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John Baldessari

By Karen Wright 10/23/09



[View Slideshow](#) John Baldessari: The Duress Series: Person Climbing Exterior Wall of Tall Building/Person on Ledge of Tall Building/Person on Girders of Unfinished Tall Building, 2003, digital photographic print with acrylic on Sintra, three panels, each 603/4 inches square. Ringier Collection, Switzerland. All photos this article courtesy John Baldessari.; Suppose It Is True After All? What Then?, 1967, oil on canvas, 201/2 by 141/2 inches.;

John Baldessari lives and works in Santa Monica, in a small building smothered in ivy. When I visited, he was dressed all in black, and at 6-foot-7-inches, he's a distinctive figure. Born on June 17, 1931 in National City, Calif., a small, gritty town on the border with Mexico, Baldessari is a first-generation American: his father was from Italy and his mother from Denmark. Uncertain about his future when he left school, he took up art hesitantly, hedging his bets by teaching. "I thought I would live in National City forever," he says, "teach, maybe have a family, and do my art on the weekends." Indeed, he taught continuously for 40 years, starting in 1967. The list of his students at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where he spent most of his immensely influential career as an educator, is long and distinguished; it includes Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, Tony Oursler, David Salle and James Welling, among many others.

A pivotal gesture for Baldessari—he says it marks when he stopped being a painter and started to follow Duchamp's lead—was the 1970 Cremation Project, in which he burnt all the abstract paintings he had made between 1955 and 1963 and put the ashes into a book-shaped casket. It was shown in the 1970 "Software" exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York and established him, along with Bruce Nauman and Ed Ruscha, as a West Coast Conceptual artist. The same year, Baldessari moved to Santa Monica, where he met many artists and writers, and began to collect photographic images from films and other commercial sources that he would use in his work; during the same period, he photographed himself in deliberately amateurish compositions, and employed local sign painters to execute text-based works. Many of the concepts he was exploring—conflating painting and photography, questioning authorial prerogatives, co-opting found images—have continued to animate his work. An inveterate rule-breaker and a "closet formalist," he likes to say that "the esthetic takes care of itself."

Baldessari's diffident manner belies his achievements: awarded the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the

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2009 Venice Biennale, he is being honored with a major retrospective at Tate Modern in London that opens this month [Oct. 13, 2009-Jan. 10, 2010] and travels to the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona [Feb. 21-May 16, 2010] and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [June 20-Sept. 12, 2010] before concluding its tour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York [Oct. 17, 2010-Jan 9, 2011]. A catalogue raisonné of Baldessari's prints and multiples is being released this fall by Hudson Hills Press. The following interview took place in May.

Karen Wright Why don't we start with the "Jazz at the Art Center" piece you did in 1962.

John Baldessari That was for the La Jolla Art Center. I was living in National City, and I had an artist friend who was working in a record store and very much into music, and he wanted to arrange a series of jazz concerts at the Art Center and asked if I would do some art to be on the stage. So I did these four pieces, wall-hung gridded boxes that things could be put in. It almost sounds a bit Joseph Cornell-like, doesn't it? A couple of them had mechanized parts that moved, and the top images were abstract. It was the first time that I did anything collaboratively. And at a museum, too. That's a big deal when you're just starting out.

KW It was probably a moment when you were pretty frustrated about being an artist.

JB [laughs] Well, every artist is frustrated. If you weren't you wouldn't work, would you? But, no, I realized that I was in a place where there wasn't a lot of opportunity for an artist, but being there was my own decision because that was where I had a job teaching. Had I lived in Los Angeles or New York, there would have been more opportunities. But I had accepted that part about it and I just dealt with it the best way I could.

KW The move to Santa Monica was important for you, wasn't it?

JB Yes, there I think my whole life changed. I'd been teaching at a community college and I also had other part-time teaching jobs. One of them was at the UCLA extension program. Then the University of California decided to open up a campus in San Diego, UCSD, and they decided to have an art department. That opened in 1968. The person they had hired as chair was a New York painter, Paul Brach, whom I'd met socially, at art openings and so on, from time to time. We had some things in common: we both liked to smoke cigars, and we both had an endless supply of jokes that we traded. And we were both very passionate about art. So I got this call asking if I'd be part of the originating faculty. I would get more money, I would get a studio, and I only had to teach two days a week. What was I going to do, say no? That literally changed my life. Then the next miracle was that he was asked to be the chair of the art department at CalArts, which was opening in 1970. I was asked if I would come teach for him there. That was the occasion for my move to Los Angeles.

KW And while you were at UCSD, I understand David Antin was also there.

JB Yes, he was also hired at the time and we shared an office. He was a pretty well-known critic in New York, and a poet. He was hired to come out and run the art gallery. In fact, I think he only put on one show, which was a Fluxus show. There was a promise there would be a big catalogue, which never came off. Of course, the Fluxus artists were not happy. What he did use his money for was to bring out New York poets. Which was good, I loved it. David was a real supporter of my work and actually he got me my first show in Los Angeles, where I had failed going around with my work. He knew a dealer, Molly Barnes, who's still around in New York. She had a gallery and said she would show me for one week between shows. I said, well, one week is better than no time at all. Then, by luck, it escalated, because the show that was going to follow mine got delayed, so I think I probably got three or four weeks ["John Baldessari: Pure Beauty," Oct. 6-28, 1968].KW It opened at the same time as a Joseph Kosuth show, at the Eugenia Butler Gallery.

JB Yes, the same night. And we both got reviewed in the same article in *Artforum* by Jane Livingston. Fate works in mysterious ways.

KW Kosuth once dismissed you, in a sense, by saying that you were too Pop-y. How do you feel about that, looking back on it?

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JB If you look at my bio, you'll see I've been in every possible kind of show. It just makes you know that categories are meaningless. I think, basically, art-making is about making choices. You have to choose one color over another, one subject over another, one line over another, and on and on. It's all decision-making, and each time, you're sharpening the way you make decisions. That's it, in a sort of Cartesian way. Without that, you don't have art.

KW You've said that you wanted to be a writer almost more than you wanted to be an artist, at the beginning. You were meeting all these poets.

JB Where I was, San Diego, telling someone you were an artist was like saying you were an exotic flower. They would just look at you strangely. So I thought, well, how can I go on with art in some respectable way? I would just tell people that I was in art education, teaching. I was copping out, I guess. Then I said, well, I'll just teach in college, art history and maybe critical writing. Also, at the time I read a lot. I thought, well, it wouldn't be a bad life, talking about art and writing about art. So I think it started there. Then with David [Antin] being a poet and a linguist—I don't know how many languages he knows, a dozen or so—I began experimenting with language. We became good friends and have remained friends since. I actually did a cover for one of his last books.

KW Can you describe your studio in 1970, when you were still on Main Street in Santa Monica?

JB Bill Wegman had a studio and I lived up the street. He'd walk his dog by my house and we'd have coffee and so on. We were both showing with Ileana Sonnabend in New York, and she had a loft there, and she said, "Either one of you can take it if you want it and come live here." I was then married, and my wife didn't want to go to New York or take our children, so I passed on it. But Bill went and he asked if I wanted to take his studio. I was working in my living room and I said, "Bill, you know it's too much space." And he said I should just divide it up. So I thought about it and then I said okay.

KW Tell me about the studio that we're sitting in now, which is also in Santa Monica.

JB The place I had from Bill was not even a lease. It was 1970, so it was pretty precarious. Finally, gentrification hit the northern end of the street, and they wanted to put up condominiums there. I was getting nervous that I would have to find someplace else and that I could never find a place. Then Kim, my studio manager, found this place. At the time, my finances were a little shaky. She said let's pass on it and see how things go. I said okay. Then it came up for sale again six months later, during a real-estate boom, and it was \$400,000 more. And I bought it.

KW And now you're expanding next door, so you're going to have double the space. Do you keep all of your stuff here now? Do you have an archive here?

JB I have another building but we use it for offices because I don't want anybody around me while I'm working. So they all work there. There's a house in front of my studio that I use as a library.

KW In the beginning you were basically a painter. Can you talk about the "Art Lesson" painting series of 1967, which borrows from art instruction manuals?

JB I think I got fascinated with the assumption that art could be taught. There are all these books about how to do art, and I assiduously collected them. I just loved them. At the time, I was trying to figure out what art bedrock was for me, without all the stuff you get in school—what assumptions couldn't be challenged. It's about making choices. The idea of art lessons—teaching art as a subject—I found fascinating. So I did a few pieces about that.

KW Around the same time, you made *suppose it is true after all?*, which is a 1967 text work.

JB That was, again, appropriated. It was from a Bible tract.

KW You haven't used many religious quotes, have you?

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JB There were two: there was that one and then one with something about floating in the ocean and being tossed a life preserver. Being rescued by Christ, or whatever.

KW So that work was significant?

JB Well, I like taking things out of context. Nobody knows that that came from a Bible tract, and I just like the whole idea, “Suppose it’s true after all.” Suppose what’s true? KW The text paintings have humor in them, which has been criticized as too jokey.

JB It’s the idea that art can be taught that has humor. I find it absurd.

KW You’ve said that when you teach art, you don’t want to give people answers. Can you talk about that a bit?

JB Well, I don’t think there are any answers. I think the way I’ve defined it is that I can, with luck, set up a situation where art might occur. But that’s all.

KW I’ve read Matt Mullican’s description of making class trips when you were his teacher. Can you remember any places you would take your students?

JB I think David Salle wrote something about that, too. I remember once we went to a farmer’s market. I’d put up a map of L.A. and somebody would throw a dart at the map, and then we would just go there.

KW Where were some of the places the dart landed?

JB Some places were my choices: the farmer’s market, I think, and Forest Lawn cemetery, the Palace of Living Art.

KW What is the Palace of Living Art?

JB It doesn’t exist anymore. It was near Disneyland. There were two sections, one of scenes from movies and the other scenes from art. The scenes from movies, that was Madame Tussaud’s sort of stuff. But the art section was just wonderful. I’ll give you a few examples: you’d have the studio of Leonardo da Vinci, and he’d be painting the Mona Lisa, and she’d be sitting in the chair as he was painting. Then you get into all these problems because of the heavy brownish varnish on the painting. As a real person, but wax, she had to have a very dark complexion. Then you’d get the studio of Michelangelo, with marble dust on the floor and chips and so on—all this statuary. There, they had a replica of the dying slave, in contrapposto. Then they’d have the model. On the statue, the genitalia are exposed. But on the wax model—because the wax model is of a real person—they had to have a fig leaf over the genitalia. So, all those kinds of complexities. The only modern art they had was van Gogh’s bedroom, and it came off looking just like Claes Oldenburg’s bedroom with all warped perspective [*Bedroom Ensemble*, 1963].

KW I think at the same time you sometimes used your students in your own artwork.

JB The important thing is that I never called them students. They were just younger artists.

KW You called the course “Post-Studio.” Where does that come from? Does it come from the idea that they’re not students?

JB Actually, I didn’t coin the term. I think Carl Andre used it in conversation. Then when I was hired at CalArts to teach painting, I told Paul, “I don’t paint anymore. I don’t feel honest about this. I’d like to teach a course doing whatever it is I do.” I considered Conceptual art, but I thought that that was too narrow. Then I remembered that term post-studio, and I said, “Well, that seems about right.” So I called it Post-Studio.

KW You were making videos at that point as well, and have been making them ever since, right?

JB In a sense I’ve been making videos since 1970. The Sony Portapak was out, and every artist that could get their hands on one was doing video. When we started we had 26 of them [at CalArts], so of course everybody was doing video. The interesting thing was we didn’t have a single drawing class, and when we got our first

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year of accreditation we were faulted for not having any. So we finally had to initiate a drawing class.

KW Tell me about a few of those early videos. Do any of them stick in your mind?

JB I know one of them is on YouTube.

KW Which one?

JB *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*. It's got five stars. That's one of the ones that seem to have gotten some popularity. *I Am Making Art*, that's another one. *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* is another.

KW Let's talk about the LeWitt piece. I know he is one of the artists who are really key for you. Why?

JB He seemed so clear about what art might be. He went about it in an unesthetic fashion, of just experimenting. I guess that was very important to me. John Cage was very important to me.

KW LeWitt gave you a set of rules, and within them, infinite flexibility.

JB Yes. I always looked at it as a freedom for invention but not complete chaos, a kind of wide corral, let's say, around ideas. KW I think that's something that comes through all your work—a push-pull between freedom and control.

JB That's where I think the art comes in. I once saw a cartoon of a kid in a classroom complaining to the teacher, "Do we have to do whatever we want to do today?" There has to be that, but there also have to be, as they say, some conditions that you can fight against. Stanley Brouwn, the Dutch artist, did a book called *Which Way Brouwn?* He just asked people on the street for directions and then he would say, "Could you make me a little drawing of how to get there?"

KW And then he put them together.

JB Yeah, pointing and drawing is a lot clearer than just talking.

KW You started collecting photographs and stills from movies in the late '60s. Are you still collecting them?

JB Not in any active way. I have such a huge store of them. It's enough.

KW What has the whole digital revolution done for your work? Has it had a big effect on you?

JB I don't even know how to turn a computer on. But I do hire people who are very good at it. What does it do? It just speeds things up. Color choices, compositional choices. Instead of doing it by hand, you can just sit there with somebody and say, "Try this, try that."

KW Is the cropping being done on the computer? Or do you still do that by hand?

JB I still do a lot of it with scissors. But the computer can speed things up.

KW The work has gotten bigger, hasn't it?

JB Yeah, I guess so. I remember when I switched to photography, all of a sudden I saw the constraints: 8 by 10 paper, 11 by 14, 16 by 20; 20 by 24 would be the biggest you could buy. I wanted to go beyond that and I found a place that did large blowups for the movie industry, so I began working with them. Again, I didn't want to accept givens. Why should I be controlled by the photographic supply industry?

KW I was wondering if you were moving more toward installation as well. I was thinking about the show you just did at the Museum Haus Lange, in Krefeld Germany, which is a true installation.

JB Yes. Over the years, especially when I've done retrospectives, I've asked if I could do a special piece for the show. I did that at the Reina Sofia, in Spain [1989], and a few other places. I think the first time was at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven [1981]. At Portikus [in Frankfurt, 2007], I used the inside of the space. Krefeld [Mar. 1-July 19, 2009] was interesting for me because the building itself could be the subject, the inside and the outside. I had never done that before.

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KW Tell me a bit about Krefeld, which is in two adjoining houses designed by Mies van der Rohe, later converted into a museum.

JB I just decided to go contrary, or anti, Mies. It was just so tempting. He was all about large windows, what we call picture windows now. So I said I'll just cover up the windows [from the outside they looked bricked over]. And then I said, okay, well, I covered up the windows, but I'm going to give you back the view. So inside, in the areas where the windows are, I put views of Southern California, seascapes and landscapes. In front of each window there's a Mies chair so you can sit and look, not at Krefeld, but at Southern California. Then I also used brick-patterned wallpaper inside, where they had these pure white walls. So I had the brick inside and outside. On the second floor, I left one slit of a window open, and over that I have a three-dimensional eyebrow. I'm going on this Modernist idea developed by Adolf Loos in Vienna, when he decided to take away ornamental details like eyebrow lintels over windows. I said, "Well, I'll just put an eyebrow back on, but a real eyebrow."

KW The eyebrow is on the outside?

JB It's on the inside of the building. Then at night—this is the reason I left part of the window open—there's a blinking light behind, so it looks like a blinking eye. I left one wall white inside, and against that I made a 9-foot white couch in the form of an ear. Then on either side of it, on the wall, are two inverted noses as sconces. Coming out of the nostrils there are flowers.

KW What was the genesis of the Venice Biennale piece? Why did you decide to clad the outside of the main pavilion?

JB First of all, I'd worked with Daniel Birnbaum at Portikus, so we'd had that experience. He said he would like me to do the facade and I said, yeah, that could be fun. As we all know, the building said ITALIA, and it's this very blocky, Fascist-looking architecture. I was treating it almost like a flat plane. So I thought I'd halve the building vertically. One half I'd have left the way it was, and the other half I'd put up a canvas backdrop blocking it, and photographically reproduce the uncovered half, but inverted. It worked perfectly with the lettering. It was really marvelous to look at. Couldn't do that because they were going to change the signage. I asked, What is it going to say? They said, We don't know. KW That's helpful.

JB Very Italian. But it was going to change. I said, I'll just have to forget about it. Then, in another proposal, above the facade was a rectangle a little less tall with white text on black, "No More Boring Art." Then I thought, well, some of the artists might think I was talking about them. And I would never do that. Anyway, that was scratched. I was still thinking about it as a flat plane, as a picture rather than three-dimensional. Then I said, I'll give them something nobody can object to. I'll treat it like a picture postcard. By that time they did have the new signage, which was "La Biennale." What I wanted to do was above the signage, I was going to put "Welcome To" or "Greetings From . . ." They didn't like that. But it still comes across as a picture postcard. It looks like a faux Roman villa on the Pacific.

KW Malibu.

JB [laughs] Exactly, you got it.

KW Wasn't *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* originally a piece about collaboration, with your students?

JB Where it started was CalArts. We had a sister school, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. They asked me to do a show up there, of course for no money, for either the show or for getting me up there. But they wanted me to do a show. So in my notebooks I just had the sentence "I will not make any more boring art." That became the genesis for the piece. It was a white gallery, and the students could come in and write that as many times as they wanted, punishment-style, repetitively. I thought it would be another conceptual art piece. But in fact all the walls were covered.

KW When you got there?

JB I never got there. I had photographs. And then somehow it became iconic out there in the world.

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KW I understand that when you went to the Met in New York and looked at the Greek vases in the new installation of ancient art, you were interested in brokenness, in their incompleteness.

JB I've had a long fascination with the meaning—in a philosophical sense—of a part, the meaning of a whole. They can be interchangeable, and that just drives me crazy. How much of a whole do we have to have before we can no longer think of it as a part? I guess we're talking about forensics. Sometimes you get a tooth and sometimes you get a person. We think of the body as a whole, not as a collection of parts. So it becomes a fascinating problem. If it were a clock, which you could take apart, then it would be less interesting. But a body doesn't come apart without killing the patient. There was a point there when I was very much interested in healing, also in a philosophical sense. I taught at Hunter College for one summer, and one of the projects was for the students to go out and find something broken and to mend it.

KW What were the results?

JB I think it was interesting when they couldn't figure out what they had found. If you knew what it was, it was a little easier.

KW Let's talk about when you started doing the images in which you covered heads with white discs and then colored discs, in the late '60s.

JB We put a priority, in vision, on looking at a person's face when we see figures. Some of the faces of the figures I had didn't interest me. It was their stance or the ambience and so on that did. I said, "Well, if that's not necessary, why do I have to use it?"

KW At the same time you also started cutting faces out and cropping them. At first they were color-coded, so we had white to start with . . .

JB At first I just had white or black and then I decided I would use color.

KB And the color had a hierarchy.

JB Red for danger, green for safety, that sort of thing.

KW Where did the orange come in? There's more and more orange in your work.

JB Orange had no particular significance for me other than that it was between red and yellow.

KW So it was neutral.

JB No, not neutral. It's between something. I'm always interested in the between.

KW Comes back to the Greek vases, doesn't it?

JB Not only that, it's a game I would play with myself and I'd also ask my students to do it. Instead of looking at things, look between things.

KW Nam June Paik said that what he liked best about your work was what you left out.

JB That's a very important part of my work. You know, the question of, How much can you leave out without killing it?

KW And how much can you leave out and still have the viewer get it?

JB For me, yes, that's the first thing. I'm not one of these artists that's like, fuck the bourgeoisie. I do think that art should communicate with at least one other person. A lot of times I do straw polls with people who work for me, and I say, "What do you think that is?" Often they don't have a clue, and I say, "Well, I guess I cut off too much." I know the context from which that image came, and I just assume it might come along as baggage. But many times it's not there and then I have to back up. Ideally, art—any kind of communication—doesn't pander. But it does honor viewers' intelligence. And it doesn't just leave them in left field. I'm mixing a lot of metaphors here. KW Part of what we need to know is in your titles.

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JB That's my fascination with language. I think I've said that my titles are just as important as the visual part of it.

KW Do you think of them before you make the work, or after?

JB It's so chicken-and-egg.

KW There came a point where you moved away from obscuring whole faces and you started obscuring bits of faces. Can you talk about why you got interested in noses and ears?

JB I had a retrospective at the Hochschule für angewandte Kunst in Vienna [1996], and my sister had some paintings of mine that they borrowed. I looked at them again and I thought, those are pretty interesting. One was a painting of a nose, one was a painting of an ear.

KW When were these made?

JB About the mid-'50s. I had slides of all my paintings and I went back and I had done paintings of an ear, of a nose, a forehead, an eyebrow, and those came about because I was getting billboard material from a friend. At the time, there would be 24 sheets to a billboard. If there was a billboard of a person's head, and if the cut was right, I would have a big ear or a big nose. I sort of used those as paintings. That's where I got this thing about parts and wholes. I said, well, I'll go back and try to do that again. So the first ones I did were ears and noses [2006]. Then next were elbows and knees. Then this last series was of foreheads and eyebrows. At one of the first shows that I did here in L.A. a woman pinned me down and asked the inevitable question, "what are you going to do next?" I said, "I'm going to do penises and brains."

KW When I was looking at the furrowed brow works [2008], you said something very funny to me—you said there were no women in that show because you couldn't find a woman with a furrowed brow in L.A.

JB I do have women with lines in their foreheads but I had to import them with Photoshop.

KW Early on, you were in the work a lot, and then you stopped. Is there a reason for that?

JB I came out of it very early on. Marcia Tucker [founding director of the New Museum in New York] was an old friend of mine, and she had done a Bruce Nauman show [when she was a curator at the Whitney Museum]. And she said, "Bruce is the only person that can be in his art and it works." I thought about that comment and I said, "Yeah, how can you be really critical if you're looking at an image of yourself?" So at that point, I just decided to bow out.

KW One of the things that is obviously important to you is movies. I was thinking that some of the dramatic lighting in your work comes from what Hollywood does.

JB Right, but I'm picking certain things, too. I think I got my sense of dark and light from Goya and his etchings. Wherever he wanted it light or dark, it would be there, regardless of logic. Somehow that appealed to me. It's always sort of been part of my toolbox.

KW What other things would be in your toolbox?

JB Absence is certainly one of them.

KW If there is one work that you would like to be remembered by, what would it be?

JB It's a text piece called *Semi-Close-Up of a Girl by Geranium* [1966-68]. It's a lift from the script for D. W. Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance*. It just seems to do everything I want it to do. It's got the painting esthetic. It describes a very brief moment of time; I like that. But it's just talking about it. It's a very simple gesture that might go unnoticed.

KW You've said when you started you had two missions. One was to keep photography in art, but not to become ghetto-ized as a photographer. Are you still concerned about that?

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JB I think in those early years, the battle hadn't been won. First, there was complete categorization. You never saw any photography in an art gallery. There were photo galleries for that. In museums it was clearly departmentalized or compartmentalized, whichever you want to call it. "Department of Photography"—you know, MoMA still operates under those rules. There was even a stage—I don't think you see it so much now—when in the Whitney Biennial, the photographs would be further back. Painting and sculpture would still be prioritized. I remember L.A. MOCA way back got a big photography collection. I told Paul Schimmel, "Don't appoint a photo curator. Don't do it. Keep it fluid."

Several years back [1994], Kirk Varnedoe asked me to participate in the MoMA series "Artist's Choice" [in which artists curated exhibitions of work from the collection]. I could pick from anything in MoMA. I had an appointment with Peter Galassi, in the photo department. It was like I was the enemy walking in. They thought, here's this guy that doesn't take photography seriously. And that was not so long ago. I was a threat. They were very nervous when I was there. MoMA's not going to change, but I'm really against having separate departments.

KW Why is Matisse significant for you? Is it just about color, or is it about line and playfulness?

JB All that, of course. More important is that he makes things look so effortless. Also, Giotto's frescoes in Padua. They are in a chapel and they look like comic strips, in a way. They are meant to be read, but they are profound at the same time. It's that kind of complexity and simplicity being paradoxically side-by-side that interests me. They could be a storyboard for a movie.

KW Do you get as much from your contemporaries as you do from Giotto and Matisse?

JB I think they are all drawing from the same sources that I am. Why not go back further? But that phrase, "It's been done," is a Modernist idea. We don't say that anymore. When I was at CalArts, I had a T.A.—I guess I was so adamant about this—who actually had a rubber stamp made that said, "Nice idea, but it's been done by blank" and then he would fill in the artist's name. That would never happen now.

KW Because it would be considered cruel?

JB Because everything has been done. We just recycle stuff. KW When we were talking about authorship before, you said you didn't sign your works. Is that still true?

JB No, never have. When I was a painter, I did. But even then I signed them on the back. If you're signing a painting on the front, then it becomes part of the composition—and I'm a closet formalist.

KW Have you ever done any performance work? Other than the video?

JB I think only once, at CalArts. We had a performance night and somebody had one of these pianos in the music department that can sound like any instrument. Everybody was invited—Bill Wegman did a piece, I think, and Allan Kaprow, and on and on. I chose Hawaiian steel guitar and I played my high school song. That was the only time I ever performed.

KW Since we're back to early undertakings, can we talk about the *Cremation Project*, when you destroyed your early paintings?

JB I suppose, metaphorically, it's like a married couple separating, and one of them says, "It's not that I don't love you, but there's more out there for me." I wasn't saying that I didn't love painting, but that there was more to art than painting. It was very pivotal moment for me.

KW And it's funny how you've come back to some of those paintings that have been destroyed.

JB Yes.

KW I think that's very metaphorical as well, isn't it?

JB Metaphorical about coming back to it? I don't know. I work on an idea until I think I've exhausted it and

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then I stop and go on to another idea. But I think here I can use another metaphor: it's like a gold mine that been closed down and you go back and say, "Maybe there's still some gold there."

The Tate Modern in London debuts a Baldessari retrospective on Oct. 13 [through Jan. 10, 2010].

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