

Salvatore Devito

John Baldessari was a conceptual artist known for his work featuring found photography and appropriated images. Creating works involving text, photographs, and prints John Baldessari creates artwork with narrative of images and language. The thing Baldessari believes that he is best remembered for is putting dots on people's faces. John Baldessari had price tag stickers that he put on people faces in found photographs. Baldeassi says that, "I just had these price stickers I was using for something else, in some graphic way and I put them on all the faces and I just felt like it leveled the playing field". The dots cover the people's faces which takes away focus from the figure's faces allowing the view to focus on other parts of the image. I want to talk about how using the semiotic method is how John Baldessari's dots bring up ideas of appropriation, identity, emotions, and symbolism.



Bloody Sundae, 1987, John Baldessari

Analyzing the piece titled *Bloody Sundae* we can see how John Baldessari uses dots to make a piece his own. Looking at this piece we can see how John Baldessari uses appropriated photographs as he believed that photographs should not be owned and that they should be open to people to make art. John Baldessari believed that the photographic image can communicate a

message. *Bloody Sundae* is a collage of two photographs on top of each other, the two photos are unrelated but are connected through use of picture frames in the photos. One day John Baldessari placed a price tag sticker over the face of a subject in a photograph and in his own words “It leveled the playing field”. Blocking out the faces orders the viewers to look at what the image is communicating. Baldessari got the idea of empty spaces after visiting the Metropolitan Museum and he saw restored Greek vases filled in with unpainted plaster. This gave John Baldessari the idea of how missing areas of an image can convey a message. Blocking out areas of the images allows the viewer focus on the non-blocked out parts to see what the message is communicated through the photographs.

Using the semiotic method, we can find meaning of Baldessari’s dots to find the idea of identity. Since Baldessari blocks out the faces of the people in the photographs the viewers can not see what they look like or what their faces are saying. When the viewer can’t see the face of the subject, they have to focus on the other areas to pull details to imagine what is going on. In *Bloody Sundae* it is two separate images on top of one another. Above three men are crowded together and hiding behind suitcases holding guns, and below a man and a woman are in a bedroom almost about to kiss. All the faces have been covered to hide the identities of the subject which gives the piece a sense of surrealism. A famous work of art done by surrealist painter Rene Magritte titled *Son of Man* shows a man in a suit and a bowler hat, the man has an apple floating in front of his face covering his identity. The apple in Magritte’s work acts like a dot similar to Baldessari’s work. Since we can not see the faces and have to look around the subject to try to figure out what is going on, we can see the images have a more standardized message.

One thing the Baldessari is able to do using the colored dots is allowing to play with emotions. Baldessari uses different colors of dots to represent different emotions. The color codes are red is dangerous, green is safe, blue is platonic and yellow is crazy. Putting the different colors to show different emotions of the people in the piece adds a new aurora to the artwork. In *Bloody Sundae* the top three men have a blue dot, a red dot, and a yellow dot showing that one of the men is platonic, the man with the gun is dangerous and the other man is crazy. Below with the man and the woman the man has a green dot over his face showing he is safe while the woman has a red dot showing she is dangerous in this intimate setting. Allowing the colored dots to show emotions allows Baldessari to change the relationships between the subjects in his pieces.

The biggest thing that John Baldessari uses in his dots is symbolism. While the title *Bloody Sundae* refers to a 1972 mass shooting in Northern Ireland by the British Army, the dots remind the viewer of an ice cream Sunday hence the different spelling so there is a double entendre. Allowing the dots to cover people's faces allows for symbolism to be shown as the view has to focus on the other details of the photograph it allows them to project a symbol onto the piece to find meaning in what the piece is trying to convey.

Work Cited

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