

# SPRÜTH MAGERS BERLIN LONDON

## *Ear Sofa Nose Sconces with Flowers (in Stage Setting)*

**John Baldessari**

**Sprüth Magers London    october 12 - november 14 2009**

Opening on the eve of his eagerly anticipated retrospective at Tate Modern, *Ear Sofa; Nose Sconces with Flowers (In Stage Setting)* is the first ever tableau vivant created by acclaimed American artist John Baldessari, a living installation which epitomises the wry wit, visual ingenuity and conceptual vigour which has defined the artist's practice for almost five decades.

The installation centres on an ear-shaped sofa, on which a model sits, posed and poised, flanked on either side by a pair of nose-shaped, wall-mounted sconces. The sofa is framed by a large decorative semi-circular arch, and the gallery's glass frontage is shrouded by a sheet of sheer stretched silk. The palette, proportions, and geometrical forms deployed in the construction of the tableau are redolent of an Art Deco aesthetic, which further contributes to a sense of grand theatricality. The allusion to (or illusion of) Hollywood's Art Deco glamour in the exhibition's design has been developed by Baldessari in collaboration with acclaimed American production designer Naomi Shohan, whose credits include her BAFTA-nominated work on *American Beauty* (1999), *Training Day* (2001), *I Am Legend* (2007) and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (2010).

*Ear Sofa; Nose Sconces with Flowers (In Stage Setting)* is an amusing riff on a number of themes that have long concerned Baldessari. Faces and physiognomy, and particularly the orificial and sensory features of noses and ears, have been present in various guises in Baldessari's work throughout his career. For Baldessari, representing the face and its features offers ways of exploring myriad conceptual questions, including the problem of perception and the physiological basis of experience, and the constitutive role of faces in forging (and erasing) human identities and selfhoods. From early paintings of isolated features such as *God Nose* (1965), to his graphic vandalism on found photographs such as *Gavel* (1987), in which the faces of local dignitaries were obliterated with circles of symbolically charged colour, utilising the social significance and aesthetic absurdity of facial features has been a consistent motif in Baldessari's diverse practice. The visual isolation of particular facial features, indeed their fetishisation, also owes much to Baldessari's ongoing interest in Surrealism, particularly in the work of Belgian painter René Magritte. Baldessari took the opportunity to explore this in the exhibition *Magritte and Contemporary Art* (LACMA, 2006), bringing together works by Magritte with the works of contemporary artists. Baldessari's interest in noses and ears also has formal and historical resonances: 'Thinking about art history, it seems that lips and eyeballs have been getting a lot of attention, but I haven't seen many examples of ears and noses. I suppose they just don't separate very well. I mean, floating eyeballs and lips seems to work okay, but not noses and ears, so I decided to free the nose and ear' (John Baldessari

in conversation with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Miami, 2006).

The specific features of the tableau originated as part of John Baldessari's installation at the museums Haus Lange and Haus Esters in Krefeld in Germany earlier this year, a project which signalled a unique confluence of a range of Baldessari's diverse theoretical interests. The artist's fascination with the perceptual experience of architecture and space, and his longstanding interest in the various meanings associated with faces and individual facial features blended as Baldessari amusingly took on these two Mies van der Rohe buildings. This bold site-specific installation involved, amongst many other ingenious artistic interventions both internal and external, the provision of a surreal vantage point from which to observe the buildings' interiors an ear-shaped sofa, flanked by two nose-shaped sconces. It is this strange yet compelling ensemble that has been installed and recontextualised in the gallery space of Sprüth Magers London. Noses and an ear, rescaled and spatially reorganised, have been turned into a dramatic salon environment; these human features are divested of their humanity but are nonetheless now adorned in this tableau vivant by a very real human model. As the wealth of Baldessari's career comes into view through over 150 works at Tate Modern in October, this single living installation reveals that this veteran artist of Conceptualism still possesses the power to surprise, provoke and delight.

John Baldessari (b. 1931, National City, California. Lives and works in Santa Monica, California.) studied at San Diego State College, U.C. Berkeley, UCLA, the Otis Art Institute, and the Chouinard Art Institute. Baldessari has received honorary degrees from the National University of Ireland, San Diego State University, and the Otis Art Institute, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2004. His many awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship (1986), the Oscar Kokoschka Prize, Austria (1996), the Governor's Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Visual Arts, California (1997), the Spectrum-International Award for Photography of the Foundation of Lower Saxony, Germany (1999), and the BACA International 2008. His work has been exhibited in the 47th Venice Biennial (1997); the Carnegie International (1985-86), the Whitney Biennial (1983), and Documenta V (1972) and VII (1982), and he has exhibited recent retrospectives at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and the Kunsthaus Graz in Austria. Earlier this year Baldessari was also awarded the prestigious Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009).

The retrospective exhibition John Baldessari: Pure Beauty is concurrently on show at Tate Modern, and will then tour a number of museums internationally:

Tate Modern, London: 13 October 2009 10 January 2010

Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona: 11 February 2010 25 April 2010

LACMA, Los Angeles: 27 June 2010 12 September 2010

Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC: 17 October 2010 9 January 2011

John Baldessari will be answering questions put to him by the readers of frieze magazine at Frieze Art Fair, at 2.30pm on Thursday 15 October. Please see <http://www.frieze.foundation.org/talks/> for more information

Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari are giving a talk at the Royal Academy, at 6.30pm on Friday 16 October: Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and the West Coast Art Scene of the 1960s. Please see <http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/events> for more information

For more information, interviews, or images, please contact Sally Hough:  
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#### Visitor Information

Address: 7A Grafton Street, London, W1S 4EJ

Opening hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 10am - 6pm

Admission: Free

Nearest Tube: Green Park

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