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Frieze

Men Swallowing Swords, Men Blowing Out Candles

An homage to, meditation on, conversation with and analysis of the multi-faceted, 50-year career of John Baldessari

By Benjamin Weissman (October 1, 2009)



Dumpster Diving

Once upon a time the young John Baldessari was so desperate for images that he prowled back alleys hunting for discarded photographs. He'd climb into garbage bins (diving head first was never the recommended technique) and rummage around, finding curious rejected pictures of odd male bowlers (something about what their hands revealed in the follow-through) or stiff ceremonial group portraits of beaming Caucasians with faces revealing their true jack-o-lantern selves, or a stack of dead bodies, or – simply and remarkably – a photograph of a standing man in a black suit which would eventually be cropped and tilted on its side and positioned at the bottom of a horizontal stack of other men – soldiers, cowboys, etc. – all of whom appear to have been shot dead in the street. The solitary living man in the black suit is on the bottom tier, facing up.

Horizontal Men

An absurd and unavoidable question arises, slippery, complex, numbing: what does it mean to be male? Why and wherefore is the work teeming with guns, knives, school boys, romance, dancing and flying men, tuxedoed men, eye-patched men, amputeed dagger men, silhouetted men, men waving goodbye to sailboats, men fishing, cap and gown men, male violinists, soldiers, masked men, men in conversation, bandaged men, men on crutches, men teased and prodded, men in quandaries, men in agony (*Violent Space Series: Five Vignettes Portraits of Stress Situations*, 1976), blindfolded men, lions and wolves, snake handlers, antlers, horns, men falling and diving and running and hiding and wrestling and belayed on rope, men behind bars, men wearing helmets, fedoras and stinky brims, men on horseback, men in fields, David fending off Goliath, men swallowing swords or blowing out candles, or throwing rocks or touching a gavel with other men, men strumming guitars, or blowing on harmonicas, or fingering a French horn, men posing with fish, men with cocktails, cigars, pitchforks, men gazing at uprooted trees,

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bucking bronco men, marching men, men in suits, men tortured or murdered in bulk, caged and hunted animals, roosters, corpses, and G-men and sportsmen and hugeness and verticality, eruptions from the earth, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Charles Baudelaire, and Edgar Allan Poe, Jackson Pollock and Sigmund Freud, Jesus, John Ruskin, Thelonious Monk and Brian Eno, William Carlos Williams, Laurence Sterne, Sol LeWitt, Pablo Picasso, Francisco Goya, Henri Matisse, and Giotto (the name of Baldessari's dog)?



John Baldessari, Noses & Ears, Etc. (Part Two): (Green) Face and (Red) Face with Noses and (Yellow) Hands and Dog, 2006, three dimensional archival print and acrylic paint, 276x154x10 cm

Dialogue

His large, round dining room table is always covered in stacks of reading material. Piles of books and exhibition catalogue galleys, towers of paper on every available surface.

Benjamin Weissman

I like how you use the phrase 'paddling around' when describing your working methods, processes, and thinking – it prompts an image of you floating on the surface of a lake, in a dinghy.

John Baldessari

Serendipity, I know, is an over-used word, but I really haven't changed the way I go about doing work much. I used to have all these found photographs, categorized by different subject matter and then I realized that any one photograph can fit into endless categories. All of a sudden things got out of order, and now what I do is go through boxes of photographs with the same kind of attitude I had when I first chose them. Anything that sort of made me stop and look at twice I realized had some sort of hold on me, and I would buy it. And now I go through things and I say, 'Geez, what was I thinking about?' I can't remember why I did it. But it's kind of like if you're at the doctor's office and you're looking at all the magazines, just flipping through them, and all of a sudden you say, 'What did I just see' and you go back and try to figure out what it

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was that made you do that. I think I still have the same attitude. You may appreciate this being a writer. It's like I'm building with images the way a writer builds with words, not words by themselves, but you get them in some kind of syntactical order that works for you and then something begins to cook. I did a whole series of works where I had photographs with a word on the back of the pictures, and then I'd build things with words but then I'd flip the photographs and use the images rather than the words.



John Baldessari, Horizontal Men, 1984, black and photographs, 247x121 cm

Clues, Supreme Tease

Baldessari has always likened his art practice to a detective writer's methods, employing archetypes, sprinkling clues here and there, toying with loaded fragments, illuminating obscure details, hiding evidence and alluding to crimes committed. In Violent Space Series: Nine Feet (of Victim and Crowd) Arranged by Position in Scene (1976), there is a horizontal rectangle of blackness and seven circular peepholes that provide a wink of information, each one featuring the shod feet of a person or character in a room. All the feet are in a standing position, with the exception of one set, which is pointed up, quite possibly suggesting someone dead. In Baldessari's hands blocked-out areas of images reek of secrets; this is where one of the many pleasures lies, in reading and decoding his pictures, in the tension between what is revealed and the great expanse of what is missing. These blacked-out or white or dense-with-colour sections evoke a rich cerebral emptiness, a projection room for the viewer's imagination. The game is 'guess the picture'. The contract is that Baldessari has made these charged and subtle images and fragments and you've got to do the rest. These pictorial proposals, games and questions are begging for participation. At one point, Baldessari seriously considered becoming a man of the cloth, and entering a seminary. He felt the best way to teach was to tell stories, the way Jesus did, otherwise no one listens to you.

Author Talking to Self

Q Does Baldessari have a particular urge to unpack the male homo sapiens' struggle with their hunting and gathering selves?

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A I don't think he consciously seeks to solve the male riddle, but the riddle is in him. And keeps him crashing fiercely through the underbrush.

Q Do they, the men, know what they really are?

A They have never known.

Q What is it like to be a man, to be a man among other men, and to be a man amongst women and to engage in conversation with them?

A Unanswerable.

Q Can a masculine man be a girly man when the time is right?

A The best men know when and where to throw down and go fully girl with falsetto, delicate hand gestures, etc.

Q What about this, the idea of collage being a sometimes femmy pursuit, collecting this and that, building a nest, all this snipping and cutting and pasting together, sort of like quilting, apron pocket detritus? Many of the heroes of the medium prior to Mr Baldessari, and you could include Joseph Cornell in this group, have a very unmasculine touch to their cut and paste.

A There might be something there. Baldessari's touch is in striking contrast to that.

Q To some degree would you say that Baldessari's work is like an encyclopedia of maleness?

A Hard to say no to that question. I'd say that's one of the bigger yeses in the history of answers.

Q To use or misuse the regularly bastardized word, does he deconstruct the male?

A How could he not?

Q Does Baldessari's gaze around and through the male gaze render a double-dude staredown?

A Affirmative. There's a German phrase for it.

Q Wissenschaftler der mannlichen Schwierigkeit?

A Scholar of male complexity.

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2 Lil' Q's, 2 Big A's

BW What do you consider your most personal work?

JB I guess it's all personal, as much as it can be. I'm still pretty guarded. With my earlier work I once explained that it was pretty cerebral. I think I'm holding my cards close to my chest. I was very much into Structuralism but at a certain point I said 'Why be so tight-assed about it?' and I began to open up a bit.

BW What caused that?



John Baldessari, *The Soul Returns to the Body*, 1984, black and white photographs, 184x154 cm

JB I got tired of what I was doing. I get bored real easy. I remember way back in the 1970s at Max's Kansas City in New York. It was always kind of funny the way it was set up because painters would sit on one side of the room – it was a long place – and all the other guys, Minimal and Conceptual artists, would sit on the other, and Andy Warhol would be in the back room. And I remember late one night I got talking to Larry Poons, who I thought was a pretty interesting painter. We found ourselves talking about beauty and I was taking the more cerebral side and he was thinking about anything that looks good and I remember blurting out something like, 'That would be like wearing your heart on your sleeve', and he said, 'Well, what's wrong with that?' I didn't have a good answer. I think I slowly came to terms with that – what's wrong with doing that? I don't necessarily think that I'm trying to be beautiful but I had this idea that if you spend enough time trying to do art you figure out how to make things look good so you might as well be concerned with something else. So I think what I do now is I'm sort of colliding states of mind in some way. I jam one image against another image, trying to create some emotional tension between them.

Shiny Hovering Nose

By way of Surrealism, Hans Bellmer, René Magritte and the comic glories of Freud's castration anxiety analysis, it's interesting to consider Baldessari's recent collages of body parts in light of America's ongoing international wars where torture and possible dismemberment are the norm. Baldessari the moralist: what is he telling us? In *The Nose* (1836), a short story by Nikolai Gogol, a nervous, gravy-stained, hen-pecked barber finds a nose in a freshly-baked roll his wife pulls from the oven. His wife threatens to call the police. He wraps the nose in a napkin, rushes to a bridge and throws it in a lake. 'At once ten puds-weight seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders.' No doubt the heaviest type of nose. As if scripted by Baldessari, Gogol tells us:

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'Further events here become enshrouded in mist. What happened after that is unknown to all men.' To have an obsession with noses and ears is to delve into the more intricate and peculiar curves and creases of the human body. Franz Kafka had big beautiful ears. Where ears bear some resemblance to wings, noses appear like a dorsal fin or rudder and look weighty, like little anvils of the face. In Baldessari's hands they're enormous and nearly constitute their own planets, suspended in orbit. Usually unclothed and part of our social appearance the nose and ear are the body parts most closely resembling genitalia. The works featuring noses and ears are Baldessari's most sexual work, brimming with play. Via his technique of colour cut-outs ears and noses easily move around in the mind. Baldessari gives the picture ample room for mix and matching.

Emotion

There's a tension percolating under the surface of Baldessari's images, and in the dynamic relationships between his cut-out images. A beautiful collie, a heroic Lassie-type dog being hugged by a pair of yellow hands; a green face may belong to those hands. And above the dog and his semi-invisible master a second face hovers, pink with a floating nose. For anyone who follows contemporary art, Baldessari's pictures have been an integral part of our experience of the world for the past half-century. Indirectly, he's been dealing with the fragility of civilization, the combustible mix of humans interacting, being alive. His freaky bowlers, mirrored cowboys, his pencils, old and sharpened; his men and women in the throes of some deep tension with the cautious fox between them; and in one of his most arresting images, *The Soul Returns to the Body* (1984), an elegant seal nosing its way into the body of a dead lion. Here the artist's poetic prowess is at its most concise and stunning. The animal is in water but appears to be flying, and resides in a cropped pointy square directed into the lion carcass. Baldessari brings the two together, an interspecies soul-meld.

Baldessari as Epoch

Much of the joy of looking at Baldessari's pictures comes from the way they make you feel. They're pictures begging to be read, ready to usher in reckless and gaudy and heady and thoughtful and fanciful interpretation. They bring out the best in his audience. They're pleasure-inducing, luscious mind-fucks, pictures that never lose their muscle, their juice, their wit. They're lively, on fire and unpredictable, forever juking the viewer, faking left and dashing right.

Baldessari's influence is immense and has many facets and offshoots. For example: from Bas Jan Ader to the Pictures Generation – whether they were employing text (Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger), big graphic work on paper (Robert Longo), or using photography (Richard Prince) – all had monster careers using snippets of Baldessari's DNA. This is a great compliment to the range and sphere of his influence, and the kind of sunlight he projects – Prince couldn't have got up in the morning without JB paving the way. Baldessari demonstrates how mediums, rules, classifications and the rigidity of forms are not sacred, but are givens best tinkered with, turned upside down and intelligently mauled. Museum shows have also reflected his influence. For example, 'Pure Beauty: Some Recent Work from Los Angeles', curated by Ann Goldstein at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 1995, was inspired by a single work of Baldessari's of the same name from 1967 (and, of course, 'Pure Beauty' is also the title of the Baldessari retrospective opening this month at Tate Modern). Similarly, the title of *Blasted*

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Allegories (1989), the anthology of artists' writing edited by Brian Wallis, is taken from a 1978 work by Baldessari.

Baldessari, aka Mr Longevity: I can't think of another contemporary artist who has remained interesting for a solid half-century. Always relevant, evolving, constantly upping the ante, continuing to grow, change, blow people away, stay cheerful, amused by the world, not a narcissistic vacuum with scores of slaves, Mr Baldessari is the only mega-successful artist I know who hasn't walled himself into his own success fortress. He studio is not a macho factory, he doesn't have a bazillion assistants (a mere five), he goes to galleries regularly and stays in touch with what younger artists are doing, even in these post-teaching days. He has always treated students like peers and not a lower form of intelligence and has never worried about his place in art history, or how an idea will fit into a given historical moment. As he has said, 'If it doesn't fit it's probably worth pursuing'. His commentaries have always been timely, never forced. He just makes things and believes in them. He's not the kind of famous artist who's got the word 'legacy' taped above his toilet.



John Baldessari, Raised Eyebrows/Furrowed Foreheads (Black and White Eyebrows), 2008, three dimensional archival prints and acrylic paint, 146x240x17 cm

No Face/Faces

There was a period when he blocked out the faces on the photographs he used as source material so that attention could be paid to other areas of the picture. This sounds similar to his procedure in life drawing class of draping fabric over the models' heads so students would focus on other parts of the body. After a decade of blocking, faces were allowed back, but not entirely.

City Can't Claim Him

Baldessari has never considered himself a Los Angeles artist, whatever that's supposed to mean (surf culture, finish fetish, film noir/muse, California dreamin'?). The regional tag has always been limiting (and meaningless). He does not produce work in response to a desert city located in the lower left-hand corner of the American map. Just because he lives near the beach, which is actually a separate incorporated city from Los Angeles, doesn't implant that location into his soul and determine his aesthetic, philosophy, style of work or mode of production. His research, study and source material comes from everywhere. He has always been an international man of mystery, working on an earthly plane. The location has always been Baldessariville.

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Easily Bored

In 1971 Baldessari was asked to participate in an exhibition in Nova Scotia, Canada. Since there wasn't enough money to fly him out he asked a group of art students in the area to write the phrase 'I will not make any more boring art' on the gallery walls, like a school punishment. They complied with his request. At his behest but without direct Baldessari supervision, a lithograph was made, the phrase repeated 17 times, on Arches paper, in an edition of 50. Later, Baldessari made a 30-minute videotape of himself writing the phrase over and over again. Years later, the faculty of Nova Scotia College made a documentary film borrowing Baldessari's phrase as its title. This was a promise that kept on promising, that every artist wanted to adhere to in some way – a promise that Baldessari certainly stuck to. But when did he ever make boring art in the first place? What piece could he have made that generated such an absurd reprimand? Moral: more artists should be fearful of making boring art.