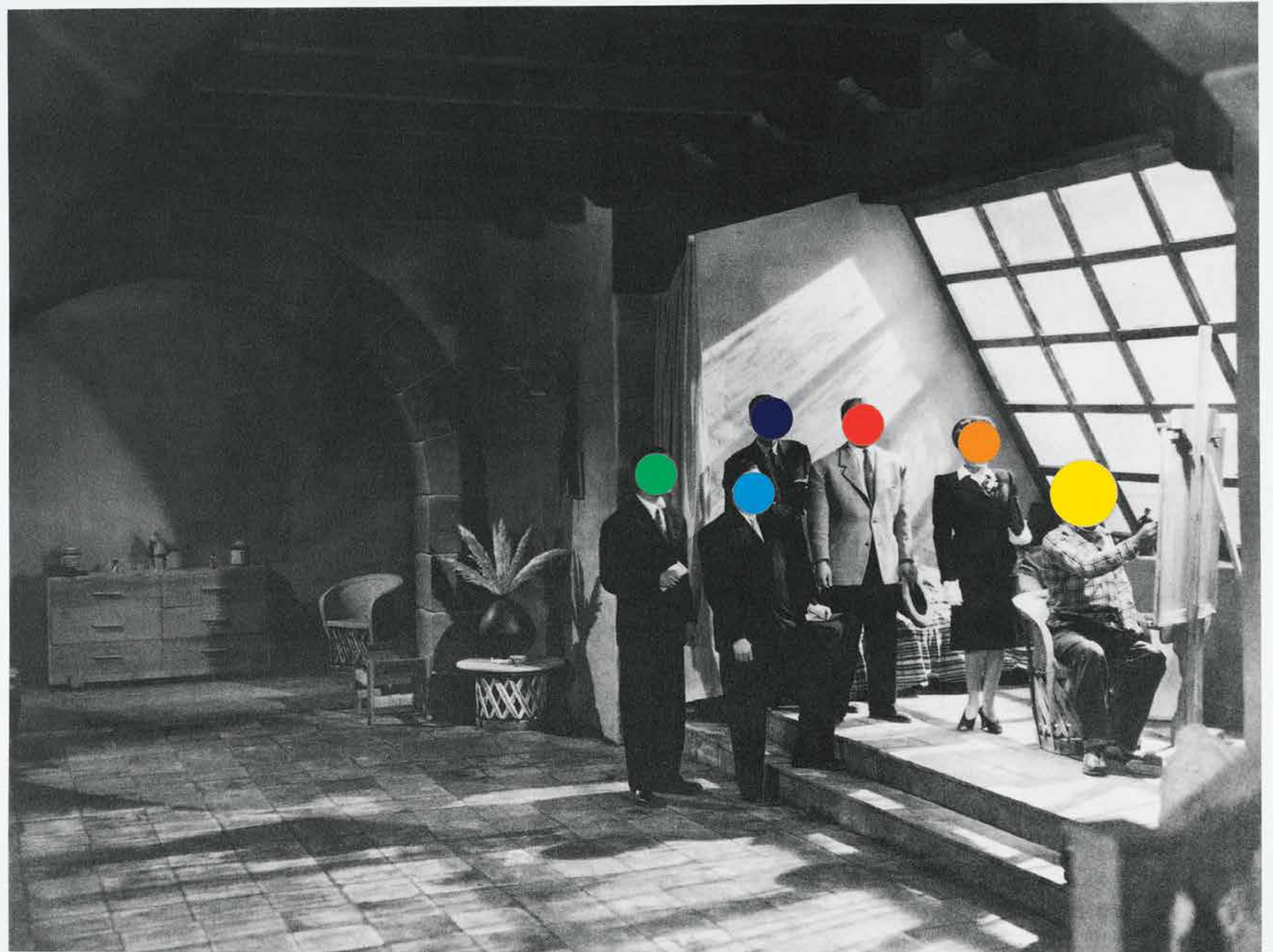


# THE MAN BEHIND THE DOT

In a career spanning six decades, **JOHN BALDESSARI** rose from humble beginnings to become one of the world's most renowned conceptual artists and an icon of the West Coast cultural scene. ►

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

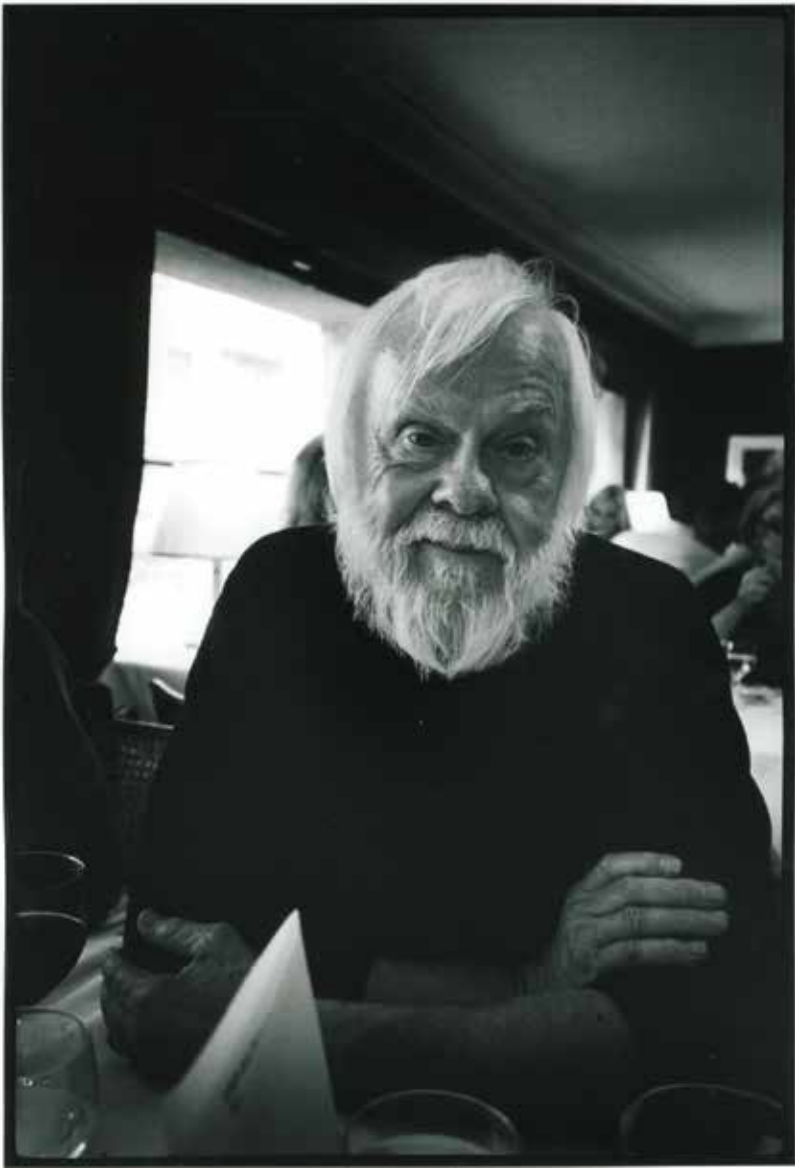
*Studio*, 1988, 30.5 x 38.5 inches. Photolithography with screenprint; Publisher: ART/LA88; Printer: Cirrus Editions, Los Angeles; edition of 150.





Conceptual art migrated from Europe to New York in the middle of the last century, but it lacked a prominent West Coast exemplar until John Baldessari. Born in 1931 in National City, California, near the Mexican border, the son of a hardworking Italian immigrant and a Danish-born nurse, he embarked on a career as an abstract painter, then in his late 30s decided to burn his inventory and start afresh. From then on he was strictly about ideas, painting texts lifted from art literature and doctoring Hollywood film stills and other photographs in ways that challenge conventional notions of aesthetics and question our passive consumption of mass media.

It might seem inevitable that a SoCal artist would be obsessed with the silver screen, but Baldessari mines the movies to unique effect. He uses wry wit and a quirky visual sense to compose collages of disparate scenes that hint at possible narratives and socio-political interpretations. His signature motif is a colored dot that obscures the faces of actors, giving them a perplexing anonymity and evoking an uncomfortable mix of absurdity and anomie. In addition to paintings



Previous page: courtesy of the artist. Top left: 2007 © Sidney B. Felsen; top right: 2015 © Manfredi Gioacchini; bottom: courtesy of the artist.



Below: *The Duress Series: Person Climbing Exterior Wall of Tall Building / Person on Ledge of Tall Building / Person on Girders of Unfinished Tall Building*, 2003, 60 x 180 inches. Digital photographic print with acrylic on Sintra.

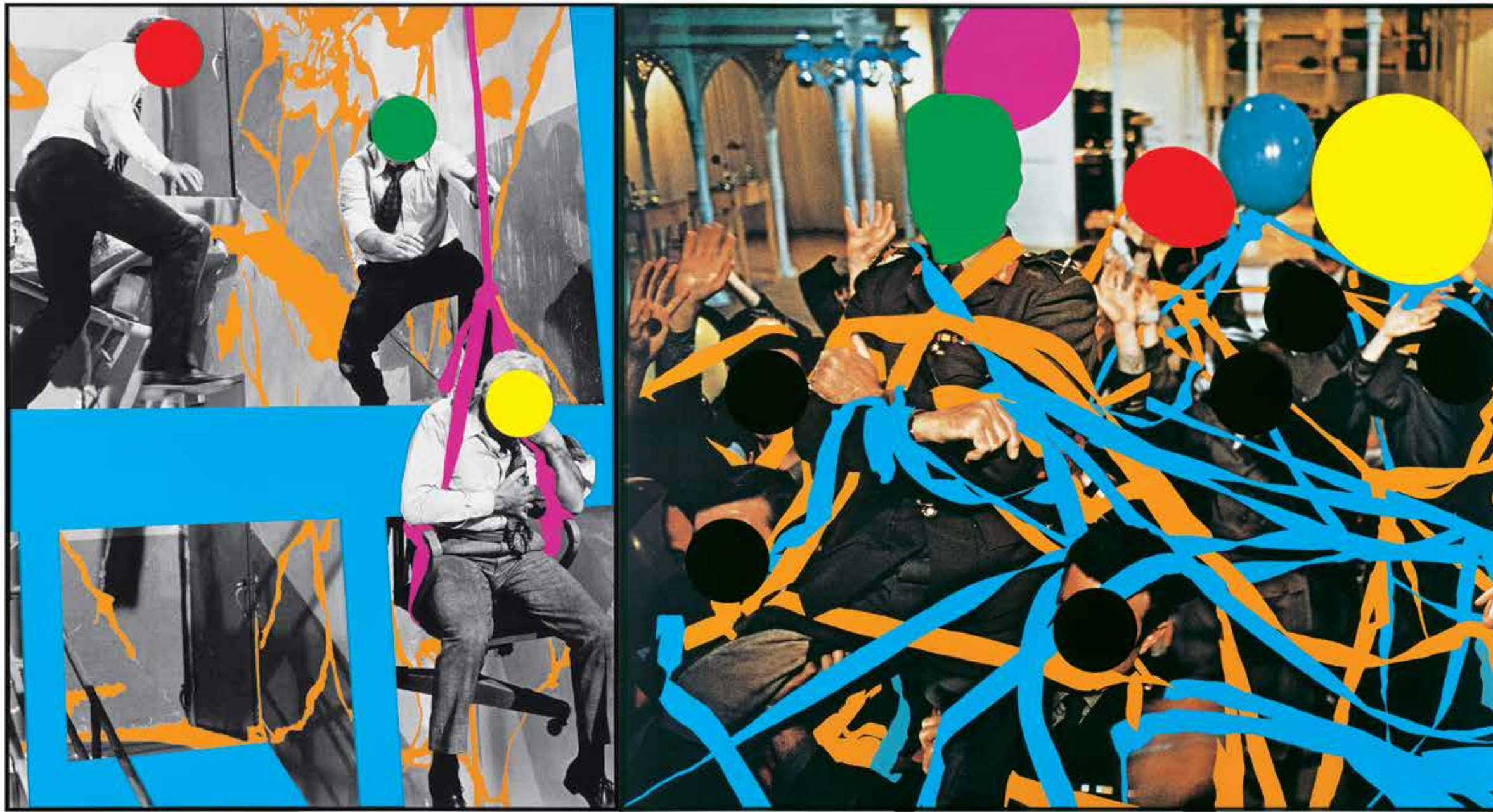


and photographs, he has applied his iconoclastic intelligence to Pop-inflected films, videos, prints, artist books, and sculptures that have influenced generations of artists and made the white-haired octogenarian an icon of the West Coast cultural scene.

Aside from a brief stint during the '90s in New York City, Baldessari has remained in Southern California his entire life. For decades he taught at California Institute of the Arts and UCLA, even after achieving financial success. His works have appeared in more than 1,000 exhibitions including the *Whitney Biennial*, *Dokumenta*, and the *Venice Biennale*, where he won the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in 2009. That year a retrospective organized by the Tate Modern in London toured to the Museu d'Art Contemporani in Barcelona, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Long represented by the venerable Marian Goodman Gallery (where he will have a show later this year from November 11 through December 23), his works sell for six- and seven-figure sums and are coveted by museums and private collectors worldwide. In 2014 he received the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama.

On a recent afternoon, Baldessari spoke with us about the early years eking out a living in Southern California, the meaning of conceptual art, his latest work, his reservations about the contemporary art market, and the new house designed for him by his friend Frank Gehry. ▸





From left: *Fissures (Orange) and Ribbons (Orange, Blue): With Multiple Figures (Red, Green, Yellow), Plus Single Figure (Yellow) in Harness (Violet) and Balloons (Violet, Red, Yellow, Grey)*, 2004, 120.33 x 225.25 x 3.5 inches. Three-dimensional digital archival print with acrylic paint on Sintra, Dibond, and Gatorfoam panels; *Kiss /Panic*, 1984, 80 x 72 inches, black and white photographs, two tinted.

**Many critics feel that your work is a critique of modern art, the mass media, consumerism, and society in general. Do you deliberately address those themes?**

I don't think so, but I'm sure it's in my consciousness. It's a lot about my upbringing. I think I have a very strong moral sense. My father was Catholic and my mother was Lutheran. I would go to church all the time and read the Bible a lot, so that was an influence.

**Is there a thread that runs through all your work?**

You could say I try to constantly reinvent myself. That would be enough. That's a constant.

**The visual collisions can seem like a one-man Exquisite Corpse game, but there always seems to be a possible narrative explanation. In some cases it is explicit, like the work *Inventory from the late 1980s*, in which you show supermarket shoppers in aisles stacked with products juxtaposed with an image of heaps of concentration camp victims.**

That's very much about consumerism. People buying things.

**Another is titled *Violent Space Series: Nine Feet (Of Victim And Crowd) Arranged By Position In Scene (1976)*. It has circular details of photographs showing people's shoes, but in one circle the feet are horizontal, as if a victim is on the ground.**

That would be the clear interpretation, but I guess it's up to the viewer. That seems to be what's going on, but it has something about anonymity. These are people who would not want to be seen.

Courtesy of the artist and Deutsche Guggenheim, photo: Matthias Schormann. Opposite page: courtesy of the artist.

**A well-known piece is *Kiss/Panic (1984)*, which has a color image of kissing lips surrounded by black-and-white pictures of guns. What's going on in that work?**

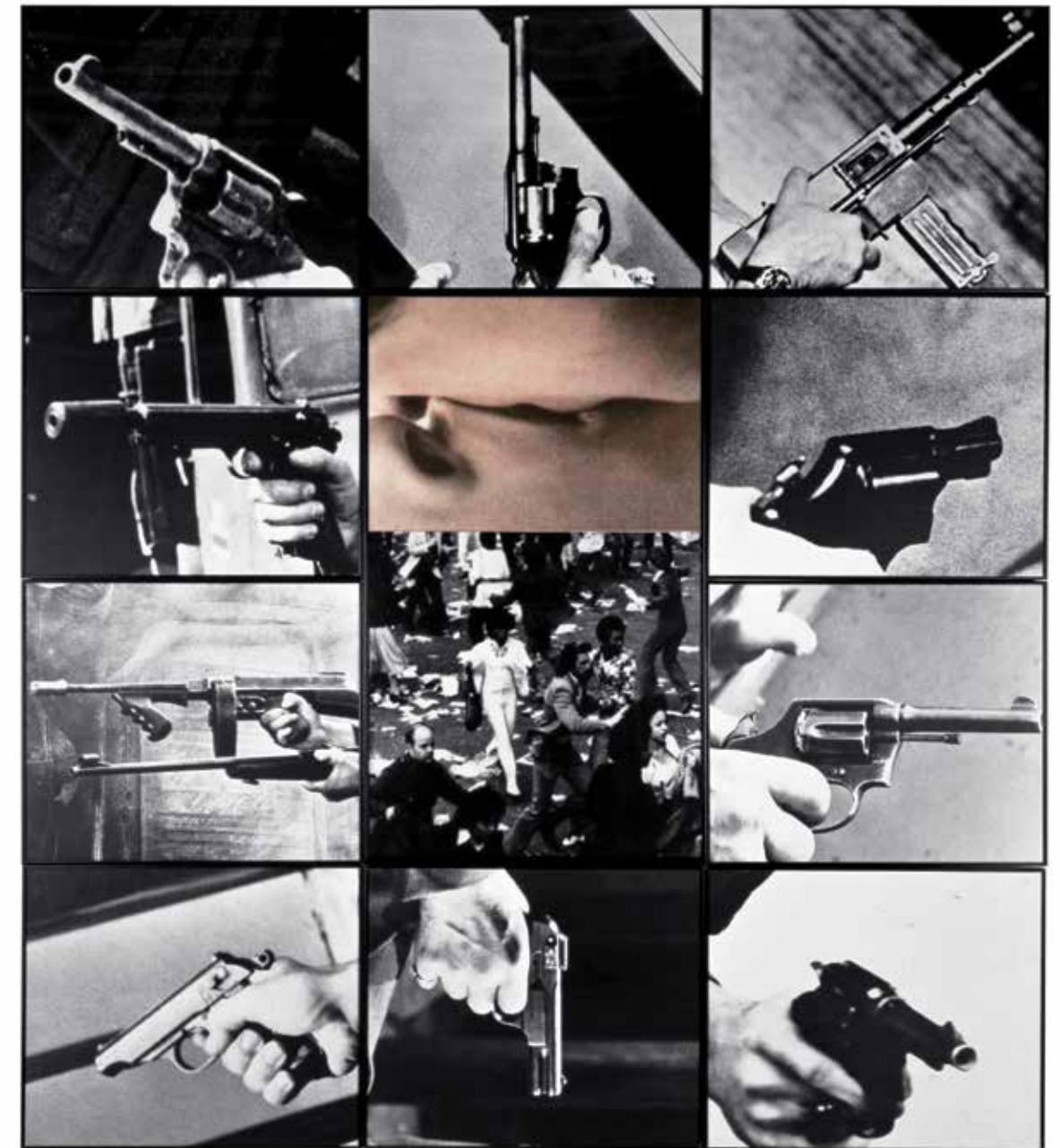
It seems like it should be self-explanatory. Guns are scary. I'm certainly afraid of them, and the public has access to guns.

**Are you interested in making statements about politics?**

Not very much. I didn't think I could influence anything through art. So no, I don't think any of my works are political. If people get the idea that they could be political by looking at the works, that's okay.

**But you must think about the impact you would like the work to have on the audience.**

It's funny. I just looked at a catalogue of Philip Guston. I own a Guston print and he can make fun of the Ku Klux Klan driving around smoking cigars with hidden



identities. If I could have that impact on people I would be happy. I just think you can't tell people it's not good to kill. You just suggest it's a good idea. That's my stance.

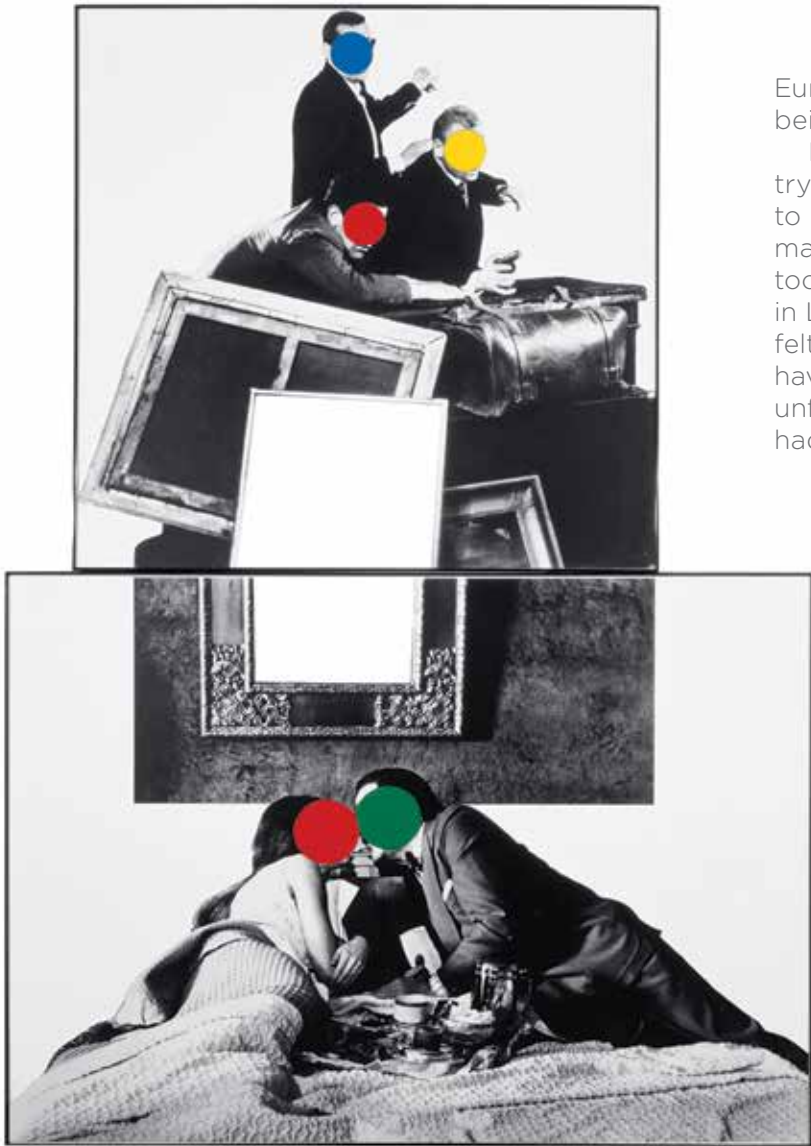
**The sources of your imagery have included film stills, magazines, art books, and your own photographs. Do you still make your own photographs?**

No, I used to, but there are plenty of photographs in the world, so I don't need to make any.

**What led you to become an artist?**

Well, it certainly wasn't the money. I guess it was part of my personality. You try to do what you do well, so I painted. I didn't make any money, but I don't think I had any other idea. My father thought I should do something to make money. He said, "Why don't you become an architect? That's kind of like art." My mother was supportive, but her attitude was, Your father knows best and the mother stays out of the way. It was a >





European marriage. I don't think I had even voiced an idea about being an artist before she passed away from cancer when I was 17. I applied to go to Harvard and I was rejected. I thought I would try to get a quality education and I wanted to be respectable, to tell people I went to Harvard, and I didn't get in. So I got a master's degree in art history at San Diego State University, then took art classes at Otis Art Institute and Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. I did some more art history at Berkeley because I felt that if I were an academic and had a doctoral degree I would have the respect from my parents. I didn't get that degree and unfortunately they both died before that moment came when I had any recognition as an artist.

**How did you make ends meet?**

Well, my father had built a movie theater, and TV came in around that time and people stopped going to movies. So he had this vacant building out in the boondocks that he couldn't rent out and I asked him if I could use it as a studio. He said, "Okay, until I can find somebody who can rent it." So I did all my paintings there. The only drawback was that it had a slanting floor—all the seats were removed. I lived in National City or in San Diego until I came to Los Angeles in 1970, when I was offered a job teaching at the new California Institute of the Arts. Teaching was a way to make a living.

**That year you destroyed all your paintings and decided to make conceptual art based on texts and altered photographs. How did you decide that was the way to go?**

It was just a life decision. I figured I was on the wrong path doing what I was doing in art, so I decided that I had to make a dramatic change. I had to get rid of my past. I had a lot of unsold paintings, mainly abstract, and I burned them all at a crematorium in San Diego. I had a bronze urn made in the shape of a book, so the ashes were all put in that book. I still have it. It solved the storage problem. I was concerned that nobody would know about it so I put a notice in the newspaper. It was a major life change. I wasn't sure what the right path was, but I knew that actually doing painting was not the right path. So in the ensuing time I tried to figure out what kind of art I was going to do.

**What do you mean, the “wrong path”?**

It was like if you were, say, studying to be a doctor and all of a sudden it became clear to you that doctors were a dime a dozen and you should be doing something else. I was beginning to get ideas of what would later be conceptual art in my mind, and it seemed like for me to be painting was just the wrong idea. I should be doing whatever conceptual art was turning out to be.

**Conceptual art was cutting-edge in the 1960s. How did you learn about it?**

I realized art wise I was in Podunk. My teachers didn't know that much about contemporary art, so that was a disadvantage. In San Diego there was just like a blackout. I would make periodic forays to Los Angeles with friends. Once a month we would drive up to Los Angeles and go to all the galleries, so that's how we



kept abreast of contemporary art. I saw the Warhol *Soup Can* show at Ferus Gallery in 1962, and went to the Pasadena Art Museum for the Duchamp show in 1963. Our knowledge came pretty much from going to the galleries, and I subscribed to a lot of art magazines. That was my education.

**How did you end up briefly living in New York?**

I was with the Sonnabend Gallery and beginning to sell some work, and so I said, "I'm going to try living in New York. Maybe I'll like it and stay here." It turned out I didn't like it. I couldn't work. I'd go out and get art materials and bring them up to my apartment, and I couldn't do anything. I just couldn't. I can't pinpoint why, I really can't. So I came back.

**While you were there you hung out at the artists' restaurant Max's Kansas City. Andy Warhol was there all the time. Did you meet him, and what do you think of his work?**

I did meet him, but it wasn't at Max's. He's right up there for me. But is my work related to his? I can't answer that.

**Do you think returning to Los Angeles put a damper on your career?**

By that time I was showing a bit in Europe, and beginning to establish my name, especially in Europe. The first year I had something like seven exhibitions in Europe. It was very unusual for an American artist to have a show in Europe, and very unusual for a European artist to have a show in New York.

*Clockwise from top left: Bloody Sundaes, 1987, 93 x 65.5 inches, black and white photographs, vinyl paint; Everything is Purged..., 1966–68, 68 x 56.5 inches, acrylic on canvas; Frames and Ribbon, 1988, 84 x 56 inches, black and white photographs and vinyl paint; Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell, 1966–68, 68 x 56.5 inches, acrylic on canvas.*

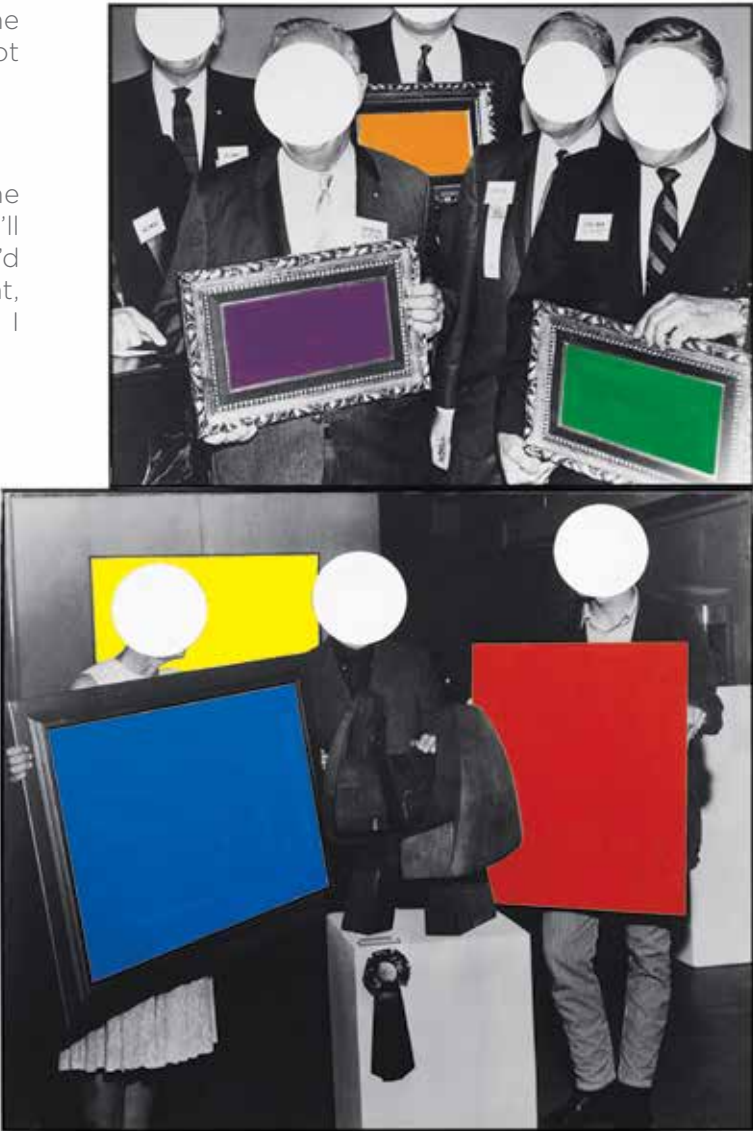
**The work you were making back then remains some of your best known. For example, the mid-1960s series of text paintings called What Is Painting? One is just a list of Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell.**

That's appropriated art. I would go through art magazines and there would be some little thing there like tips for artists who want to get seen, and I would just copy it literally.

**You overturned the idea of authorship by having sign painters do the lettering for text pieces, and for your Commissioned Paintings series (1969) you hired artists to make paintings that you sold as your own. How did you come up with that idea?**

I used to go to shows, state fairs, that sort of thing, where these kinds of artists—we call them Sunday painters—would work. And quite often I thought they were really good painters. So I just decided I would do a work that would be conceptual where I would do a work painted by somebody else. I paid them.

I was just putting something out there and seeing if anybody would accept it as art. What helped was that at that time I was living in National City and I >







FEELINGS

thought that no one would give a damn what I do. I could do anything I want. I could just hire a sign painter and make something like a “For Rent” sign and say that’s art. And that’s what I did. I don’t think I could have done that in LA or in New York.

**Those works come off as very irreverent. They also come off as funny. Was humor something you were after?**

People often say I have a sense of humor. I don’t think I have a sense of humor. I’m just painting about who I am.

**The *Text Paintings* (1966–68) is extremely droll. You took instructions from an amateur photography manual and made photographs that deliberately went against the rules. One shows you with a palm tree growing out of your head and a caption below that reads, “Wrong.” Can you talk about that series?**

It’s a very simple explanation. I read books about art a lot, and how to do art, and I had this one I really loved that would have two sketches of a landscape or whatever, and one would say “Wrong” and the other would say “Right.” I loved that you could kind of know what wrong was. How would you have that power? The series was based on that. The idea that somebody could tell you when you were doing the wrong kind of work, that seemed like such a weird idea.

**You made black-and-white photos of yourself holding a hat in front of your face and called it *Portrait: Artist’s Identity Hidden With Various Hats* (1974).**

Later the hat became a dot I would put in front of the face.

**Perhaps your most recognizable works are those photographs with white or primary-colored dots covering the faces of the figures. How did they come about?**

I remember doing it. I had a lot of movie stills in my studio on the desk, and I had these price stickers nearby. My motive was revenge. I said, “All these people influenced my life and I have no control, so I’m just going to blot out their faces.” I was leveling the playing ground. Now they’re just like me. Nobody cares who I am, and I don’t care who they are. They didn’t have any influence anymore. I chopped their heads off.

*Clockwise from top left: Double Play: Feelings*, 2012, 75 x 71.625 inches, varnished inkjet print on canvas with acrylic and oil paint; *W magazine project*, 2007, variable sizes, 16 digital files; *Noses & Ears, Etc.: Blood, Fist, And Head (With Nose And Ear)*, 2006, 43.25 x 52 inches, three-dimensional archival digital photographic prints with acrylic paint; *The News: Three Men Leaving House...*, 2014, 38.25 x 35.125 inches, screenprint; Publisher and Printer: Gemini G.E.L., edition of 50.



**After you put the dots over the faces, did you blow up the photographs to make the finished work?**

I had an actual 8 x 10 photograph and the price stickers, and I would literally put them on the image and that would be the basis of the work. I’d just enlarge it. Back then they were on paper. Now the ones I’m doing are on canvas. I transfer the image onto canvas with printers. I have a printer in my studio and can print up to 8 feet wide.

**Do you make the works yourself, or work with assistants?**

I’ve always had one or two assistants. I’ve never done the printing myself. Now I have people doing the works for me. I don’t physically enter into it. When it involves painting on a canvas sometimes I paint myself, but only now and then. I have about six assistants, and that’s it.

**You studied traditional techniques of drawing, painting, and sculpting from the figure, but you always use found imagery and never draw or paint representational images anymore.**

I draw pretty well, but I’m a conceptual artist.

**How do you design what the assistants are going to make?**

That’s where all my experience as an artist comes in. The buck’s on my shoulders and I have to decide what’s going to be shown and what’s not going to be shown, how it’s going to be painted, the colors that are going to be used, and on and on. I have a photographic image, and with colored pencils I intervene and decide a subject, which



colors are going to be drawn and what colors are going to be masked out. So at that point I’m reinventing and deciding how the finished piece really looks.

**Has digital technology altered your methods? Do you compose on a computer now?**

No, I don’t. It’s altered the way my art is made, sped things up, but it doesn’t impact the way I compose.

**How do you decide on the scale of your works, and how do you want them framed?**

The size is something that would look good in a home. I don’t decide on the frame. That’s up to the person who buys it. ▸

Top, courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris, photo: Cathy Carver. Bottom, courtesy of the artist and Gemini G.E.L.





**Many of your works combine multiple framed photographs arranged on a wall, often with areas highlighted in color or cut out. Why did you start conjoining images and how do you decide how to arrange them?**

I just got bored. I guess “collage” would be the best term. I arrange them by instinct. It’s not a hard idea to get. You can go to a friend’s house and they have a lot of images on the wall, and it’s one big collage.

**What are you thinking about when you compose a work?**

All the art I have ever seen, everything I have ever read, everything I have ever heard someone say. It all comes into play. Why do you put things on the wall in your house, one picture next to another picture? Because you sense a relationship.

**Are you looking for beauty?**

No, I don’t think it’s about beauty. I don’t think you can put a name on that. Somehow it has to make sense to you.

**Robert Rauschenberg said something similar about how he decides which images he will juxtapose against each other. He couldn’t really explain why things went together.**

Yeah, well, I think he had visual diarrhea. Poor Bob. He gave us too much imagery.

**You made dozens of films and videos in the 1970s. Why did you start making videos?**

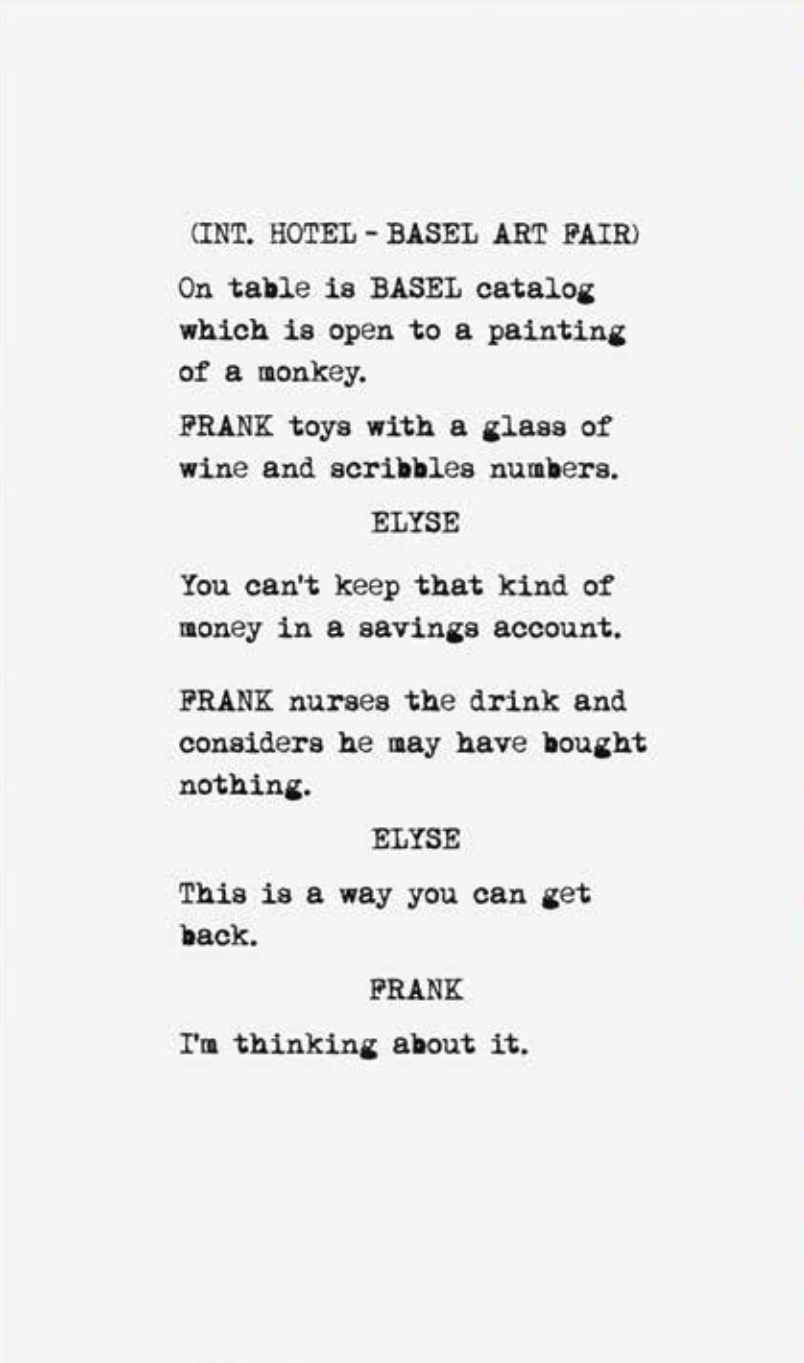
Because Sony video Portapak came out and every artist had one, including me.



*From left: The Overlap Series: Jogger (With Cosmic Event), 2000–2001, 84 x 43.75 inches, digital photographic prints with acrylic on Sintra board; Hands and/or Feet (Part One): Skateboards / Tiger, 2009, 58.875 x 62.625 inches, three-dimensional archival print laminated with lexan and mounted on Sintra with acrylic paint; Movie Scripts/Art: Frank nurses the drink..., 2014, 90.625 x 108 inches, varnished inkjet print on canvas with acrylic paint.*

**One of your most famous is a 13-minute shot of you writing over and over again, “I will not make any more boring art.” Was it a parody of teaching?**

Probably. I was a visiting artist at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. They always ask visiting artists to make a print so I made one of a sheet of lined paper on which I’d written over and over again, like punishment, “I will not make any more boring art. I will not make any more boring art...” That got an unexpected jump soon after because The Museum of Modern Art bought one for their collection and had it on



display, which helped me a lot. Then I made the video of me writing out the sentence over and over. It’s not an unnatural idea. I mean, if you were at a school teaching art, you could very easily come up with that idea of doing artist punishment, that I won’t do bad art, I’ll only do good art. “I will not make any more boring art.” You want to imbue that idea.

**You also made a kind of documentary in which you walk into an art class, set up a camera to film the students, then leave. Later a police artist comes in and sketches you based on the students’ testimony.**

I was trying to see literally whether the artist could make a drawing that looked like me by verbal description. Afterward I saw the drawing, and he looked at me and said, “They’d pick you up.” The police would pick me up by looking at that drawing, so it worked pretty well.



**In an even more bizarre video you try to teach a plant the alphabet using flash cards.**

That was during the time of hippies, and hippies thought plants were intelligent. I said, “Oh, if that’s the case, I will get a plant and give them a lesson from the alphabet.”

**Were you a hippie?**

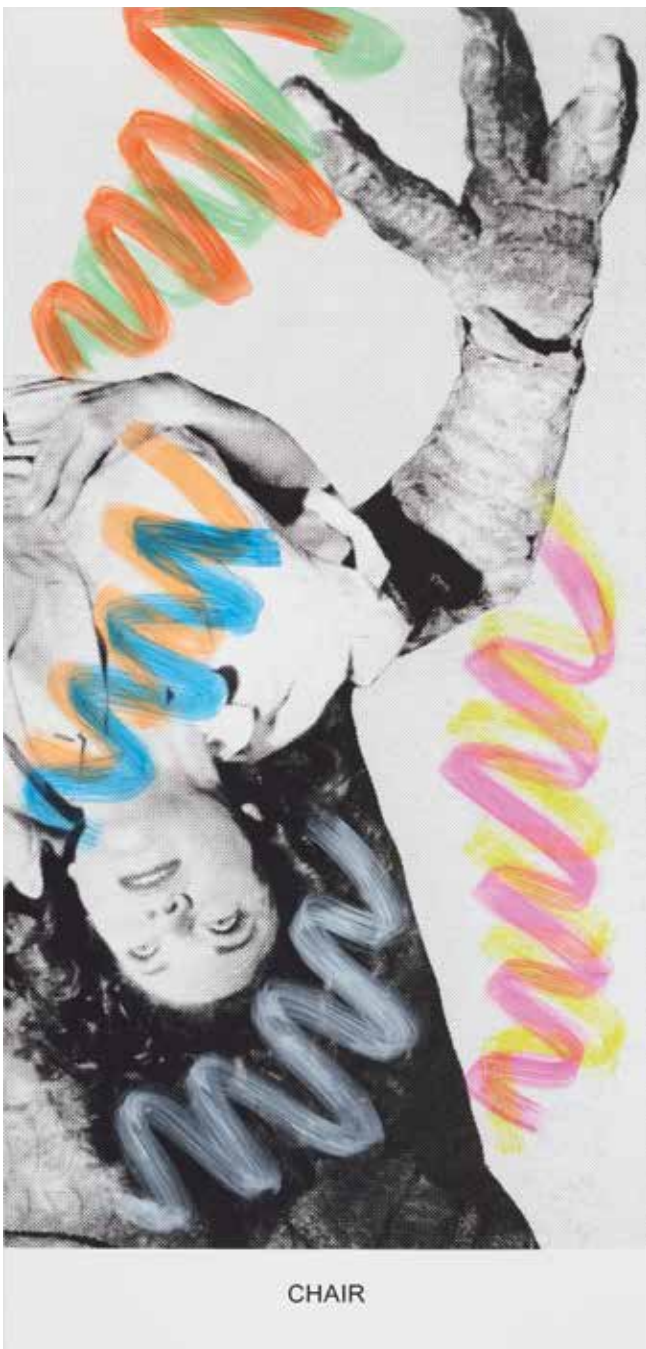
Of course I was! If you’d asked me I wouldn’t say I was a hippie, but I tried to look like my friends, and they looked like hippies. It didn’t matter.

**The West Coast was associated with drug culture. Were you into drugs?**

Not really. I kind of got into cocaine. I didn’t have the money to buy cocaine, but at LA art world parties they would have cocaine. It didn’t take over my life, but >

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris; photo: Joshua White.





once you've had cocaine how would you not want it if somebody offered it to you? I didn't like marijuana. I took LSD once with Bob Smithson in New York. We had dinner in Max's Kansas City and he said, "I've got some LSD. You want to try some?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll try it." So he said, "Let's go for a walk." So we headed down to Canal Street and walked around. You couldn't think of anything else other than the state of your own being at the time, so I guess you would say everything was "normal."

### Where do you find inspiration these days? What are you working on now?

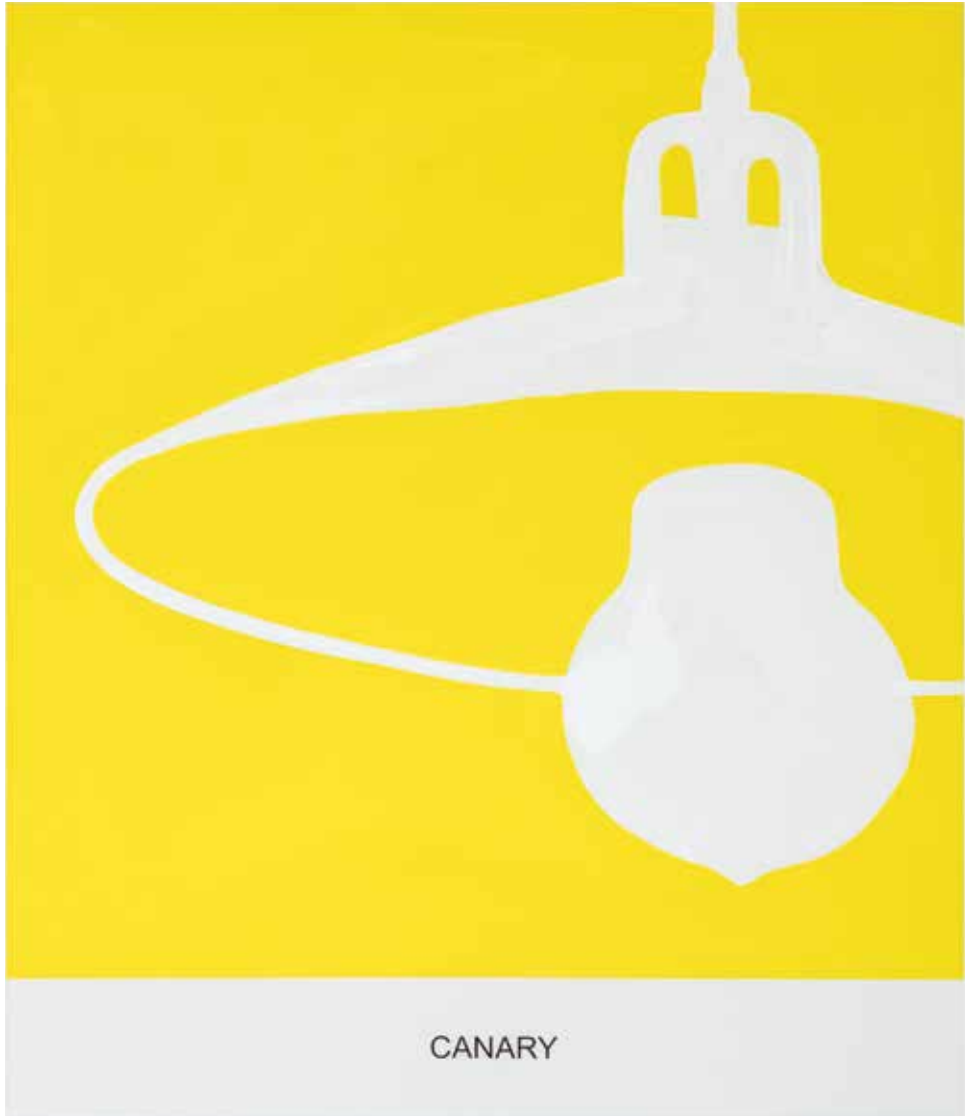
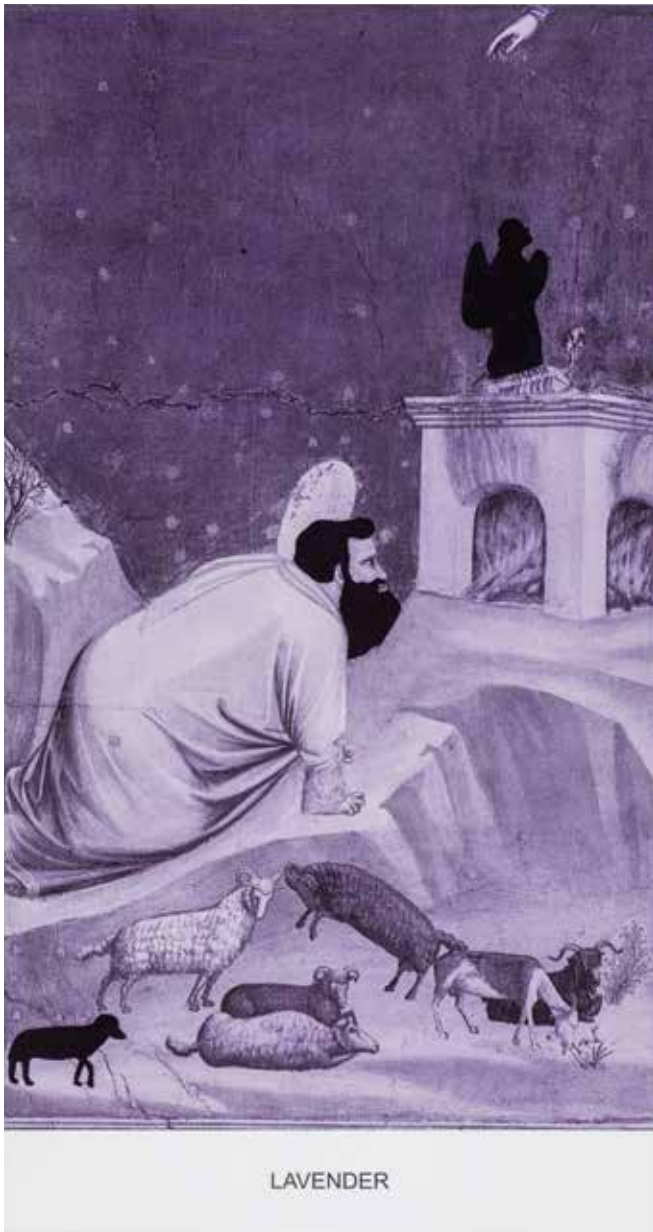
I tend to use art history a lot. Recently a topic has been how Jackson Pollock was influenced by Thomas Hart Benton. I find that very interesting and it has become a subject of a new series of works. Jackson Pollock is like the beginning of contemporary art for most of us, so I thought, let's go back and see who his teacher was. These paintings are about 6 feet tall by 5 feet wide. There's part of a Jackson Pollock on one half, and part of a Benton piece is the other half. By painting over it I bring the two artists together to make one artist. Benton worked a long time in Hollywood. One of my books has Benton drawings of Hollywood movie sets. He was very much part of Hollywood.

### Do you think of yourself as part of Hollywood?

I certainly used a lot of Hollywood movie stills in my earlier work, so, yes, I think so. I found a bookstore that sold movie stills for 10 cents apiece and I thought, "These are kind of interesting. I'd be able to use them." I would buy a lot of them and figure out how to reuse them. One of the first subjects was of a guy and a girl kissing each other. I don't do that anymore. I just work from Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton reproductions from books.

### In the last decade you've started making sculptures and wall reliefs. Why did you decide to make sculptures instead of images?

Boredom. I had visited Beethoven's house in Bonn and seen all his ear trumpets. Then I decided to do a series based on Beethoven's hearing trumpet coming out of a plaster ear hanging on the wall. I also did an ear-shaped sofa with wall-mounted flower sconces shaped like upturned noses.



After the trumpet I made a giant carrot that hangs from the ceiling. It's exactly my height. It was part of a proposal I had made with LACMA for the *Venice Biennale*, but the project didn't happen. The carrot would have hung point down from the cupola of the American pavilion. I was looking at the carrot like a plumb bob that carpenters use in building.

### Why hang a giant orange vegetable from the ceiling?

Well, to get attention, I suppose. You wouldn't think of using a carrot necessarily as a plumb bob.

### You're sure to get attention for the BMW Art Car you recently designed, adding your primary colors and dots to an M6 GT3.

They have artists design one of their cars every year. They shipped the car here and after the unveiling at Art Basel Miami Beach they will race it and show it at museums beginning in 2017. It will definitely be my fastest artwork yet.

### What is a typical day for you?

Pretty standard. I'm in my studio by 10 o'clock. I meet with the head of my staff once a day and look at the emails and the rest of the time deal with doing new work. The assistants all have specific jobs that they do producing new work. My office is separate from where they work. I leave around 2:30 p.m. or 3:30 p.m. This routine has not changed at all over the years.

*From left: CHAIR, 2015; 112.5 x 54 x 1.625 inches, varnished inkjet print on canvas with acrylic paint; The Purple Series: Lavender, 2016, 94.75 x 50.75 inches, varnished inkjet print on canvas with acrylic paint; The Yellow Series: Canary, 2016, 63.25 x 54 inches, varnished inkjet print on canvas with acrylic paint.*

### What's your studio like in Venice?

When I moved here from Santa Monica in 2003 I had the space designed by an architect who worked for Frank Gehry. It was built around my needs and how much money I had. It's quite large. It has office space, a space for a gym, two floors for doing new work, and then I have a private room, I guess you'd call it a man cave where I can hang out and rest.

### There's a short film about you narrated by Tom Waits, who is also from National City. He mentions that you have two peepholes in your studio door—one high and the other low. What's that about?

It's just a joke about me being tall.

### You must be one of the tallest contemporary artists alive. How has being 6'7" impacted your life?

Well, I sit down a lot so people can see me!

### When you're not in the studio, where do you live?

I have a craftsman house in Santa Monica. Frank Gehry is a friend of mine and he did some work on it. Frank was always friendly with the artists that are in LA. He was one of the art people I grew up with. Now, I'm having a new house built by him in Venice, so I'll live in that one when it's finished.

### What will your Frank Gehry house be like?

It's going to look like one of Frank's houses. He says mine is a "junior version" of his own new house in Pacific Palisades. We had a lot of meetings and discussed in detail what I needed to make living easy. It's two stories, but not many stairs. I needed wall space to hang art. I look at movies a lot so a room to watch movies in. That was about it. No studio space to make art.

### Do you have a lot of art on the walls?

In my current house, yes. I have the Goya print of the bodies hung on a tree, one of Philip Guston's prints of the Ku Klux Klan, work by Hanne Darboven, Christopher Williams. I have a Lawrence Weiner, a piece of grid paper and he's making x's in the grid. I have quite a few things by Sol Lewitt including a portfolio of prints and a lot of drawings. Nothing by Duchamp or ▶

All images courtesy of the artist, photos: Joshua White.



Warhol, but I buy work of young artists, and trade work also. I have early works by a former student of mine, Analia Saban, and she's quite popular now and shows with Tanya Bonakdar in New York.

**Do you consider yourself a collector?**

No. Sometimes I work with David Platzker, a former employee of mine who now works at MoMA, and if there are works that he wants to have in the collection of MoMA he will tell me and I will buy them for the museum. It's probably under a dozen works by artists of varying degrees of recognition. I've bought things for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I had an old wall work by Lawrence Weiner that I gave to MOCA for their collection. I've bought works for them and given them works I owned, including my own sometimes.

**Which of your own works hang in your house?**

The only one is a drawing I made when I was in grade school that's framed up on the wall. I think it was probably from math class, and there are these red dots and numbers written underneath.

**Can you talk about your family? You were married to the schoolteacher Carol Wixom from 1960 to 1984.**

I'm divorced, and have only been married once. We have two children, Anna and Tony, who have houses that I've bought for them, one in Los Angeles and one in Berkeley. No grandchildren.

**Over the years you've owned some dogs, including one named Giotto.**

I named all my dogs after artists. One was a Labrador named Goya and the previous one was named Giacometti, a skinny Weimaraner that I got from the artist Bill Wegman. I don't own any dogs now.

**You smoke cigars. Do you have other vices or hobbies?**

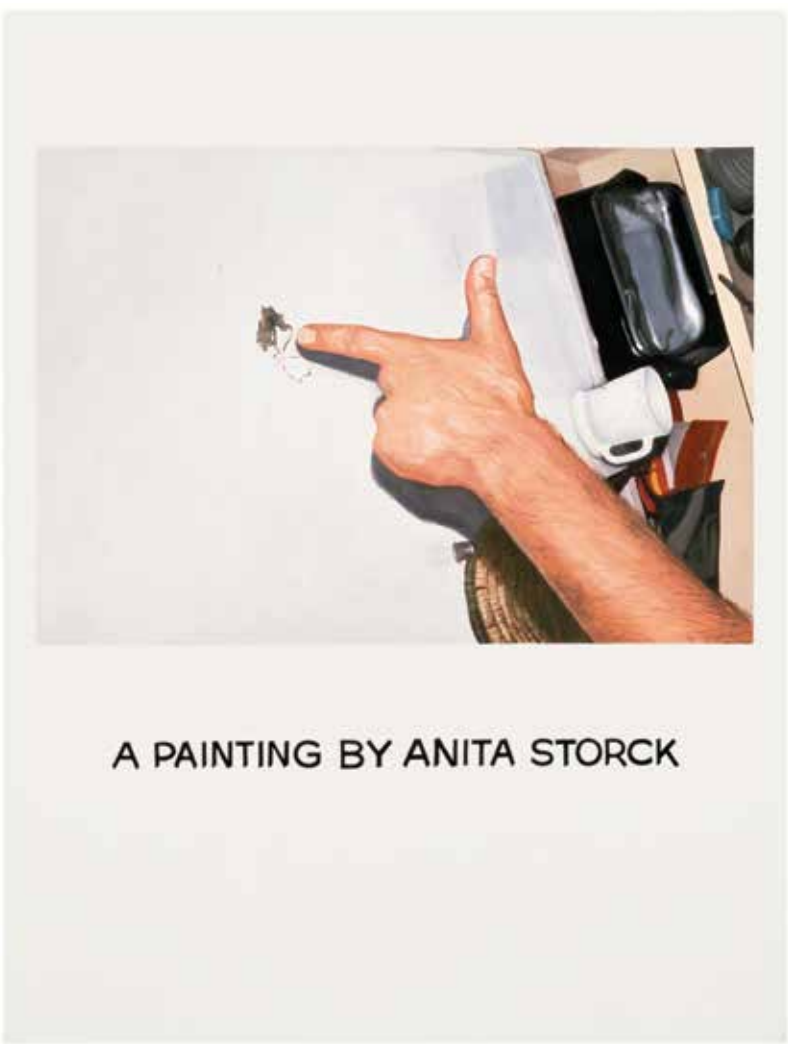
I don't think so. Just making art. I drink alcohol, but not to excess. Vodka's the only drink I have. I guess that would be it.

**Early on you were not commercially successful. What happened that spurred the market for your work?**

I think it was my dealer Ileana Sonnabend. She was European and helped get the work known in Europe. She had two galleries, one in New York and one in Paris. Not so much sold, even in the 1970s, but it was a prestigious gallery to be part of. I got to know her very well, and having lunches and dinners with her—all that was helpful, but not in terms of money.

**How did you meet her?**

She searched me out. I can't say why. I was in the Paris airport and she came up and asked me where I was showing. I was already showing quite a bit, and she said, "Well, would you like to show with me?" and I said, "Sure."



**Now your more recent unique works on canvas have begun at around \$300,000, depending on the scale, but the record for a work at auction is \$4.4 million for *Quality Material* (1966–68), an acrylic on canvas painting of five lines of text that sold at Christie's New York in 2007. Another text picture from the same period sold two years later for \$1.9 million. Why do you think those early text pieces have commanded the highest prices?**

I don't know who bought those works or why they have sold for so much.

**Have you kept some of them?**

I wish I did! I don't have a lot of my older works. I would sell anything I could sell. I remember calling up the LA collector Stanley Grinstein and asking if he wanted to buy a text piece, and I sold it to him for like \$500. Now it's worth something like \$5 million. What a change in attitude.

**You began printmaking in the 1970s, and you also make limited-edition art multiples and artist books. Is that a way to make your work accessible to a broader public?**

It's cheap art. You don't have to buy an original. I've always said every artist should have a cheap line. I think the average price for a print of mine is about \$3,500.

Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris. Installation view from John Baldessari: *Movie Scripts/Art*, courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris, photo: Cathy Canver.



**After Ileana Sonnabend had represented you for a quarter century, in 1997 you switched to Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, who is still your commercial representative. What is it about her that keeps you with her?**

Ileana wasn't making much money. I needed money, and Marian had always been after me, so I finally decided to show with her.

She has the reputation in the art world of having the best gallery and showing some of the best artists. I met her early on when she had a business called Multiples and she did editions. I did prints with her. I also still show with Sprüth Magers in London and Berlin, but it all goes through Marian Goodman Gallery. They cooperate.

**Is the market for LA artists different from artists based in other parts of the world?**

Art is international. It has nothing to do with geography. People buy art on the Internet, so they can buy art anywhere in the world. It's not about the local market. I don't think the market has anything to do with geography.

**How do you explain the amazing prices that art sells for these days?**

For a lot of people now it's just parking money. The works are interchangeable with the money. You'd probably get more money if you buy art and sell it than the interest you'd get in the bank. So art is used for status or to park money. I think that's why it has become so popular. That's not good. The art should always be uppermost.

**What do you think of the art fair phenomenon? Do you go to Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, Frieze, the Armory Show, and others?**

It's inevitable, but predictable at the same time. I did go once in Miami, once in Switzerland. It was scary.

**How would you describe your own collectors? Have any been particularly supportive?**

The collectors I've met vary, and when I haven't met them they don't identify themselves so I can't tell much about them. Eli Broad has been very supportive. He's bought a lot of work and shown it in the wing he built at LACMA and in his new museum in downtown Los Angeles. He also commissioned one work for a museum in Israel.

**You taught at California Institute of the Arts for 16 years, then at UCLA for another 22. CalArts named their studio building after you. Why did you teach so much?**

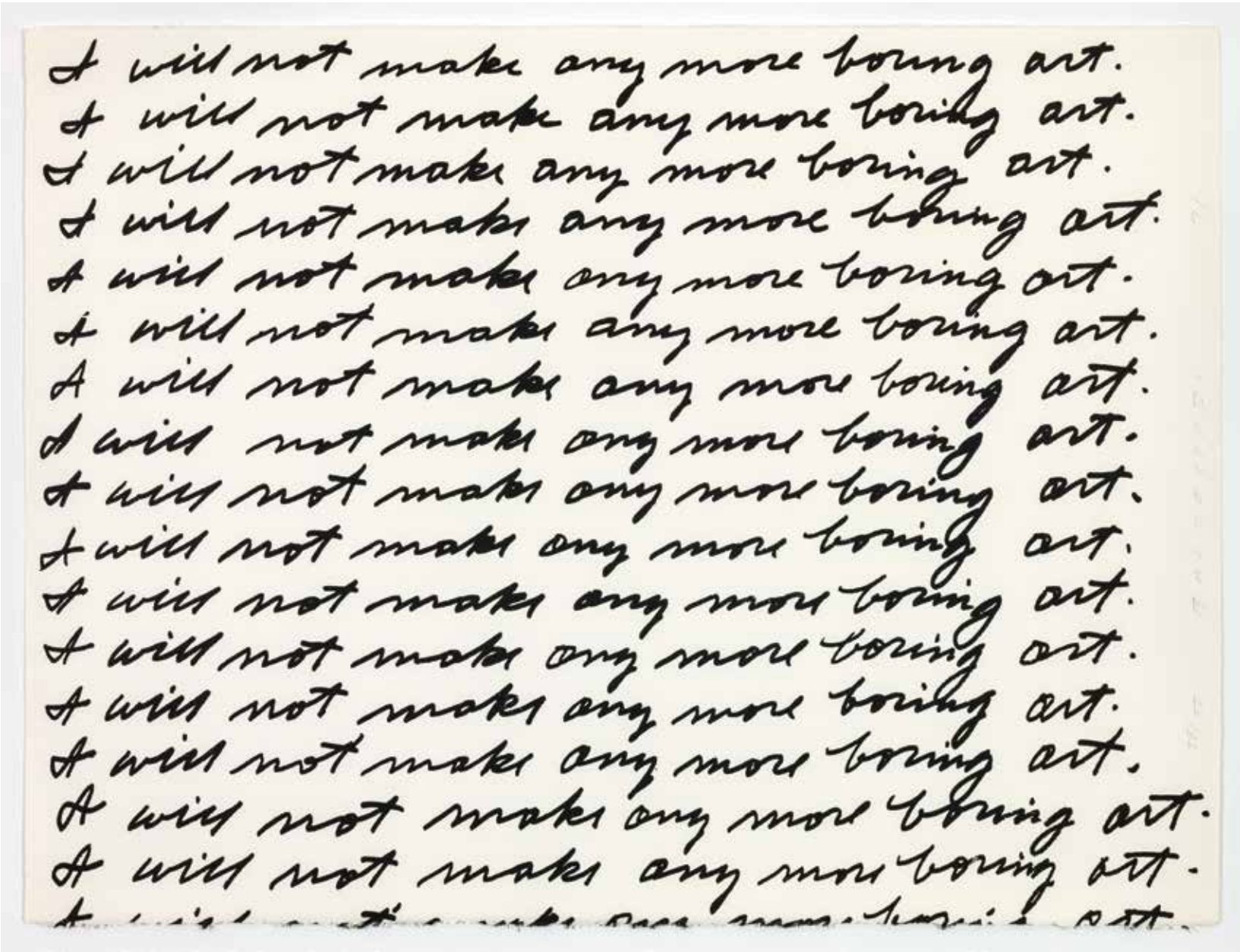
I needed money.

**Your students included David Salle, Jack Goldstein, Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, James Welling, Barbara Bloom, Matt Mullican, and many others who went on to big careers. Some feel their outlook was shaped in part by your classes. What was your approach to teaching in your famous "Post-Studio" class?**

That's very kind. I was just trying to open up other areas for art. I was doing the same thing myself. In fact, I was both teacher and student. It was more kind of exploratory, like, What could be art? Matt Mullican had a project where he brought sunlight into CalArts with a whole series of people holding mirrors until the sunlight finally was in the classroom. And that was the work. When I got back from doing shows in Europe I would come into class with a suitcase, open it up, and it would be full of catalogues and everybody would look at catalogues. That's what the class was about—looking at catalogues of art from Europe. There were no grades. It was pass or fail. ▷

*From left: Commissioned Painting: *A Painting by Anita Storck*, 1969, 59.25 x 45.5 inches, acrylic and oil on canvas; Installation view from John Baldessari: *Movie Scripts/Art*, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, NY, Fall 2014.*





Would you give them assignments?

I didn't tell them to do anything. I made up a list of assignments and said if they wanted to have an assignment it would be better if you went to another instructor, but if you need an assignment you can choose any of these. Teaching is like being a parent. You can't teach them anything, but you can be an example.

You have had hundreds of solo shows since the first in 1960 at Art Center in La Jolla. Which ones stand out in your mind as particularly significant?

The retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (2010) and the Tate in London (2009), just because they are what they are. It's an honor.

But you've curated collection shows for the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., and for MoMA. And you curated an acclaimed Magritte show at LACMA, and designed an installation replete with a carpet of clouds and images of freeway overpasses on the ceiling, turning the space upside down. Would you like to curate more shows?

No, not really. I've had enough of it.

*I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971, 22.5 x 30 inches, lithograph, published by Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, edition of 50.

How important is the media to you?

It's nice to see your name in print. The reviews impact me, sure. I've had some good reviews. Just as long as it's accurate I'm fine with it. I think anybody would like a good apologist, somebody that could explain the work.

You've become one of the most renowned artists in the world. It must be satisfying to look back on such a stellar career. How do you feel about that?

Lucky. I'm lucky to be doing what I want to do. Some people don't have that choice. It's very satisfying to do what you want.

How do you imagine you will be remembered in art history a century from now?

I have no idea, but I think I have a place in art history. I do show up in books on art—a lot. But I have said that people know me as the guy who puts dots on people's faces. That's just the way it is. I have to accept that. ♦



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