

Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are delighted to present a solo exhibition of Los Angeles based John Baldessari, with a new series of large-format storyboard canvases created this year.

For almost five decades now, John Baldessari has numbered among the most important figures of contemporary art. His uninhibited and tabooless perspective onto art and the world in which it arises, along with his ambivalent attitude toward painting, Concept Art, and Appropriation Art, have had an enduring influence on several generations of visual artists – from David Salle and Jack Goldstein to Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger.

The storyboard canvases on display, measuring up to 2.60 meters in height, were printed in an inkjet process and overpainted with acrylic by Baldessari here and there. Each storyboard consists of two photographs ripped out of newspapers and magazines, a text panel which may implant a scene in the head of the viewer, and a color chart which takes up the hues of the individual pictorial elements.

The pictures created in this manner not only evoke the storyboard, an aid to film production used by directors for developing a narrative sequence, but also make reference to earlier works by Baldessari: his collages of found film stills furnished with colored circles and surfaces, the philosophical witticisms on canvas typical of his early oeuvre, in which the picture is replaced by a text about the picture, or his serial deconstruction of motifs into simple color charts done in pantone colors. The works may provoke both amusement and disquiet, and they guarantee that the viewer becomes more acutely aware of the interwoven processes of making art, viewing art, and understanding art. The storyboards have an almost melancholic glamour. Although they seem to have been created with no particular regard for style – still to be seen here and there is the adhesive tape with which the newspaper images were attached to the surface –, their cool and cryptic subtlety immediately causes them to be recognized as works by Baldessari.

If there is a recurrent theme in Baldessari's oeuvre, then it is his patient approach toward undermining the clichés and romanticized stories which we often uncritically tell ourselves. These clichés include not only our perception of the world which to a large extent is controlled by the media, but also certain characteristics of contemporary art. Baldessari's repudiation of the painterly image has in the meantime become legendary. His Cremation Project from 1970, in which he caused the paintings which he had painted between 1953 and 1966 to be burnt to ashes, numbers among the founding works of Concept Art. But Baldessari freed himself as well from those aspects of conceptuality which had in the meantime become clichés. The storyboards are the result of a long development which, in a certain sense, has brought Baldessari back to the pictorial space of the painter – but in a manner which almost causes this pictorial space to implode. These works are

pictures, and at the same time they are not.

More than other artists, Baldessari has understood that pictures arise above all in the heads of the viewers. The storyboards play with the desires and expectations of the viewer, with his power of imagination along with his memories. The canvases make use of our tendency to read stories into every image, fostered not least of all by films. They attain entrance into the psyche of the viewer and bring him to the point where he may not understand, but absolutely desires to do so.

Two Hands Holding Cell Phone may have nothing to do with the black-and-white photograph of a meeting in which a head, painted over in the color of skin, looks at a raised index finger, even less with the photograph of a bouquet of flowers, partly ripped in the middle. There is just as little connection between the faceless ceremonial photograph of Pope Benedict XVI and the caption Woman Speaking into Ear of Man (Gesturing with Hand) or between the fashion-show snapshot of Two Men Lowering Coffin into Grave (Large Floral Arrangement in Foreground), to which a yellow pair of sunglasses has been appended, and the protest photograph of a solitary South American behind barbed wire.

But it is precisely this combination of images which causes the yearning for conventional narration to miscarry in an enigmatic manner. The storyboards lead to the collapse of the referential interconnections promulgated by the media, in other words of the stories which we tell ourselves. They cancel out what for us long ago became an automatized, media-driven view of the world. Their omissions may induce the viewer to develop his own story.

Baldessari has often said that he does not consider Andy Warhol or Jasper Johns to be the most important visual artist of the nineteen-sixties, but instead the French Nouvelle Vague filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. Perhaps the works featured in this exhibition could be read as the outlines of an imaginary film which Godard would have very much appreciated. He would have held the irreverent intellectual stature of the storyboards in high esteem, as well as their montage aesthetic and the contrary statements made by their texts and images. And last but not least, he would have approved of their fundamental poetic of freedom, which causes us to question long-held beliefs. When meaning is prefabricated, as these pictures seem to say, then we must shove everything to the side in order to think of something new.

John Baldessari (born 1931 in National City, California) lives and works in Santa Monica, California. His works were part of the 47th (1997) and 53rd (2009) Venice Biennials, the Carnegie International (1985-86), the Whitney Biennial (1983), as well as the documenta V (1972) and VII

(1982). In 2005, an extensive, two-part retrospective was dedicated to the artist at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and at the Kunsthaus Graz. In June 2009, John Baldessari was awarded the Golden Lion at the 53rd Venice Biennial and 2012 the Kaiserring of the city of Goslar for his lifetime achievement. His large retrospective Pure Beauty opened 2009 at the Tate Modern in London, and subsequently was on view at the MACBA, Barcelona (2010), the LACMA, Los Angeles (2010), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2010/2011). Recently the artist has presented his works in solo exhibitions at the Fondazione Prada, Milan (2010) and at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2011). In autumn 2013 the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Moscow, is showing 1+1=1, a first selective presentation of his recent Double series.

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