

Wadsworth Atheneum
Early June to mid September, 1977

John Baldessari
MATRIX 32

From Structure of Color Series: Simone with Fruit, 1975



MATRIX is supported in part
by a grant from the National
Endowment for the Arts, a
Federal agency.

Spend a little time with the work of John Baldessari and you might find yourself questioning basic assumptions about the way you understand the world around you. You might also run headlong into how frequently your eyes (perceptions) mislead your mind (conceptions) as well as how frequently your mind misleads your eyes.

With a generous dose of wit and good cheer, Baldessari uses the familiar and the commonplace to provoke thought (and sometimes confusion) about matters so broad that we rarely stop to give them consideration. Couching serious inquiry in a variety of incongruous situations Baldessari coaxes the viewer to explore the flux that surrounds our perceptions and conceptions of color and light, of space and time, of distance and scale.

Color Corrected Studio (with lamp) and Color Corrected Studio (with window) are two richly provocative works which join the long tradition of interior views of artists' studios. As is often the case with Baldessari, his titles give us useful information about the work. In each sequence, Baldessari presents three photographs. The first is a straightforward photograph of the interior of his studio. The second is the same view altered on its surface by the addition of paint in four bright colors. The third shows the studio interior altered apparently to approximate the placement of color as seen on the surface of the second photograph.

The colors added in the third photographs are understood to be the same used on the second. By habit we assume that straightforward color photographs closely approximate our memory of the real event. Here we are confronted with the vast difference between the actual pigment and a photograph of the same.

In the second photographs we have four swatches of reality

introduced by the hand of the artist. In the third photographs we see only a distilled illusion of that reality. The four colors have been filtered through a physical, chemical and artistic process. The record album covers and the Polaroid prints are carefully placed clues. Baldessari uses them to remind us that photographs - including the ones we are looking at in this exhibition - are only flat, two-dimensional illusions of reality.

Any given pigment varies greatly according to the nature of the light which it is reflecting. At a particular moment in time, what color we see is determined by the intensity of the light and whether the source is direct sunlight, daylight, window light, candlelight, incandescent or fluorescent light. This is basic science, and yet we rarely integrate this information into the way we order what we see. Much that we conceive of as specific and fixed is relative. These works themselves would look very different if hung in a gallery space that admitted daylight or if seen outside. On a more personal level, we each think we have a specific and fixed hair color or skin tone... until we meet the work of John Baldessari.

The order in which Baldessari presents the photographs as well as the titles which suggest that the studio has been corrected to match the second photographs lead us initially to conclude that the events took place in time sequentially as indicated: one, two, three. Order of presentation is persuasive. Yet, it is possible that, in actuality, the second photographs were color corrected to match the photographs of the altered studio. Soon we are sleuthing the piece for clues as to the actual order of events. Has the furniture or the camera been moved? Are the first two photographs printed from the same negative? How has

the light changed? But ambiguity prevails. The question of order remains unresolved but not unimportant. Concerned with matters of sequence, time and artistic process, the viewer is left wondering if this is a color corrected studio or a color corrected photograph.

We are quick to match each mark of pigment in the second photographs to the corresponding change made in the studio, as shown in the third photographs. This prevailing sense of equivalency distracts us from paying much attention to significant differences. So obvious are the differences, we are apt to overlook them. In the second photographs the marks of pigment on a two-dimensional surface are exactly the size we see in front of us. Their counterparts in the third photographs might measure the same on the surface of the photographs but are larger in actual size in Baldessari's studio. (Baldessari also engages this issue of scale in Card Color Series (grey) and Car Colors Series (1968 blue Volvo). Here, using the device of close-up shots, he greatly enlarges the subjects.)

Color Corrected Studio, titles which seemed innocently helpful and reassuring at the outset, now suggest an untenable proposition. In each case, with three ostensibly simple photographs, Baldessari has made the notion of "correct" color (or "correct" scale, "correct" sequence or even a "correct" photograph) seem unexpectedly complex.

Structure by Color Series: Simone with Fruit, with fleeting reference to traditional still life vocabulary, uses various fruits to delineate six colors of the spectrum. Bronze and alluring, Simone poses with each piece of fruit. Using the liberties won by such predecessors as the Fauves and Expressionists, Baldessari solves the problem of a blue fruit with

the tricks of his trade: a little blue paint matched to Simone's bathing suit. The sumptuousness of these sun-drenched scenes suggests the structure of color, California-style.

John Baldessari was born in National City, California in 1931. He received a BA from San Diego State College in 1953 and an MA from the same institution in 1957. Baldessari, whose works include paintings, photography, books, video and film, is on the faculty at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. He lives in Santa Monica, California and is represented by the Sonnabend Gallery of New York City.

AMK

Works in MATRIX:

Color Corrected Studio (with lamp), 1972-73, color photographs, pencil and paint on board, 31 1/2" x 14 3/4".

Color Corrected Studio (with window), 1972-73, color photographs, pencil and paint on board, 31 1/2" x 14 3/4".

Color Card Series: one grey (on grey background) held in forefingers and thumbs, 1975, color photograph, 20" x 20".

Pathetic Fallacy Series: Yellow Yearning and Stoic Peach, 1975, color photographs, 11" x 11" each.

Structure by Color Series: Simone with Fruit, 1975, six color photographs, 8" x 10" each.

Car Colors Series: 1968 Volvo, Dirty and Polished, 1976, color photographs, 16" x 42".

All works are courtesy of the Sonnabend Gallery, New York City.

Selected one-man exhibitions:
La Jolla Museum of Art, La Jolla, CA '60 (first), '66; Eugenia Butler Gallery, Los Angeles '70; Konrad Fischer Gallery, Dusseldorf '71; Art and Project, Amsterdam '71; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax '71; Sonnabend Gallery, NYC '73, '75; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam '75; The Kitchen, NYC '75; University of California at Irvine '75; James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles '76.

Selected group exhibitions:
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Art by Telephone '69; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC, Annual/Biennial '69, '72, '77; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, OH, Art in the Mind '70; Jewish Museum, NYC, Software '70; Museum of Modern Art, NYC, Information '70; Kassel, Documenta V '72; Cologne, Projekt '74 '74; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era '76; Philadelphia College of Art, TIME '77; Fortworth Art Center Museum, American Artists: A New Decade '77.

Selected bibliography about Baldessari:

Collins, Tara. "John Baldessari," Arts Magazine, vol. 50, no. 4 (Dec '75), p. 6.

Foote, Nancy. "New York," Artforum, vol. 14, no. 5 (Jan '76), p. 64+.

Frank, Peter. "Reviews and Previews," Art News, vol. 72, no. 6 (Summer '73), p. 96.

Winer, Helene. "Scenarios/Documents/Images I," Art in America, vol. 61, no. 2 (March-April '73), p. 42+.

Young, Joseph E. "Los Angeles," Art International, vol. 14, no. 6 (Summer '70), p. 111+.

Collins, James. "Reviews," Artforum, vol. 13, no. 1 (Sept '74), p. 78.

Collins, James. "Pointing, Hybrids, and Romanticism: John Baldessari," Artforum, vol. 12, no. 2 (Oct '73), p. 53+.

Lippard, Lucy. Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972... Praeger Publishers (New York) '73. Various entries.

Wortz, Melinda. "New Editions," Art News, vol. 75, no. 7 (Sept '76), p. 68.