly the thrilling force of new ideas just overran them — Post-Minimalism, earth art, performance, video, feminist art and more. And partly it was economic fate.

The late 1950s and 1960s experienced something new in American artistic life: the emergence of an active commercial market for contemporary art, from Leo Castelli Gallery in New York to Perus Gallery in L.A. When that market collapsed in the recessionary waves that battered the 1970s, traditional objects like paintings and sculptures couldn't be sustained. But a dematerialized art based in ideas could. Conceptualism flourished in the state-supported art scene of Western Europe and in the school-supported art scene developing in the United States, where a market didn't matter. There's a reason Baldessari's 1971 pledge not to make "any more boring art" was carried out by far-off students directed by telephone and letter. It cost next to nothing.

The renewal of painting

PAINTING'S death was widely asserted in the wake of Conceptual art. Baldessari even held a funeral. At least, he held one for his own paintings — those he made before 1967 were ritually incinerated at a San Diego crematorium in 1970.

But his newest work pushes painting into the foreground, signaling confidence in painting's renewed significance today. For his first L.A. solo show in five years, currently at Margo Leavin Gal-



The Project

WORD TO THE WISE: For a recent exhibition, Baldessari ordered the curator to the blackboard. The title says it all: "I Will Never Curate Any More Boring Shows." The piece harks back to a Baldessari work from 1971, a key to Conceptualism.

lery in West Hollywood, Baldessari is showing what he bluntly describes as "occasions for painting."

The "occasions" arise in the intersections between photographic enlargements. Using a panorama camera, Baldessari was taking landscape pictures. Then, quixotically turning the camera 90 degrees, he realized the panorama best encompasses tall subjects, such as palm trees or apartment buildings.

The new works each assemble two or four linear panoramas, greatly enlarged, into a square or cross. Where the photographs overlap, a kind of double exposure is created. Inside this zone of camera chaos, Baldessari paints the jumbled pattern of shapes, shadows and lines, using flat acrylic colors. Although visually unique, these provocative works immediately recall paintings by artists as diverse as Matisse and Ellsworth Kelly.

"I think there's probably a hidden notion that, if you engage in painting, that's known territory," Baldessari says of his surreptitious methods for insinuating painting into Conceptual art, which are now blatant. "It's not like 'there are dragons out there in the mist,' you know? It's familiar territory."

In the 1980s, Baldessari made big photographic composites whose inventive mix of whimsy and power catapulted his career from cult status into the stratosphere. They

were composed from cropped and altered B-movie stills, but their pictorial language derived from 17th and 18th century Baroque painting, re-imagined for an age of cinema. "Bloody Sundaes," for example, shows three men in the upper frame with guns drawn, while lovers in bed fill the lower frame — mere mortals held unwitting hostage to the caprice of wicked gods above. Think Fragonard or Tiepolo.

Still wrong after all these years

THERE'S little interesting art today — including painting — that hasn't been informed by Conceptualism, but painting per se remains an institutional whipping boy. (Alluding to the lingering queasiness about the medium in institutional art circles, Baldessari groans and says, "If I see one more refrigerator door that's meant to be considered as a painting, I think I'll scream.") The Project exhibition betrayed an almost pathological fear of paint. So do the big national and international surveys, such as last spring's paintings-poor Whitney Biennial and Germany's recently closed Documenta 11.

Documenta dismayed Baldessari, who found little to admire. His favorite work was

an enormous still-life painting by Luc Tuymans. The Belgian artist's moody paintings of the mysteriously slain, post-colonial Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba made a big impact at the 2001 Venice Biennale. He was one of only three painters invited to Documenta, where most of the 113 other artists employed documentary methods of political art.

"He might have done it perversely," Baldessari said of Tuymans' huge still-life. "But you know the reason he was chosen for [Documenta] is not because he's a painter, but because of his [earlier political] subject matter. Me, I couldn't care less about the content, I like his painting. I know there's suffering in the world. I read the newspapers every day. I don't have to be told that by art."

"Metaphorically, it's like Christ nailed to the cross: I don't want to see the nails in the hands, I want to see the ascension — all the joy and the glory. Which I didn't see at Documenta."

Baldessari's embrace of artistic pluralism is plainly not in sync with today's dominant international state of affairs, where fourth-generation Conceptual art still rules, and picto-phobia is rife. Thirty-five years after "Wrong," it seems Baldessari is still wrong.

Christopher Knight is *The Times*' art critic.