

## **John Baldessari – *READ/WRITE/THINK/DREAM*, 2001**

**John Baldessari** (a native of National City, south of San Diego) is internationally renowned as a conceptual artist who invented a completely new approach to photography, often working with images taken from old Hollywood black and white movie stills. As an influential teacher at UCSD, California Institute of the Arts and UCLA he has encouraged students to break the rules for over 30 years.

Before his 1994 visit to UCSD, John had been thinking about Ghiberti's fifteenth-century bronze doors in Florence which render Bible stories in high relief, teaching the moral lessons of the day. His work also involves lessons, but in the form of questions rather than answers: through surprising combinations of pictures he prods the viewer into open-ended puzzles. The most prominent doors at UCSD were at the entrance to the Geisel Library, a landmark building designed by the California architect William Pereira, with a 1992 expansion by Gunnar Birkerts. Baldessari decided first to transform the library doors and then to incorporate the entire lobby space, choosing students as his subject. The entrance to the Geisel Library is comprised of a wall of eight ten-foot high glass panels flanking two pairs of automatic sliding doors. Onto each of these panels the artist placed photographic images of UCSD students standing atop a row of shelved books. They become part of the architectural structure – like a Greek temple using the figures as columns, the books as their bases.

The existing clear glass of the doors was replaced with glass in primary colors, perhaps suggesting primary sources of information. As the doors open and close, the colored panes cross over each other, visually mixing into new colors. Above the doors the words READ, WRITE, THINK and DREAM echo the exhortation Baldessari gave his students to remember that beyond the day-to-day grind comes the chance to contemplate the unexpected and envision new worlds.

Entering the foyer, one faces images of seated students in four glass wall panels. Two eucalyptus wood benches designed by Roy McMakin offer seating for real people, imitating the images preserved in glass. The tall, slender palm trees seen throughout Southern California are depicted in a wall of glass panels on the right. Visible beyond these trees is a photomural of beachfront and sea. The verticality of the trees is mirrored in another mural with a row of oversized pens and pencils, instruments of learning, ordered according to the color spectrum of the rainbow.

This is here and now. Baldessari, once again, has absorbed the culture around him, using the latest techniques to create a collage juxtaposing photographs, words, and colors, which all loop back on each other to spark new associations and thoughts.

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