
[Databases selected:](#) Multiple databases...

IN CONVERSATION: John Baldessari & Jeremy Blake

Tim Griffin. *Artforum*. New York: Mar 2004. Vol. 42, Iss. 7; pg. 160, 6 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

A conversation with Los Angeles-based artists John Baldessari and Jeremy Blake is presented. They talk about favored art styles and technology.

Full Text (3485 words)

Copyright Artforum Inc. Mar 2004

The classic pedagogical practice of juxtaposing slides of artworks allows for the quick comparison of paintings, photographs, sculptures, and installations and invariably produces a plethora of similarities and differences to be conveyed and discerned with critical detachment. Artforum's "In Conversation" series, inaugurated with this discussion between Los Angeles-based artists John Baldessari and Jeremy Blake, is intended as a slight perversion of that model: What if, instead of providing an outsider's view of slides set side by side, we were to put the artists side by side and let them speak for themselves? Such pairings-providing two viewpoints that will necessarily inflect and expand on our understanding of either one-may build bridges but also reveal provocative gaps, when it comes to negotiating the terms of those cross-generational, cross-cultural, and cross-media discourses that contemporary art demands. It is our hope, too, that these tete-a-tetes, which reflect this publication's ongoing commitment to providing an active platform for the artist, will also contribute to a more complex model of critical exchange and lead to renewed engagement with-and a heightened sense of what's at stake in-contemporary artistic practices. "In Conversation" is introduced here in the spirit of engendering fertile, ongoing, often unexpected dialogue.

A connection between Baldessari and Blake was established in my mind two years ago, during the last Whitney Biennial, when I found myself in a gallery with the younger artist's Winchester, a digital-video projection that hardly announced itself as such. Its lingering image of a nineteenth-century mansion possessed the warm pallor of an albumen silver print, the blur of the moving picture confusing the lexicons of advancing technologies. Indeed, Blake had gone so far as to mimic the skips and scratches of a weathered film and antique projector, whose appropriated whir occasionally filled the darkened gallery at high volume, spiriting an outmoded medium's indexical mark into our own arguably nonindexical time. The uncanny sense of loss induced by this palpably absent yet sensuously evoked form was only compounded by the hypnotic rise of swaths of rich, electric color-unmoored Greenbergian shades recalling Morris Louis and Jules Olitski-that soon saturated the image. Many discussions of Blake's work have centered on the formalist terms of modernist painting-with his use of technology upping the ante on questions of surface and depth, and of medium-specificity. And yet it was John Baldessari who sprang to mind. just some twenty blocks away, Marian Goodman Gallery was hosting the New York debut of his "Intersections" series: photographic montages of landscape and cinematic imagery arranged in crossing panels, the central frames of which were painted, such that emulsion and paint, the optical and the textural, reality and fantasy commingled to obtain, as in Blake's Winchester, quantum properties.

For me, regardless of generational differences (or perhaps because of them), the association was evocative. For years, Baldessari has moved somewhat freely among media and genres, mixing them, appropriating dated imagery from cinema while remaining steeped in questions of painting, managing also to locate a deep psychological, sometimes romantic and playful pulse in his work even while negotiating the rigorous terms of Conceptualism.

Many similar observations could be made of Blake, even as the aesthetic and critical terms surrounding, and prompting, his artistic decisions are not so clearly drawn (or, better, not so clearly articulated). Certainly, in work and in person, the two share a kind of low-key irreverence when it comes to artistic postulates and predicates, an elementary willingness to move around and outside the accepted terms of art and of operating in the art world. In the case of Baldessari, Artforum will forever have to live down the artist's This Is Not To be Looked At-or live up to it, as the case may be. Either way, it is Artforum's hope that "In Conversation" will contribute to the continual reevaluation of artistic norms, to serious, irreverent play, and to a blended sense of permission and provocation. This is to be looked at. -TIM GRIFFIN

JOHN BALDESSARI: I recently saw a piece of yours in a collector's house in Miami, right between a painting and a sculpture. And I thought to myself that you've somehow been able to get beyond technology so that one can actually look at the image. But what I like most about what you're doing is probably the worst nightmare come true for a lot of people in the art world, in the sense that everybody fears Bill Gates's idea of flat screens, where the visitor comes in and has a memory of what his favorite art is, and it's projected there. That looking at an image of a van Gogh on a flat screen will be just as good as looking at a van Gogh.

JEREMY BLAKE: Bill Gates might have to cut off his ear and send it to you now . . . [Laughter.] Yeah, there was an idea floating around for a while that I somehow had something to do with the "technologization" of art or that I thought of it as a technical progression. That was really off, because I think about technology kind of the way a musician thinks about an instrument. Given all of the cool things happening in music and film, most people's thinking in the art world about the aesthetic potential of technology is still surprisingly passive. Even now, I think some critics have problems with the work because it's like the "paintings" are talking back.

But on a more subjective level, if my work has anything to do with a fantasy about technology, it's a slightly nostalgic one. In Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451*, you see Julie Christie in her apartment at the mercy of a, well, basically a flat screen, with kaleidoscopic, hypnotic projections being piped in from an all-powerful regime that has burned books and provided instead a kind of insidious abstract entertainment. When I was a student I saw that and thought, What a great comment on abstraction. What a weird, uncanny, dystopic potential for abstraction. I wanted to make paintings like that. But I couldn't make paintings like that, because paintings only move so much.

JOHN BALDESSARI: There is a kind of seamlessness to your work. I guess you do a dissolve, while I do a jump cut.

JEREMY BLAKE: I hope it is seamless. For me, the dissolve is a device that formally supports time-based abstract imagery. The philosophical discussion around painted abstraction has, I think, deteriorated lately, leaving abstraction as a kind of style. I want abstraction to be more than a style, or a backdrop, so I try to build a context for it in my work-often I make a kind of fantasy architecture to house the abstraction.

For example, the "Winchester" films I've made deal with a mansion built during the late 1800s, early 1900s by the heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune. She married into the family, but her husband and daughter died early; in her grief she visited a spiritualist, who said she was being haunted by the spirits of all those killed by the guns and she needed to build a house to accommodate them. So for thirty years, she was constantly building the good-spirits rooms and facilities. I'm taking a space that, in theory, is haunted, and using time-based abstraction to demonstrate that haunting. The dissolves relate to the return of the repressed, which undermines everything that seems solid. And these abstract passages allow you to process the violence done by the gun, the fear that made the gun seem necessary in the first place-the violent act of going West-and trying to present those things as if they're fresh. I mean, this mythology isn't dead. Every time we go to war we lean back on this wobbly logic of cowboys and Indians.

JOHN BALDESSARI: If there was something I recognized in the piece that I try for in my own work, it was that it traverses a kind of visual music, moving the viewer's eye and slowing it down.

JEREMY BLAKE: Well, there's a nice tie-in with mesmerizing people in occult practices, too, which is why the video speeds and slows in places where the spirits appear. And there's the dual meaning of the word "medium" . . . New mediums, new technology always spook people a little. By the way, did you know that Winchester was recently

included in a show up in Maine about "haunting" with your Botticelli piece?

JOHN BALDESSARI: That's interesting. I was mining Futurism in that, taking up the idea of movement within the still image, and, of course, looking to Botticelli's Venus. I mine art history a great deal; if you look at my work, I hope you can see all of art history. Even so, and I think this applies to what you're saying about freshness, I love de Kooning's adage that "a masterpiece is a masterpiece only if it invigorates the present."

JEREMY BLAKE: Sometimes the past is the best door into the present. The mixture should make your head swim. I guess I also tried that in Reading Ossie Clark [2.003], which grew out of an interest in forcing together narrative and delirium. Clark was a gifted fashion designer in Swinging London, one of these jet-set people who were just flinging open doors, and it didn't really seem to matter so much to him what was behind those doors, until he was ruined. At the top of his game he was the subject of a terrific painting by David Hockney, and I thought it would be kind of interesting to move into the psychology of a Warhol or Hockney subject, which previously always felt off-limits.

JOHN BALDESSARI: How did that project start?

JEREMY BLAKE: Clark left all these kind of psychedelic diaries that are graphomaniacal and color-coded-they're a mess, because he's on so many drugs-and I had read something about Franz Kline making paintings from overhead projections of his doodles. So I started with a painting where I collaged his diaries into one fabulous day, and then made a film based on a similar premise. I guess I also think of memory sequences-like memory sequences from Hollywood films-as abstractions. You know, if you pull a blurry flashback sequence out of its tedious Hollywood-story shell, it can be really nice.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I have to admit I'm not really ready to look back to the '60s. I was too immersed in them. But I think it's interesting for artists to go back to things that fell through the cracks, looking at styles that have been exhausted and seeing if there is any gold left there. What I try to do is reinvigorate strategies and clichés I find in Hollywood movies. At a certain point I had these huge folders, each one classified according to subject matter or genre: people with guns, people kissing, Indians and cowboys falling off of horses, getting shot, getting shot with arrows-almost every plot device. Then I cropped the cheap, recycled imagery to give exhausted images new meaning, or at least something other than their original meaning. I'm basically reassembling atoms to give them a meaning that's more *au courant*. I realized-and maybe we share something here-that you can tap into a language that might be more universal than art. People go to movies and have them in their minds.

JEREMY BLAKE: Is that where your punchy vectors of solid color come in? Are you using color to push against anything that makes the work too specific?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, I do deal with the presence of absence. I've said this before elsewhere, but I love what Nam June Paik once told me: "What I like about your work is what you leave out." What I leave out is more important. I want that absence, which creates a kind of anxiety: In *Violent Space Series; Nine Feet (of Victim and Crowd)* [1976], for example, you have spectators standing around an accident victim, but all you see are these people's feet, which is the least interesting part of the picture. You're left wanting to know things like, "What do their faces look like?"

Now, if there's something psychological about that, it's that there's a human need to edit one's surroundings. For example, we're in a hotel room: I like that lamp; I don't like that chair. If I eliminated all those things I don't like, I'd have a room of my favorite things, but I'd still feel the absence of what I'd eliminated. It's about human attention. Or say you were late for a train. You'd continually be looking at clocks to see if you were on time-and everything else would be a blur. Or if you were hungry, you'd only notice the restaurants. It's all according to one's state of mind, temperament, the time of day. You're always creating new narrations; in my work, maybe it's like William S. Burroughs cutting up the sentences to make new meanings.

JEREMY BLAKE: I like the effect you get in your "Intersections" [2001-2003], where you were taking photographs of the landscape and then inserting parts of movie scenes. It gets me thinking about the European exiles that end up hitting the West Coast, from Brecht to Hockney to ex-Sex Pistol John Lydon. It seems like all these dynamic people who have tried to get free of something, wherever they're from, end up there. But they end up there alone with the

heavy side of freedom to deal with as well. It's just like when you get to that beach, you're all too human.

JOHN BALDESSARI: There is this great story about Aldous Huxley staying with some people in Bel-Air. He's out walking one night, and the cops stop him. They say, "What are you doing?" he says, "I'm taking a walk." And the cop says, "Nobody walks in Bel-Air."

JEREMY BLAKE: So the Bel-Air cops club Huxley and dump him on a curb in Venice? [Laughter.] But let me pick up a thread here. That "Intersections" series also had me thinking about all these grim records from the early '70s, like Neil Young's *On the Beach*, and John Phillips—one of the Mamas and Papas who basically went nuts in the early '70s and made an album called *John, the Wolf King of L.A.*, which is perversely almost a diary of his becoming less and less civilized. Each wave washes away another inhibition, for better or worse. Your series seems to actually handle, with philosophical finesse, what happens when you can't go any farther. It demonstrates an awareness of what happens when suddenly experience somehow impacts or folds in on itself—when you become part of a paradigm and your experience is vacuumed out.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I like it when you see a surfer out in the water: You're trying to get beyond the land, but you keep getting returned by the waves. In "Intersections" I was dealing with movie imagery and then scenes from water or earth, one or the other, which come out so essential and non-Hollywood. Then I would combine the two in the most banal way. You know, it's like screen grabs. I'm not trying to be too artful about it. I'm just counterposing one against the other.

I think a lot of my interest there comes from the fact we can't figure out what's real anymore, because we were brought up on movies. It finally hit me one morning when I came down to my studio, trying to find a parking spot, and there were movie trucks in my way. I walk up to my place and Roman Polanski is in a chair, with Jack Nicholson, right there in front of my studio. And I say to them, "I'd like to get in. That's my studio." Talk about collision. They were shooting *Chinatown*, I assume. I get that strange mirror effect a lot, you know. I'm watching some dumb movie and there are shots of Santa Monica. I say, "This is a movie. This is not a travelogue." [Laughter.] I continually have this kind of floating back and forth between the two worlds in my mind. But I like that.

JEREMY BLAKE: Speaking of two worlds, you paint on photographs, when you could just paint or just do photos. Is it an alchemy thing? Are you looking for the ideal mixture?

JOHN BALDESSARI: I always think about the movie title *When Worlds Collide*; I'm trying to make a new world. It's a lifelong venture of trying to put a square peg in a round hole, of trying somehow to make a hybrid out of painting and photography. I rub two sticks together to make fire.

One of the things that compels me is I can't prioritize a word over an image. It's that constant state of not being able to pick or to say that this is more important than that. They're both important. I think it's that struggle that animates a lot of what I do, that a word and an image are equally important.

JEREMY BLAKE: That's a way of achieving a new kind of vitality, right, a hybrid vigor.

JOHN BALDESSARI: I didn't mean it to happen. I know in the '70s I did film and video in some Greenbergian sense, trying to figure out what each one did. And my films became like still images, and my photography became like movies. At the first show I did in the '70s, there was a really great curator at the Modern, Jennifer Licht, who came and had a look around. And she smiled at me and said, "John, I see you're still painting." The idea, then and now, is that you can't get it out of your system. It's going to be there, whatever you do. Right now I actually do physically paint the photograph, but I think the point is—the return of the repressed. The more you try to blot it out, the more it's going to be there.

JEREMY BLAKE: And you actually were trying to get away from it, period.

JOHN BALDESSARI: Yeah, but you just can't. But that's also going to be the working method. I always say, "Why work at making things beautiful, because it's going to be beautiful anyway because you're an artist?" [Laughter.] In other words, you've spent all these years being an artist, so it's going to be there. just try to have something else as your goal instead of being beautiful. It's going to be beautiful regardless.

JEREMY BLAKE: I'm curious, then, how you dealt with-well, what happened when you found yourself among Conceptual artists? Was your idea of having fun disallowed or counted against you? How has that all sorted itself out?

JOHN BALDESSARI: Well, in the late '60s, I was introduced to some painter at Max's Kansas City and he said, "Oh you're one of those 'write-about's'?" I said, "What do you mean 'write-about's'?" "You know, critics write about your work." To him, that's what made a Conceptual artist.

Joseph Kosuth is an old friend of mine, but in some early Art International article he called me a Pop artist, saying I wasn't a true Conceptual artist. And I think another old friend, Mel Bochner, called some Conceptual art "joke art." I always suspected I fell into that category. I loved the idea of using language in art, but I didn't think it had to be so boring. There are a lot of ways to use language, and it was only being used one way. That bothered me. That's why I had this "I will not make any more boring art" thing.

JEREMY BLAKE: I don't take the idea of you being policed by Kosuth that seriously, but that happens with people on the other side of the aesthetic fence too, like a friend of mine who is a famous and gifted figure painter. On the train home from a lecture we recently did together at Yale he wouldn't stop badgering me about how he thought Robert Smithson was boring "PBS art." Shutting down the range of interpretation is an obsession for some people-a negative obsession that cuts across styles. Symbols should have a wide range of interpretation. On the other hand, I don't want them to be so wide that they don't mean anything. I want to reclaim abstraction from its being just a visual style. After all, before abstraction was a visual style, an abstraction was a philosophical concept that called up multiple images. That's what abstraction means to me: the visual demonstration of philosophical nuance.

[Sidebar]

I have to admit I'm not really ready to look back to the '60s. I was too immersed in them. But I think it's interesting for artists to go back to things that fell through the cracks, looking at styles that have been exhausted and seeing if there is any gold left there. -John Baldessari

[Sidebar]

Shutting down the range of interpretation is an obsession for some people-a negative obsession that cuts across styles. Symbols should have a wide range of interpretation. -Jeremy Blake

Indexing (document details)

Subjects:	Art, Technology
People:	Baldessari, John, Blake, Jeremy
Author(s):	Tim Griffin
Document types:	Feature
Document features:	Photographs
Publication title:	Artforum. New York: Mar 2004. Vol. 42, Iss. 7; pg. 160, 6 pgs
Source type:	Periodical
ISSN:	10867058
ProQuest document ID:	585618231
Text Word Count	3485
Document URL:	http://proquest.umi.com.proxy.brynmawr.edu/pqdlink?did=585618231&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=42764&RQT=309&VName=PQD

Copyright © 2010 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

Tripod: Web Services of Bryn Mawr, Haverford & Swarthmore College Libraries

