



Baldessari, 2015  
Photograph: Stefanie Keenan

Baldessari at [Marian Goodman Gallery](#)

Baldessari reflects on his childhood, teaching, and creative inspirations in a 1992 [oral history](#) with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

In 1994, Baldessari participated in [MoMA's Artist's Choice series](#) of exhibitions, selecting objects in the permanent collection to inspire a new artwork. He curated and installed the show, which featured six of the original works of inspiration alongside photographs of the remaining twenty plus pieces, and [the newly completed construction](#).

“As I continued with teaching and art, I began to see how they both shared the same problem of communication,” explains Baldessari in an [essay from 1998](#). “I saw how you could obfuscate, be crystal clear or do anything in-between. You could play your audience like a musical instrument.”

In a 2008 [interview with Art21](#), Baldessari discussed his interest in language and the relationship between teaching and his art practice. “You try to think of ways to make your time in the classroom like you’re making art in some way. A vital lesson for me was learning that teaching is about communication. Lecturing doesn’t do it. You have to see the light in the student’s eyes; you have to see that they get it...I realized that that attitude was filtering into my art—that you have to communicate. Teaching and art began to cross-pollinate and one affected the other.”

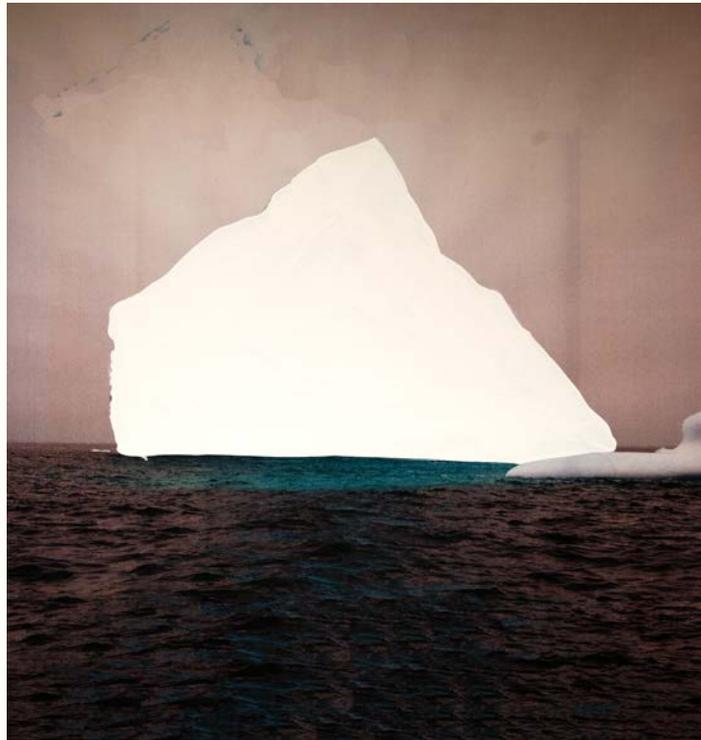
[Art21](#) talked with Baldessari in his studio in a [2009 video interview](#). “I think my idea is this: not so much structure that it’s inhibiting, that there’s no wiggle room, not so loose that it could be anything...like a corral around your idea.”

The Tate Modern celebrated Baldessari’s towering career with the 2009 retrospective [Pure Beauty](#). A wealth of resources accompanied the exhibition, including a [print interview](#) between Baldessari and curator Jessica Morgan, an [audio interview](#) with fellow artist Simon Patterson, and a video profile presented by [Tate Shots](#), in which he reflects “I thought what if you did give people what they understand. They read newspapers and magazines and books. What if you just gave them information and photographs... speaking in the language of the realm.”

In 1970, Baldessari embarked on [Cremation Project](#), in which he burned his entire creative output until that point, 13 years of work. [Discussing the project](#) with the Tate in 2009, he remembers feeling like he “was drowning, inundated by paintings. I was getting more and more doubtful that only painting was art. The fun of it was doing it, and I thought I don’t really have to own these things, nobody’s ever going to buy them.... Then I thought about the idea of my work as a cycle – an eternal return – so all these materials, pigments and canvas that came out of the ground would return to it. It was a body of work, and I said what if these works are me, and so I’ll cremate them literally as a body.”



Baldessari in Santa Monica studio, 1986  
Photograph: *LA Times*



MAX

Be careful. Do not race up the stairs. The musicians must not know what has happened.



NOTHING MOVES

John Baldessari (American, 1931-2020)

**Hot & Cold Series: MAX Be careful., NOTHING MOVES, 2018**  
Varnished inkjet prints on canvas with acrylic paint

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2019:160.1a,b

A California native, John Baldessari was a beloved teacher throughout his professional artistic career, inspiring generations of artists at San Diego State College, UC San Diego, CalArts, and UCLA. He is remembered as a genial, slyly humorous and formally innovative leader of Conceptual Art on the West Coast in the 1960s, and is credited with helping to establish Los Angeles as an art capital rival of New York. From his 2018 *Hot & Cold Series* of diptychs, this work exemplifies the artist's affection for hybrid images that combine photography, painting, and found text with calculated manipulations such as the removal of key visual details. Throughout his career, Baldessari sought to jar viewers into a different mode of perception, famously urging, "Don't look at things. Look between things." The visual pairings of icebergs and volcanos that comprise the series deliver a sublime vision of the natural world as conceptual polarities: stillness and action, passivity and threat, cold and hot, surface and depth. Ambiguous captions add a sardonic narrative touch that invites imaginative engagement with the landscapes.

[Hot & Cold series at Marian Goodman Gallery](#)

*On view June 17 – September 20, 2020*

John Baldessari (American, 1931-2020)

**Hmmm**, 2017

Varnished inkjet print on canvas with acrylic paint

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2019:160.2

John Baldessari left a towering (literally, he was 6 foot 7) void in contemporary art when he passed away in January. The endlessly experimental, wry, and ironic oeuvre he leaves behind was fueled by an idiosyncratic approach to the world and to his practice. As he mused in 2008, “I just stare at something and say: Why isn’t that art? Why couldn’t that be art?” Text was a central, periodic facet of this quizzical equation throughout his career, embraced by the artist as a means of communication equivalent with images. “I couldn’t figure out why they had to be in different baskets,” he explained. **Hmmm** delivers quintessential Baldessari humor, pairing a random object with nondescript text to provoke, challenge, and ultimately entertain. Inserting a nondescript caption and title, Baldessari alerts viewers to his fascination with windmills as “useless” objects that “don’t do anybody any good, but they’re so symbolic.”

*On view July 1 – October 4, 2020*





John Baldessari (American, 1931-2020)

**Overlap Series: Various Palm Trees (with Spectator and Floating Object), 2001**

Color digital photographic prints with acrylic on Sintra

Private Collection, Los Angeles; L2020:62.1

In 1970, nearly twenty years into his career as a painter, John Baldessari burned his entire oeuvre in a seminal exercise he titled *Cremation Project*, announcing his fully realized identity as a conceptual artist. The project marked Baldessari's graduation from a more traditional vocation as a semi-abstract painter to a liberated realm that encompassed photography, film, text, found materials, prints, sculpture, and installation. Everything could be art, and art could become anything. As seen in this work from his *Overlap* series, Baldessari felt a particular affinity for hybrid images, mixed media, and a playful reimagining of compositional logic. Color photographs of iconic California palm trees frame uncontextualized black and white film stills, jarring the senses into consideration of the potential narratives at play. Reflecting on his use of appropriated material in 2009, Baldessari explained: "I was trying to be artless. I thought the more I'm involved with art, the more artful I'm becoming, so how do I get myself out of that? Well, have other people do things for me, or just use other people's imaging."

*On view July 1 – October 4, 2020*