

ART

Conceptual art with a photo of a fish

A picture, like a word, is intrinsically worthless. Its only value is in its use — in what it stands for, be that idea, emotion or Big Red Truck. Its only meaning, beyond mere denotation, is derived from its context — from its place in relationship to other pictures (or words) and the rest of the world.

No word in this column means quite the same thing here as it does in a dictionary — as it would standing alone.

Two current exhibitions explore these concepts in witty but forceful ways. Both shows present recent work by major Los Angeles talents: one, the mature product of a central figure in the conceptual art movement in the 1960s and '70s, the other a rising star.

John Baldessari has devoted over 20 years to an extended examination of meaning and truth in pictures. His new work at Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles, all of it done in 1988, is the artist at his best and at a grand scale.

Baldessari's work is not the stuff of 19th-century illusions about artists and their working methods. Oh, he paints, after a fashion. But for the most part he works with found images: generic photographs of generic subjects — official images, public relations pictures, stills from long-forgotten films.

These he simply blows up and combines into huge panels of multiple images, up to 9-by-12 feet. When he uses a paintbrush, it's usually to obliterate recognizable faces with a big, bright, generic dot.

But the new pictures that result are subversions of conventional logic, creating new meanings from virtually meaningless visual detritus.

One key to the exhibition, and to Baldessari's art in general, is "Art/Plan/Fish," an 8-foot column made up of three sub-images. Each panel shows a group of three figures gathered around a framed display. These are an elaborately framed painting, an architectural drawing on an easel and a chalkboard commemorating the landing of a prize marlin.

Baldessari has overpainted the frame-within-a-frame that appears in each of the old photos, though, thus equalizing them and opening a range of topics to discussion.

What, for example, is the real or apparent difference between the proud poses struck by the men and women in the three original photographs? Are any of these prides more legitimate than the others?

Without knowing the specific content of the frames, can we say that any one is of greater or lesser value than the next?

Baldessari's compositional sense is remarkable; few artists have used formal means to such humorous effect. In "Art/Plan/Fish" our attention is called to the one creature not blinded by the painter's alterations: a dead fish.

On Art



Charles Desmarais

"Goose/Baby/Rabbit" and "Arm" draw analogies between visually equivalent but intellectually incongruent subjects. In "Arm," a muscular biceps is compared to the rolled upholstery of an overstuffed chair arm.

Baldessari demonstrates that a new context even for an expanse of blank wall can create meaning. In "Mountain Climber" he combines photographs of a rope-belayed mountaineer, a length of rope against the sky and a scuba diver with his line.

The mountaineer, though, is at the top of the 20-foot wall, near the ceiling. Only our imagination and the strong vertical lines of the three photographs bridges the gap between that picture and the others, mounted at the base of the wall.

The John Baldessari exhibition is at Margo Leavin Gallery, 817 N. Hilldale Ave., Los Angeles, through May 14.

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Just a few blocks away from the Baldessari show, Kuhlenschmidt-Simon Gallery is showing work by neo-conceptualist Mitchell Syrop.

Syrop is hot these days. A 1978 graduate of the California Institute of the Arts — where Baldessari teaches — he was featured prominently in January's "CalArts: Skeptical Belief(s)" at the Newport Harbor Art Museum.

He is also currently included in "Striking Distance," the excellent survey of new LA art at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Temporary Contemporary. The title of the MOCA show, in fact, is a Syrop invention (and, by an ingenious but convoluted conceptual twist, his work of art).

This newest exhibit, "Reverse Discrimination," continues Syrop's interest in the cliché phrases of contemporary America.

He chooses two-word combinations which have taken on heavily weighted connotations: blind spot, academic freedom, spare change, etc. These he presents in bold juxtaposition with idyllic landscapes: travel posters depicting island sunsets, ocean waves and a wildflowered forest floor.

Mitchell Syrop, "Reverse Discrimination," is at Kuhlenschmidt-Simon Gallery, 9000 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, through May 7 and at The Temporary Contemporary, 152 N. Central Ave., Los Angeles, through June 19.



Margo Leavin Gallery

"Art/Plan/Fish," 1988, black-and-white photographs with vinyl paint by John Baldessari on exhibit at Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles.