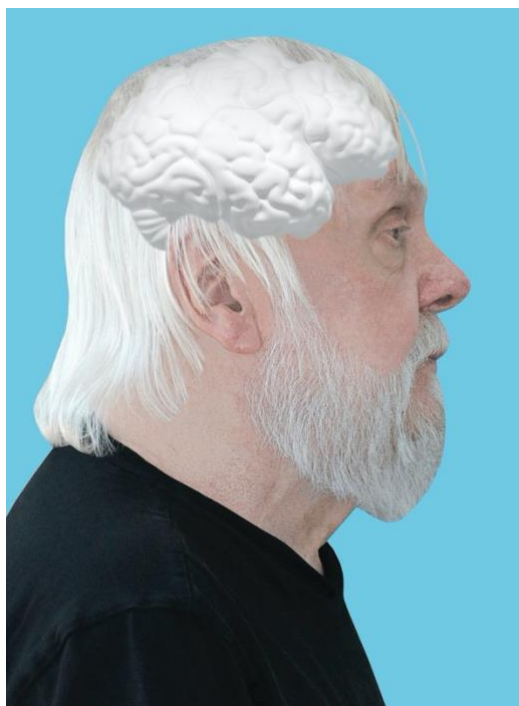


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No More Boring Art

John Baldessari's crusade.

by Calvin Tomkins (October 18, 2010)



Baldessari's "Self-Portrait (with Brain Cloud)" (2010).
Marian Goodman Gallery, NY / Paris; Photograph: Franziska Wagner

Now that contemporary art has become a global enterprise, we tend to forget that a few pockets of regional difference still exist. In Los Angeles, for example, artists rarely talk about Andy Warhol. Warhol's shadow hangs heavy over the international art world, but not in L.A., where the most relevant artist of the moment, the seventy-nine-year-old John Baldessari, said recently that he "hadn't thought about Warhol in forty years." Baldessari's endlessly surprising retrospective, which was on view all summer at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, comes to New York this month, opening on October 20th at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The fact that none of our modern or contemporary museums could find room for it in their schedules suggests a strain of parochialism at work here, too, but who knows? Baldessari's contrarian brand of conceptual, photography-based art-about-art has so few regional or even national characteristics that it probably belongs at the Met, among all those certified treasures of fifty centuries.

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Baldessari has made a career out of upsetting priorities and defying expectations. “Pure Beauty,” an early work that doubles as the exhibition’s title, consists of those two words, painted by a professional sign painter in black capital letters on an off-white canvas. When Baldessari had it done, in the mid-nineteen-sixties, he was teaching art at a junior college near his home in National City, California, a working-class town near the Mexican border, and painting in his spare time. His work until then had been fairly traditional—oil paint on canvas, applied with loose, gestural brushstrokes in the Abstract Expressionist manner. “I was getting tired of people saying my art was like Abstract Expressionism,” he told me. “Being in National City, where nobody cared what I was doing, I thought, What if you just give people what they want? People read magazines, and look at photographs, not at Jackson Pollocks.” There was more to it than that, of course. Baldessari is a prodigious reader—art history, novels, philosophy, the Bible, comics—and in those days he subscribed to a dozen international art magazines. What he really decided to give people was his version of conceptual art, in which ideas take precedence over images and the artist’s personal “touch” doesn’t count. In New York, in the mid-sixties, conceptual art had just started to take hold. It was a pretty serious business, severe and theoretical: Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs,” an iconic early example, consists of a folding chair placed against a wall, a photograph of the same chair on the wall to one side of it, and a dictionary definition of “chair,” enlarged and hung on the wall to the other side. Baldessari reinvented conceptualism, in his own vein of laid-back, irreverent humor. “Everything Is Purged from This Painting But Art, No Ideas Have Entered This Work,” another of his text paintings proclaims—conceptual art mocking conceptual art. “Don’t do any beautiful calligraphy,” Baldessari had told the sign painter. “I just want this to be information.”

“I’ve often thought of myself as a frustrated writer,” he said last summer, when I spent some time with him in L.A. “I consider a word and an image of equal weight, and a lot of my work comes out of that kind of thinking.” We were visiting his exhibition at lacma, where a good many museumgoers recognized him. Baldessari’s height (six feet seven inches), his shoulder-length white hair and patriarchal beard, and his wheezy, high-pitched laugh command attention in any setting, but out here he is a landmark presence, a famous artist and art teacher, whose former students proliferate and prosper in New York as well as in L.A. Several of the text paintings were quite funny, and a few actually evoked visual images in the mind. “Baldessari gave conceptual art a visual language,” as Paul Schimmel, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., puts it. The clearest example is his “Semi-Close-Up of Girl by Geranium (Soft View),” from 1966-68, whose text, filling the pale-gray canvas, is lifted from the screenplay for D. W. Griffith’s “Intolerance”: “Finishes Watering It—Examines Plant to See If It Has Any Signs of Growth, Finds Slight Evidence—Smiles—One Part Is Sagging—She Runs Fingers Along It—Raises Hand Over Plant to Encourage It to Grow.” Standing in front of the painting at lacma, Baldessari said, “It’s probably my all-time favorite piece. I just think it’s perfect—very simple, and you can imagine it so easily. David Foster Wallace once said that the duty of the writer is to make the reader feel intelligent, and let them fill in the gaps. I feel that way, too.”

In the same gallery were more early works, most of them dated 1966-68, which combine texts with greatly enlarged photographic images. The photographs, grainy and over- or underexposed shots of locations in National City, had been printed in photo-emulsion on canvas, so they looked just like bad amateur snapshots. Underneath each one, in large, generic capitals, was a text identifying its location: “Econ-O-Wash/14th and Highland/National City Calif.” Baldessari took the pictures, shooting through the window of his car “with the idea that truth is beautiful, no matter how ugly it is.” His wife took one that makes sport of the rule in every photography manual about not posing your subject in front of a tree, because it will look like the tree is growing out of the subject’s head. This picture, which lacma now

owns, shows Baldessari standing directly in front of a spindly palm tree, and underneath is a one-word printed text: “wrong.”

After the photo-and-text pictures, Baldessari’s work becomes more complicated and increasingly ambitious, but no less playful. Hearing that Al Held, the New York abstract painter, had said that conceptual art was “just pointing at things,” Baldessari did a series of “Commissioned Paintings”: he took photographs of a friend’s finger pointing at various objects or places around National City, then asked a dozen amateur artists, whose work he had seen at county fairs, to choose one of the photographs and reproduce it in a realistic painting, pointing finger included. Baldessari has often said that he wants his work to make people stop and look, rather than just take it in passively. In two large galleries devoted to works from the nineteen-seventies, several exhibits stopped me cold. One was “Cremation Project” (1970), a glass-topped cabinet containing three objects: a bronze plaque inscribed “John Anthony Baldessari—May 1953—March 1966,” an urn in the shape of a book, and a notarized affidavit stating that “all works of art done by the undersigned between May 1953 and March 1966 in his possession as of July 24, 1970 were cremated on July 24, 1970 in San Diego, California.” As Baldessari explained to me, his National City studio then was full of unsalable paintings, and his work was headed in a new direction, so it seemed logical to have the early stuff cremated. “I thought about Nietzsche and the eternal return,” he said, “and equating the artist with the ‘body’ of his work, and so forth. The problem was that several local mortuaries refused to cremate paintings. I found one finally, but the guy said we had to do it at night.”

The second showstopper was “Baldessari Sings LeWitt,” a 1972 video of Baldessari sitting in a chair, very relaxed, reciting each of Sol LeWitt’s thirty-five “Sentences on Conceptual Art” to the tune of a different song—“Some Enchanted Evening” and “The Star-Spangled Banner,” among others. LeWitt, an older, New York-based artist whose work Baldessari admired, had agreed to the recital. “Sol was very sweet. I called him up, and he said, ‘Sure, go ahead.’ ” This one is now on YouTube. The third stopper was the video version of “I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art,” his best-known work. The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design had invited him to have an exhibition in 1971, but it couldn’t afford to pay shipping or travel costs. What he proposed, instead, was that any students at the school who felt inclined should come in and write “I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art” on a gallery wall, “to redeem themselves, or whatever,” and so many of them did that all the walls were entirely covered. The school subsequently published a lithograph of the phrase, and one of the prints was bought by the Museum of Modern Art. The video version shows Baldessari’s hand as he writes the words, like a penance, for thirteen minutes. “And it’s very boring, isn’t it?” he said, laughing.

The range and complexity of Baldessari’s work over the next thirty years gradually silenced persistent attempts to dismiss him as a joke artist, a mere purveyor of visual one-liners. He produced prints, artist books, installations, films and videos (sometimes featuring his students), and photographic montages whose scale and wall power made them look more and more like paintings. He investigated the use of chance methods, photographing successive attempts to make a straight line or a square by throwing three or four colored balls in the air. He played visual games that involved choosing one out of three green beans (or carrots, or sticks of rhubarb), and he had himself photographed “Hitting Various Objects” from a garbage dump with a golf club. In his cinematic photo-collages of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, film stills advertising B movies or film noirs cohabited with suburban group portraits, landscapes, urban architecture, water sports, mermaids, art history, and surrealist fantasies. Baldessari constructs a vivid, skewed world in which the viewer can either participate or smile and walk away—a world whose complicity with the one we know becomes increasingly perplexed as the

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exhibition unfolds. Baldessari once said, regarding his work from the late sixties, “So much of my thinking at that time was trying to figure out just what I thought art was.” And had he figured it out? I asked him. “Not a clue,” he said, with another big laugh. “Not . . . a . . . clue.”

Antonio Baldessari, the artist’s father, came to the United States in 1903, when he was twenty-eight. He had grown up in a poor family in the village of Albiano, in the Dolomites, where the people spoke Italian but were subjects of the Austro-Hungarian empire—the area didn’t become part of Italy until after the First World War. John visited Albiano for the first time in 1993, when one of his exhibitions travelled to a museum in nearby Trento. He was warmly welcomed, and shown the church partly built with money that his father had sent back, in small but unflagging amounts, for more than sixty years.

“The guy was amazing,” Baldessari remembers. “He never threw away anything. He’d get jobs demolishing houses, and then resell the lumber and other materials. When I was old enough, I helped—I’ve pulled more nails out of old lumber than anybody alive. He raised chickens and rabbits, and sold eggs and rabbit skins—I remember rabbit skins drying on stretchers in the back yard. He made his own wine. Life was about making money, any way you could do it. One of the things he told me was ‘Don’t work for anybody.’” The elder Baldessari had settled in National City after twenty years of hard labor—in Colorado coal mines, on an onion farm in Mexico, and picking grapes in the San Diego area. He had saved his money, and taught himself carpentry, and by the time John was born, in 1931, he owned properties and made a respectable living tearing down houses and building new ones. In 1927, he had married Hedvig Jensen, a nurse at a San Diego hospital. Born and raised in Denmark, she was twenty years younger and, at five feet six, an inch taller than Antonio. She was also much better educated. Hedvig took John and his sister, Betty, who was three years older, to cultural events in San Diego; she also arranged for them to have piano lessons, and when John asked for art lessons she made sure he got them. Antonio went along with the art lessons, and he was supportive in other ways; when John got interested in photography as a teen-ager, his father built him a darkroom. But the relationship between them was never easy. Although John didn’t rebel, he was much closer to his mother, whose early death, from lung cancer, when he was seventeen, is something he still finds difficult to talk about. Antonio never remarried and lived into his late nineties.

Baldessari majored in art at San Diego State College, with a minor in literature. He wanted to be an artist, but he didn’t know how to go about it, and for several years he also had trouble reconciling art with his social conscience. His father, a devout Catholic, had bowed to his Lutheran wife’s insistence that their children not be brought up in the Catholic faith. There was no Lutheran church in National City, so they went to the Methodist one instead. “I got really into it,” Baldessari told me. “I read the Bible three times, cover to cover—the King James Version, luckily. I had this sense that I should help people, and I couldn’t see that art helped anybody.” He felt drawn to the ministry, or to being a social worker. His sister had urged him to get a teaching degree. (Betty became a language pathologist, and specialized in treating autistic children.)

Two experiences helped him resolve his dilemma. In the summer of 1957, after getting a master’s degree in art history from San Diego State, Baldessari enrolled in a studio-art course taught by Rico Lebrun, a charismatic figure in the Los Angeles art world. (ZaSu Pitts, the comedienne, was a fellow-student.) In his final lecture, Lebrun spoke favorably about Baldessari’s work, and then took him aside and said he should think seriously about being an artist. It was the first professional encouragement he had received. He spent the next two years at the Otis Art Institute, in Los Angeles. (His father paid the tuition.) In 1959, he moved back to National City, and began teaching art in the San Diego school system.

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That summer, he had his second epiphany. The California Youth Authority hired him to teach at a camp for juvenile offenders, in the mountains near San Diego. “I think they hired me because of my height,” he said. “They thought it would help to keep the offenders under control, but it didn’t.” When two of his more troublesome students petitioned him to open up the arts-and-crafts room at night, Baldessari offered them a deal. “I said, ‘If you’ll cool it in the daytime class, I’ll open the room.’ Worked like a charm. And then it hit me—these young criminals cared more about art than I did! So I realized art must do some good after all. I’d been training hard to be a social worker, but after that I said, no, I’m going to be an artist.”

Even so, he kept on teaching for nearly three decades, in schools and junior colleges and community colleges, and eventually at the university level. “I taught because I needed the money,” he said, “but I tried to keep it interesting by making teaching as much like art as I could.” By art, he meant his own art, whose characteristics even then were openness, humor, and an irreverent, “why not” attitude toward traditions. In the early sixties, he was still painting on canvas, but his subject matter was becoming odder and odder. A few works from this period survived the “Cremation Project,” because he had given them to his sister. Among them are “Bird #1,” in which the blue-and-white body, red feet, and white tail feathers of a bird (but not the head) are shown plummeting straight down, out of the canvas, and “God Nose,” an expanse of celestial blue canvas with a small cloud near the top and, below it, a disembodied white-and-gold shape that is clearly a nose but not a mortal nose. (The title is vintage Baldessari, straddling “God’s Nose” and “God Knows.”) The images in some of these early paintings came from his photographs. “I was using photographs as visual notes for my paintings,” he said, “and at some point I said, Why do I have to translate this stuff? Why can’t photographs be art?” This line of thought led to his image-and-text works. “They’re on canvas,” he reasoned, “and that qualifies them as paintings.”

When he wasn’t teaching, Baldessari was usually in his studio, in a corner of a movie theatre that his father had built. Once a month, he drove up to Los Angeles to visit the museums and galleries. He saw the Marcel Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963—the show that inaugurated Duchamp’s rediscovery as the most influential artist of the twentieth century (and the grandfather of conceptual art). A year earlier, he had seen Warhol’s first one-man show—painted replicas of Campbell’s soup cans—at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. Baldessari, who never met Duchamp and barely knew Warhol, had no doubt about their relative importance. “Everything Warhol did later was already there in the soup cans,” he told me. “I would prefer to go to the source with Duchamp rather than credit Warhol as an influence.”

Through books and magazines, he kept abreast of art developments in New York and Europe. He also liked to drink, tell jokes, smoke cigars, and go to parties. In 1962, at a party in San Diego, he met Carol Wixom, a twenty-two-year-old schoolteacher who lived in Riverside County, just south of Los Angeles. They kept seeing each other, and a year later they were married. “John had decided to dedicate his life to being an artist,” Carol told me, “and I just loved that dedication, even though the art world was something entirely new to me. I also loved his open mind, and his height—I was five ten and three-quarters, which was tall for a woman in those days.” They lived in a house that Baldessari’s widowed father had built next to his own house in National City. Carol got on fine with Antonio, whose unrelenting energy and drive were still hard for John to deal with. She remembers being awakened one morning by Antonio banging with his cane on their back door—he had found, in their garbage, a couple of loaves of stale bread that he had given them the day before, and he wanted to explain to her how she could cook them. John and Carol’s two children were born three years apart: Anna in 1964, Tony in 1967. Both adored their grandfather, who made toys for them, kept rabbits and chickens, and

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sometimes broke into Italian in mid-sentence without realizing he was doing it. Baldessari, at this point in his life, was afraid he would never get out of National City. Nobody was buying his work. He taught because he had a wife and two children to support, but he was becoming more and more convinced that art could not be taught.

Paul Brach, a New York abstract artist and teacher, had come west in 1967 to run the newly established art department at the University of California in San Diego. Brach heard about Baldessari's unorthodox teaching methods, and hired him to teach there in 1968. It was a turning point for Baldessari, who had met very few professional artists until then. David Antin, the poet and art critic whom Brach brought in to run the college art gallery, liked Baldessari's work so much that he arranged for a show of the photo-and-text pictures at the Molly Barnes Gallery, in Los Angeles. (None of them were sold.) "John was a remarkable artist even then," Antin recalls, "and a marvellously independent and droll presence. There was a deadpan comedy about those literal pictures of a desperately uninteresting town—the image of provincialism as a front for considerable intelligence and wit." When Brach left, in 1969, to become the first dean of the California Institute of the Arts, in Los Angeles, he asked Baldessari to join him. Baldessari, who cremated his early work the following summer, was getting out of National City after all.

CalArts was the result of a merger between the Chouinard Art Institute and the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music. Conceived and lavishly funded by Walt Disney as an interdisciplinary school whose graduates would include a ready supply of talented Disney animators, it opened in 1970 (four years after Disney's death), and quickly became the most radical art school in the country. Brach brought in Allan Kaprow, a prime instigator of the "happening" movement in New York, as assistant dean, and his faculty appointments included Nam June Paik, the progenitor of video art; the feminist artist Judy Chicago; and the Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles. There were no formal classes, no grades, and no curriculum. Baldessari was supposed to teach painting, but he balked at that; he called his course "Post-Studio Art," which meant anything other than traditional painting and sculpture. He hoped that by treating his students as "younger artists" he might be able, with luck, "to set up a situation where art might occur."

Students had to show a high level of talent and self-confidence to get into the program. Baldessari's first classes included David Salle, Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, Troy Brauntuch, James Welling, and Barbara Bloom, all of whom went on to become highly original artists whose work looked nothing like his. He tried to help them find their own path as he had, by being open to everything. "I wasn't aware of John's being a teacher," Bloom told me last summer. "We'd just sort of get together. John was extraordinarily generous with his time, with his knowledge, with his library." They had a game, in which a student would throw a dart at a map of Los Angeles, and then they'd all go there and spend the day, taking pictures and Super-8 films or videos. Video was becoming the essential student medium. "At least three generations of artists have had themselves photographed doing dumb stuff in their dumb settings," David Salle wrote, in the catalogue to "Pure Beauty." "This is largely John's fault." But self-expression and personal choice were off the table. "[W]e learned a whole new attitude about what art could be—not expression but investigation," according to Goldstein.

One of Baldessari's few intentional goals was to break with what he called the "L.A. aesthetic," which was dominated then by two interrelated groups: Pop-oriented artists who showed at the Ferus Gallery, and the "finish fetish" people, whose smoothly crafted sculptures were a West Coast version of minimalism. Critics have tried to define the "look" of California art, assigning to it certain qualities derived from the light, the ambience, and a generally perceived absence of angst out there (in Southern

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California, that is; San Francisco was different), but even in the nineteen-sixties, when Los Angeles artists struggled with a nagging sense that New York was and would continue to be the vital center, their work was too diverse for classification. In that sense, they were ahead of the game; New York is no longer so dominant, and the rest of the art world has become more like Los Angeles—there's no "there" anywhere. Baldessari has always said he was not a Los Angeles artist. He became global very early, and his teaching, or non-teaching, reflected that. Even "conceptual" was too narrow a term for Baldessari, whose own work hardly conformed to the puritanical strictures of its principal theorists. Joseph Kosuth, in his 1969 treatise "Art After Philosophy," dismissed Baldessari's "'conceptual' cartoons" as "not really relevant to this discussion." "The conceptualists thought I was just doing joke art," Baldessari said, "and I thought theirs was boring." His work, however, was starting to reach a much larger audience.

Baldessari had his first solo New York exhibition in 1970, when the Richard Feigen Gallery showed several of his "Commissioned Paintings" at its SoHo branch. None of them sold, but Baldessari went to New York, and met a number of artists whose work seemed related to his; he also renewed ties with Lawrence Weiner, who became a close friend. Soon afterward, the ambitious young German dealer Konrad Fischer offered Baldessari a solo exhibition at his Düsseldorf gallery. "I told Konrad I wasn't sure he understood my things," Baldessari recalls, "and he said he only liked work he didn't understand." In 1972, there were Baldessari shows in Brussels, London, Milan, Amsterdam, and Rome, and Ileana Sonnabend, a powerful dealer who showed many of the leading European and American conceptual artists at her galleries in Paris and New York, agreed to represent him worldwide. European collectors and dealers were receptive to Baldessari's ironic ambiguities, and to his postmodern questioning of what art was, or could be. I asked Baldessari whether his father had been pleased by any of this. "My sister says he was," he replied, "but I never saw it."

Although he often told his students they should move to New York, because in those days the best new art was still being made there, Baldessari never did so. He taught a summer course at Hunter College in 1971, and was asked if he'd be interested in a permanent position. "But my wife didn't want to raise our two children in New York," he said. "By that time, things were going pretty well for me. I was showing in Europe, and didn't really need New York." Baldessari and his family lived in a rented house in Santa Monica, and he worked in a funky but spacious studio on Main Street. The studio rent was cheap, and out front was a cement courtyard already famous as the birthplace of skateboarding. Baldessari, a congenial workaholic, spent most of his non-teaching time in the studio, and this, together with the increasing pressure of exhibitions and travel, put a strain on his marriage. "I just couldn't follow him into the art world," Carol told me last summer, without a trace of bitterness. "I didn't like the social life. I was mainly focussed on the kids, and he was focussed more and more on the art, and teaching. We decided to buy a house, and that was really the end of it, because he didn't move in." Baldessari lived in his studio until the early nineteen-nineties, when he could afford to buy and renovate the vintage California bungalow, in Venice, where he lives now. He stayed close to both his children. "He loves them unconditionally," Carol said. She remarried, Baldessari did not. "I just figured that was not one of my skills," as he put it.

In California, there is no stigma attached to artists who teach. Things are different in New York, where teaching is sometimes associated with failure, and some artists would rather wait on tables than take a long-term teaching job. "I don't make a great deal of separation between communication by teaching, and communication by the work I do," Baldessari once said. "In one case I'm there, and in the other case I'm incognito." Several of his students became so successful, though, that until quite recently his teaching was assumed to be more important than his art. David Salle took up painting after he

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graduated from CalArts, and became one of the New York art stars of the nineteen-eighties. Troy Brauntuch and Jack Goldstein showed at leading New York galleries, and a lot of younger artists, following Baldessari's lead, made flourishing careers doing photo- or text-based art. "I remember at a party in SoHo," Baldessari said, "Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman came up to me, and Cindy said, 'You know, we couldn't have done it without you.'" That was gratifying, but Sherman and Kruger were much better known than he was, and their work sold for higher prices. (Until the early nineties, a major Baldessari work could be bought for seventy-five thousand dollars.) Baldessari had his first retrospective exhibition in the U.S. in 1981, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Although the critics treated it kindly, the New York art scene was in thrall then to the big, bowwow, neo-expressionist paintings of Salle, Julian Schnabel, Robert Longo, and others, and Baldessari's idea-driven art seemed somewhat peripheral.

On a cool day in July, I went to see Baldessari's new studio, in Venice. He bought the property in 2003, when he was told that his rented studio in Santa Monica was being torn down, and started building on it five years ago. It's a two-story structure with a lot of big, mostly empty rooms, and an annex that's still under construction. The high-ceilinged, ground-floor space he works in is the only one that looks fully occupied—floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, cluttered worktables, cartons and files of the visual material (photographs, posters, billboards, etc.) that he has been collecting since the sixties for possible use. Digital prints of several black-white-and-gray paintings from a new series he was showing at the Margo Leavin Gallery, his L.A. dealer, were pinned to the wall. They had been painted from his designs by a studio assistant, with descriptive titles inscribed on the canvas by an artist who does signage for lacma and other museums. "This is the first studio I've ever owned," he told me. The Santa Monica building wasn't torn down, after all, and he still pays rent on it and uses the space for storage; a former student of his lives and works there, and looks after his dog, Giotto, in the daytime. (Baldessari's dogs are named after his artist heroes; the first one was called Goya.) He has "about eight" studio assistants—he seemed unsure of the exact number—but none of them were in evidence when I was there. "I really like being alone," he said.

I asked him how he started using film stills in his work. "Somebody told me about this store that sold movie paraphernalia out in Burbank, where I could buy old ones for ten cents apiece," he said. "Whenever I had some free time, I'd go there and buy more." Most of the stills he bought showed men with guns or couples kissing. In Baldessari's "Kiss/Panic" (1984), ten cropped photographs of hands holding guns surround the two central images: a chaotic crowd scene, and an extreme closeup of a kiss. All the images are black-and-white except the kiss, which is in color, and the ensemble packs a considerable wallop. Baldessari was in psychotherapy at the time, and he had started to let emotion (but not his own emotions) into his work. The presence of fear, anxiety, lust, horror, and other states was a new element, but their frequently jarring context was not; he was on the lookout, as always, for the unexpected associations generated by random images (or words) in close proximity. The most unsettling montage from this period is "Inventory" (1987), which pairs two photographs of overstuffed supermarket shelves with the horrific image of a railroad car full of stacked, naked human bodies. "I'd been deeply upset as a child by seeing photographs of the Holocaust," he explained. "Although I don't consider myself a political artist, I like to get between the cracks in people's psyches." He told me about another 1987 work of his, called "Drawing (from Life)," which includes a snapshot of a lynched black man. "Ileana Sonnabend thought that was a little too much," he said. He didn't protest, and the collage has never been shown.

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“For some reason, the idea of absence, of leaving things out, has been very important in my work,” he said. When he was teaching at CalArts, he told me, “Nam June Paik said, ‘What I love about your work is what you leave out’—that was a really nice compliment.” In the eighties, Baldessari began painting out faces, bodies, and large areas of photographs, challenging viewers to fill in the blanks, and then, to his endless delight, he discovered the round, colored price stickers that stores put on their products. To see Rotarians, garden-club ladies, or B-movie actors with red, yellow, or blue dots instead of faces suggests satiric or humorous intent, but Baldessari says that was not what he had in mind. “If I were trying to be funny, I wouldn’t be doing this,” he said. He believes that getting rid of faces allows viewers to focus on body language, stance, and other things they might not have noticed otherwise. “What’s the average time a person looks at a painting—seven seconds? I want to get them hooked. I have to raise the bar in such a way that they’re not going to get it, but they want to get it. Do I do that? At times, not very often. But that’s what I aim for.”

He quit teaching at CalArts in 1986. He had received a Guggenheim grant that year, after several failed applications, and the booming art market of the eighties allowed him, for the first time, to live on sales of his art. (Baldessari missed teaching, and eventually went back to it, part-time, in the art department at U.C.L.A.) His pictures got bigger and stranger, with elements that escaped from the frame to go off in seemingly arbitrary directions on the wall. The buyers, as before, were more likely to be European than American. In 1990, though, a major Baldessari retrospective was organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and travelled to the Whitney Museum in New York. The show drew large audiences and enthusiastic reviews in both places, and at four other museums in the U.S. and Canada. Baldessari “has created an often startling visual poetry that is restorative and emancipatory,” Christopher Knight, the dean of L.A. critics, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*. *The New York Times* critic Roberta Smith said that his work “has gotten consistently better, more accessible, and also more profound.” Recognition on this level makes you “wonder what you’re doing wrong,” Baldessari quipped.

Of course, there were a few critics who thought he was doing everything wrong. Writing in *Art & Antiques*, the staunchly reactionary Hilton Kramer used the Baldessari show as an opportunity to condemn the whole conceptual movement for “distracting galleries, museums, classrooms, and the media with an absence of talent, an avalanche of pretension, and an abundance of hot air.” Lynne Cooke, a highly respected curator and critic and no enemy of conceptualism, reached a surprisingly similar conclusion about Baldessari’s large photographic work of the last decade, which, she wrote in *The Burlington Magazine*, “seems unnecessarily inflated in scale, purely whimsical in mood, and repetitiously stale in statement.” Most of the reviews were positive, though, and the market responded with an increased demand for his new work. In 1999, after twenty-six years with the Sonnabend Gallery, Baldessari made the painful decision that he would do better elsewhere. Pace, Gagosian, and several other top-ranked galleries were interested in showing him, but he went to Marian Goodman, whose international stable included Gerhard Richter, Maurizio Cattelan, and his friend Lawrence Weiner. The move led to a spectacular escalation in his reputation and his prices: a new painting by Baldessari now sells for upward of two hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars, and one of his early text pictures (“Quality Material”) sold at Christie’s, in 2007, for \$4.4 million.

In a 2005 exhibition of his early work (1962-84) at a museum in Vienna, Baldessari saw “God Nose,” which his sister still owns, for the first time in many years. Not long afterward, he began a new series of paintings derived from photographs—overpainted with acrylic, no texts—called “Noses & Ears, Etc.” His return to what looked like pure painting, after more than four decades, surprised everyone, but his subject—the two least expressive human features, presented in isolation on brightly colored areas of

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

canvas, or built out in sculptural relief—was disconcerting in the familiar, Baldessarian ways. He went on to depict hands, feet, elbows, raised eyebrows, and “furrowed foreheads”—the latter mostly male because, he said, it was hard to find a woman in Los Angeles now with a furrowed forehead. Jasper Johns and other contemporary artists had used body parts in their work, but not with this kind of insouciance. “Maybe because I’m tall and gangly, I’ve always considered myself an assembly of parts,” Baldessari told me, in the studio that day. “I’m not unified. But you don’t need to see the whole thing. Hollywood has always taken advantage of this—they show us the part, and that’s all we need.”

His use of raised or recessed surfaces in the relief paintings of noses and ears got him interested in sculpture. In 2007, working with the art fabricator Steven Beyer, he made “Beethoven’s Trumpet (with Ear),” inspired by his love for the late quartets and by knowing that Beethoven had been deaf when he composed them; the piece, part sculpture and part relief, is an eight-foot-long bronze-plated ear trumpet, attached to a six-foot-high wall-mounted ear. “Ear Sofa: Nose Sconces with Flowers” came in 2009, a freestanding, molded-plastic sofa in the shape of an ear, flanked by two upside-down noses on the wall behind it, with flowers in the nostrils. For the retrospective, he completed a room-filling sculptural installation called “Brain/Cloud (Two Views): With Palm Tree and Seascapes.” The central element in this one is a hugely enlarged, computer-designed, Baldessari-altered sculptural relief of a human brain, made of cast polyurethane resin and weighing six hundred and twenty-five pounds. I’m sorry to say that it will not travel to New York.

The opening of “Pure Beauty” at the Met should put to rest any lingering misconception that Baldessari is more important as a teacher than as an artist. It should also silence critics who still don’t believe that art can be playful and serious at the same time. In his eightieth year, Baldessari is riding a wave of acclaim. He won the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Charles Saatchi, the London collector and entrepreneur, is said to have bought a cast of “Beethoven’s Trumpet.” Baldessari has done a big sculptural commission for the Prada Foundation, and he is making a new version of “Brain/Cloud,” as an indoor fountain for a space in Berlin. I asked him how it felt, after all these years, to become an art star. “That word makes me cringe,” he said, cringing. “I used to wake up sometimes in a sweat, and tell myself I was just making trinkets for rich people.” That didn’t happen very often. “I’ve always done what I want,” he said a little later. “Luckily, I’m blessed with a well-developed sense of absurdity—it’s what saved me.”