

John Baldessari: *Guitars* In the Anderson Collection



John Baldessari
Person with Guitar (Orange), 2004
Five Color Silkscreen Construction
28 ½" x 40"

For most of us photography stands for the truth. But a good artist can make a harder truth by manipulating forms or pushing paint around. It fascinates me how I can manipulate the truth so easily by the way I juxtapose opposites or crop the image or take it out of context.

John Baldessari is one of California's most influential artists. Born in National City, CA, in 1931, he has lived in Los Angeles since 1970. He studied at many art schools around the state and is also renowned as one of California's great pedagogues, having taught for many years at the California Institute of the Arts in Santa Clarita and now at the University of California, Los Angeles. Baldessari got his first big break with a one-man show in 1968 at the Molly Barnes Gallery in L.A.. The show was supposed to run for just a week during the interim between two others, an opportunity Baldessari thought "better than nothing." Instead, it remained on display for a month and generated a good deal of press and interest in the Los Angeles art community. Shortly thereafter Baldessari was featured in a group show at Richard Feigen's new gallery in SoHo, where he caught the eye of major players in that scene, including Jasper Johns and Harold Rosenberg. From there, Baldessari found great success in Europe, and as West Coast artists have established themselves as significant figures in the post-war art world, he has received deserved acclaim as one of the founding fathers of Conceptual Art.

The conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s aimed to upend the status quo in the art world. For Baldessari this meant contesting the dominance of painting. In his early work, Baldessari took aim at painting by introducing photography and written text into the fine art sphere. He created

photographic emulsions on canvas by coating the surface with light-sensitive chemicals, thereby confusing the distinction between photography and painting by combining elements of each. Often the images were taken from found photographs, dissociating the artist from his own work and from the gestural legacy of Abstract Expressionism. Adding insult to injury, Baldessari would also include block letter captions executed by a sign painter underneath those images, which gave the finished product a journalistic tone that deliberately countered the highbrow aesthetic of modernist painting. With the mundane tools of photography and language, Baldessari hoped to create a more relatable kind of art, one that utilized the familiar stuff of the world to facilitate communication between art and audience.

Baldessari also made a number of video pieces in the 1970s that dealt with the changing status of art, utilizing the conceptualist building blocks of language, irony, and documentary in a new form. For example, in the comical *Baldessari Sings Lewitt* (1972), he promoted his fellow Conceptualist's artistic tenets by singing them to various tunes including *The Star-Spangled Banner*. In another video piece, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971), Baldessari fused conceptual interest in language with minimalist repetition as he wrote the title phrase over and over for thirteen minutes, the length of the tape. Here, in a work filled with irony, the very act depicted in the video undermines the declared intent of the title as the repetitive strokes are nothing if not boring to watch, let alone create. The deadpan attitude of these shorts characterizes much of Baldessari's work. Without assuming an aggressive stance, he confronted artistic convention head-on by challenging our aesthetic norms.

The interest in the relationship between painting and photography that marked Baldessari's early work persists in his more recent series of cut-outs, including the *Guitars* (2004) on display here at the Quadrus Café. Instead of combining photography and painting directly, Baldessari layers a silkscreened photograph onto a colored plastic surface called Sintra, and then cuts out the shape of the guitar, leaving a bright Sintra silhouette in its place. One might wonder what this has to do with painting at all since neither of the two surfaces are painted. By using Sintra, a smooth surface with its own integral color, Baldessari has managed to incorporate painting's core components of flatness and color without resorting to painting itself. In this way he can reference and renounce painting without picking up a brush.

Likewise, the artist manipulates our understanding of photography and its supposedly communicative ability through omission and obfuscation. The silkscreens are derived from found photographs, but by cropping the head of the musician in each frame, Baldessari shorts the informational circuit the viewer generally finds in a photographic image. The subjects depicted are rock legends, Bob Dylan, Elvis, and Johnny Cash among them, but the compositions glaringly conceal their celebrity. The cut-out guitars add to this obscurity, offering only a solid field of color where the viewer expects to see strings mid-strum. Thus, Baldessari has created something that is neither painting nor photography, one of his formal goals for this series.

For his current work, Baldessari describes his mission as "trying to jam the media world together with what we would call the real world." This is a call for turbulence in our otherwise smooth media culture. The artist's interference with the image clearly yields frustration for the viewer. That dissonance is intentional. With fragmented compositions and bold cut-outs that limit the viewer's understanding of the image, Baldessari interrupts the usual free flow of information from media to viewer. In doing so, he demonstrates that visual information need not be totally accessible. With these jarring images, Baldessari breaks out of the comfort zone of easily digestible mass culture and instead offers a refreshingly real moment of denied satisfaction.