Woman and Man with Arrow Piercing Chest, 1984



John Baldessari's recent works are comprised of two or more black and white photographs--cropped, arranged, rephotographed and enlarged. These composite works explore ideas and themes that have fascinated Baldessari since he abandoned painting in the midsixties -the effect of context on meaning, creating new kinds of order, fundamental dualities such as life and death and the relationship between words and images.

The photograph has long served as the basis for Baldessari's works. He currently derives his images from old movie stills that he collects and categorizes according to some unifying factor (men pointing guns might be one) for possible future use. Baldessari was appropriating images from the media -- television, magazines, films--long before "appropriation" became a hallmark of Postmodern practice employed by a new generation of artists including Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince.

Each of Baldessari's works can be read on several levels. As a means of formal connection, the juxtaposition of photographs is based on simple similarities of shape or subject-matter. In A Bow to the Flesh: (Far to Near), Baldessari has cropped two greatly enlarged photographs of men in battle into triangles, thereby imposing a geometric order on chaotic events--boxers in one photograph (battle as sport); a man fleeing an armed pursuer in the other. The cultural cliche of the aggressive male in violent (life and death) combat is present in many of

Baldessari's works.

Baldessari borrows from Christian as well as Freudian symbolism in Pelicans Staring at Woman with Nose Bleeding. A photograph of pelicans is placed alongside a tinted depiction of a woman with a bright red nosebleed. Pelicans, who legend says will pick at their own breasts in order to feed blood to their young, are a symbol of Christ's sacrifice. The woman with the nosebleed refers to recent research indicating Freud's theory that sexual trauma is located in the nose. The placement of the photographs creates a fictionalized narrative that reveals Baldessari's Duchampian sense of the absurd.

By removing an image from its context, he exposes one of the principles of Structuralism. That is, that every element in a situation (be it a novel or a picture) derives its significance solely from its relationship to the other elements in the situation. In Woman and Man with Arrow Piercing Chest, the nude female torso in the upper photograph and the male torso below are ripped from their context. We cannot know the circumstances of the female figure, although it is less difficult to reconstruct the situation in the lower print in which an Indian (tinted in reddish flesh color) is felled by an arrow. In this piece Baldessari's pairing of love and death (the arrow of Eros with the arrow as weapon) can also be seen as a comment on the obsession with sex and violence in our culture.

Baldessari's explorations into the relationship between text and image go back to the

sixties when he, along with such New York artists as Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Wiener, was a leader in the new Conceptual Art movement. In Conceptual Art, art is viewed as part of a linguistic system and the idea takes primacy over all other elements. Sometimes conceptual works existed only in the form of the written word. In the midsixties, for example, Baldessari hired a sign painter to letter phrases onto blank canvas. Often the message was a comment on art education -- one piece states merely "A Work With Only One Property." Although Baldesssari no longer includes words on the pieces themselves, he uses titles as captions to activate the imagery much as did Surrealist and Dada artists. The Soul Returns to the Body was suggested by a medieval drawing book of animals of the same name. The work needs the title to complete the idea.

Although the idea has always been more important to Baldessari than the form in which it was expressed, the medium is always carefully chosen to best represent that idea. Over the years Baldessari has created books (he was a pioneer in the field of artist-made books), videotapes and films as well as otherwise noted): well as photographic works. In recent years Baldessari has placed greater emphasis on the visual impact of his photographic works, which have, in general, become larger and, often, colorful.

That the meaning of a work by Baldessari is often ambiguous (one could supply several meanings for Woman Held Down by Lions) only goes to illustrate the Deconstructionist position

that texts have many possible meanings that often undermine one another. Baldessari has always believed that "one of the purposes of art should be to keep us perceptually off balance."

At 54 Baldessari continues to be on the forefront of contemporary art ideas. He has influenced an impressive array of younger artists, both through his work and his teaching at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (where he has taught "Post-Studio Art" since the founding of the school in 1970). Now a resident of Santa Monica, California, Baldessari was born in National City, a small town south of San Diego. Interested in making art since childhood, he studied art history briefly (1954-55) at UC Berkeley before completing his Master's Degree in studio art at San Diego State College (1957).

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, unless

- 1. Pelicans Staring at Woman with Nose Bleeding, 1984, gelatin silver prints, one oil tinted, 30 1/4 x 64 3/4" overall.
- 2. The Soul Returns to the Body, 1984, gelatin silver prints, 72 1/2 x 50 1/2".
- 3. Triangle, Rectangle, Circle (with Hanging Man), 1984, gelatin silver prints, 79 x 57".

- 4. Woman and Man with Arrow Piercing Chest, 1984, gelatin silver prints, one oil tinted, 58 1/2 x 32 3/4".
- 5. Woman Held Down by Lions, 1984, gelatin silver prints, 41 1/2 x 30".
- 6. Watches: Supplicant and Woman with Green Arm (Plus Fallen Red Hat with Bullet Holes), 1985, gelatin silver prints, oil tinted, 46 x 36".
- 7. A Bow to the Flesh: (Far to Near), 1984, gelatin silver prints, oil tinted, 92 1/2 x 94 1/2".
- 8. Blue Water/Red Fire,
 1984, gelatin silver prints, oil
 tinted, 73 3/4 x 38 3/4". Lent
 by David H. Vena and Carol
 Vena-Mondt.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

La Jolla Museum of Art, CA, '60, '66; Molly Barnes Gallery, L.A., '68; Richard Feigen Gallery, NY, '70; Eugenia Butler Gallery, L.A., '70; Konrad Fischer Gallery, Dusseldorf, Germany, '71, '73; Sonnabend Gallery, NY, 175, 178, 180, 181, 184, 185; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, MATRIX, '77 (brochure); The New Museum, NY, '80 (traveled, catalogue); Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, '81 (traveled to Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany, catalogue); University Art Galleries, Wright State University, Dayton, OH, John Baldessari: Art as Riddle, '82 (catalogue); Margo Leavin Gallery, L.A., '84.

Selected group exhibitions:

Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Annuals and Biennials, '59, '72, '77, '79, '33 (catalogues); Jewish Museum, NY, Software, '70 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Information, '70 (catalogue); Kassel, Germany, Documenta 5,7, '72, '33 (catalogues); Venice, Italy, Biennale, '72 (catalogue); Cologne, Germany, Westkunst, '81 (catalogue); Paris, Biennale '85 (catalogue); Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA, Carnegie International, '85 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Gablik, Suzi and John
Russell. Pop Art Redefined
(New York: Praeger '59).
Foote, Nancy. "John
Baldessari," Artforum
(Jan. '76).

Battcock, Gregory. Why Art (New York: E.P. Dutton 177).

Foster, Hal. "John Baldessari's Blasted Allegories," Artforum (Oct. '79).

Cavaliere, Barbara.

"John Baldessari at
Sonnabend," Arts Magazine
(Jan. '81).

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