

# THE TECHNOLOGICAL BALDESSARI

## John Baldessari: Pure Beauty

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Los Angeles

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John Baldessari is a demigod in Los Angeles—a revered educator, patron, thinker, and artist. Countless individuals have been influenced by his teachings, as well as his works, to such an extent that almost nothing that juxtaposes found image and text is devoid of reference to his creations. In 1990, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (LACMA) launched a Baldessari exhibition that introduced the artist to those unacquainted with his works, and now twenty years later, LACMA is revisiting that territory with “Pure Beauty.” Whether it is pure coincidence or not, these exhibitions have over thirty-five works in common (out of 150 in the current LACMA exhibition). Because Baldessari is an incredibly prolific artist, the overlaps are unfortunate and the show might have been stronger had it concentrated on work made since 1991. Baldessari works in myriad media, making paintings, prints, photographs, installations, and now even an iPhone app. The finished pieces are usually derived from isolating or rearranging—taking things apart and putting them back together anew. Best known for his appropriationist strategies, Baldessari uses movie stills as the basis of insightful and witty juxtapositions that occasionally offer poignant social commentary.

In a retrospective, the underlying premise is to introduce a vast body of work in a condensed fashion to a general audience. For that reason, many museum shows are generalized presentations of an artist’s work—one from this series, one from that series—to round out the artist’s oeuvre. Baldessari exhibitions are frequent, therefore, this museum exhibition becomes a walk down memory lane. What makes the LACMA exhibition different from previous Baldessari shows is its ability to trace a new trajectory—the influence and use of technology on his work. Because the exhibition spans more than forty years, one can now look back in time and clearly see Baldessari’s inventive uses of technology.

Early text paintings including *Wrong* (1967), *Pure Beauty* (1967–68), and *A Painting That Is Its Own Documentation* (1968–) set the stage for Baldessari’s conceptualism. In the late 1960s, he began purging art of imagery in favor of words that describe its making or meaning. These, among other works, display Baldessari’s wit and cunning alongside a pointed commentary on the process of creating an artwork. While it previously could have been a rare treat to see him sing Sol Lewitt’s 35-point tract on conceptual art to tunes like the *Star Spangled Banner* and *Heaven* (1972) or state “I Am Making Art” repeatedly for eighteen minutes as he moves his hands and body in quirky motions (1971), these early video works are now prevalent on the internet. In Baldessari’s development, from the mid-1970s to the present, what becomes striking and relevant is how he has used technology and taken advantage of various equipment (such as the Portapack in the 1970s) and software development (such as the iPhone app in 2010) to become a leader in expanding new fields for artistic experimentation.

In the digital age, where everything is reproducible, how does an artist like Baldessari stay current? When Baldessari first started juxtaposing images and texts, the seamless collage of Photoshop or the easy downloading of internet imagery was hardly commonplace. To create many of his works in the 1980s and ‘90s he collected Hollywood film stills, marking up and isolating individual segments, gestures, and looks. He then had them rephotographed and enlarged and assembled these croppings into wall-sized works. He focused on how a look could lead the eye through a succession of images in such works as *Man and Woman with Bridge* (1985). Later, as in *Three Red Paintings* (1988), he masked parts of the images using handpainted circles to block out specific elements—faces as well as the paintings—in the original work. Formal as well as conceptual threads led him from the 1970s to the 1990s. A line drawn on the wall connecting balls tossed into the air and photographed, *Aligning Balls* (1972; 41 color photographs with chalk line), translated to a line connecting the ocean to a mountaintop in *Mountain Climber* (1988), where the guide line in a photograph of a scuba diver installed at the bottom of the wall extends through another image, becoming the mountain climber’s rope installed where the wall meets the ceiling. The use of language comes in and out. Pure image becomes captioned image, like in his “Goya Series” (1997) and “Tetrad Series” (1999). In the later works, however, text rarely stands alone.

The gradual shift from analog to digital has reduced the presence of the artist’s hand. Baldessari has embraced this transformation by making his imagery smoother, slicker, and more mechanical—reducing it to its essential elements. The hand tinted black-and-white photographs become digital prints on canvas or vinyl. The montaging is now created in the computer, allowing for more rounded edges and exact isolation. When text is presented, it is a chosen typeface rather than a handpainted graphic. What was once flat can become dimensional with the aid of a laser cutter. Forms that once interlocked on the two-dimensional surface now join forces in three-dimensional space.

While adapting the physical elements of his works to a rapidly changing digital age, the meanings remain unchanged. The humor implicit in the early conceptual works is now subtler and more refined. Most significant is the desire to do what has not been done before—at least by Baldessari. The works become big—billboard size—because technology allows them to. They hang on the museum’s façade and span the walls from floor to ceiling. In an expansive image of the ocean, *Palm Tree and Seascapes* (2009), the horizon line that divides sea from sky is presented as a mirror image on two opposing walls in the final room of the exhibition. A similar image previously adorned the façade of a building in the 2009 Venice Biennale where Baldessari transposed the Pacific Ocean he sees from his Santa Monica home to the Venetian island. In the LACMA incarnation, the images are identical seascapes, but one is bisected by a palm tree. Standing in front of the tree, which was Photoshopped into the image, one can

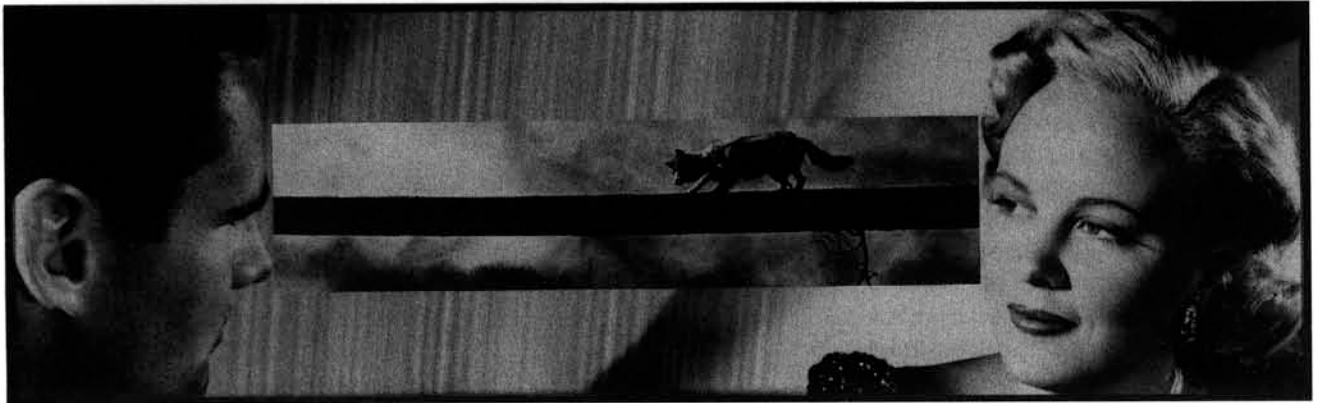
imagine recreating Baldessari's early work *Wrong*. Here the wrong has become a right.

The ocean murals are part of *Brain/Cloud* (2009), a multimedia interactive work created specifically for this exhibition. *Brain/Cloud* uses the painting *Falling Cloud* (1965) as its point of departure. The painting is a diagrammatic work depicting a crudely painted cloud-like shape on top that appears to be expelling a smaller incarnation of itself below. In the 2009 piece, Baldessari three-dimensionalizes the brain, making it a large white object that floats on an empty wall. A digital video of the object is captured by a camera on time delay and projected on the opposite wall. Here viewers can see themselves lingering under the brain, becoming part of the work. While this piece is the most technically sophisticated within the exhibition, the payoff is somewhat disappointing. Seeing oneself as a black-and-white element in the work does not enhance its content or impact; its only significance is to illustrate Baldessari's engagement with the technology.

Concurrent with the LACMA exhibition, Baldessari launched an iPhone app. The work, a re-creation of a piece originally presented in LACMA Lab's "Seeing" exhibition in 2001, was designed to be an interactive work where viewers could use the computer and view

a projection depicting their rearrangement of the elements in *Banquet Still Life* (1667) by Abraham van Beyeren. The projected display from the "Seeing" exhibition can now be rearranged by the finger on the iPhone's touch screen, allowing viewers to create and save numerous new versions of the still life. While there is nothing extraordinary about the work or the experience, what is notable is that Baldessari is mining this territory. Baldessari is an adventurer and a pioneer. He charts out new territories to be explored and pushes what can be done. There is a consistency to his vision that becomes all the more evident in a retrospective exhibition where works from different series are juxtaposed. Walking through the chronologically installed retrospective gives viewers the opportunity to trace Baldessari's influence and impact on the contemporary art world, but more importantly it allows seasoned viewers to discover new threads and connections. The layout and choice of works in this exhibition make clear that Baldessari has always been quick to adopt new technologies and equipment and use them in both the conceptual and material development of his work. Occasionally these lead to false starts, but more often result in strange and amusing new pieces (that still manage to surprise). His adventurousness serves us well.

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*Man and Woman with Bridge* (1985) by John Baldessari; © 2009 the artist; photo by Robert McKeever; photo courtesy Gagosian Gallery