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George Baldessin's first view of the city: The formative influence of the Italian sculptor Alik Cavaliere on George Baldessin.

ABSTRACT

In Sasha Grishin's 2014 book, *Australian art: a history*, he begins his discussion of printmaker-sculptor George Baldessin (1939-1978) with a statement about the artist's migration to Australia. While this is appropriate, as Baldessin's art is intimately involved with his relationship to 'place', extensive biographical interpretations have meant that the consequences of Baldessin's life have long overshadowed the consequences of his art. After travelling to Milan in 1962 to study with the internationally renowned Marino Marini, Baldessin found himself under the tutelage of Marini's lesser-known studio assistant, Alik Cavaliere (1926-1998). Cavaliere's phenomenological philosophy, which informed his approach to sculpture, formed a foundational basis for Baldessin's later work in Australia. After his return from Milan, the young artist created works that were derivative of Cavaliere. This was contemporary Milanese art, Melbourne style. Over time this influence became less obvious, and Baldessin slowly transformed Cavaliere's approach into something idiosyncratic and deeply personal. Yet the basic tenets of Cavaliere's philosophy remain traceable in Baldessin's most admired work, the installation produced for the 1975 São Paulo Biennial – the sculpture *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* with the print suite *Occasional images from a city chamber*. Cavaliere's advocacy for works which simulated 'place' and *being-in-the-world* struck a chord with Baldessin. Not least because Baldessin was raised relatively close to Milan, a truth he often obscured.

'Baldessin belonged to that generation of artists in Australia who tried to conceal their migrant origins as much as possible, and who invented an identity for themselves to appear as one of the local boys.' Sasha Grishin, 2014¹

The printmaker-sculptor George Baldessin (1939-1978) died tragically in a car accident at the age of only thirty-nine. At the time of his death his career post-art school spanned a mere fifteen years. Commentators and art historians have been eager to treat this short period as a full and more-or-less complete narrative. For example, Elizabeth Cross claimed that the body of work left by Baldessin 'does not strike us as incomplete, immature, unseasoned or awaiting resolution.'² This is not entirely accurate. A desire to construct a heroic arc for Baldessin's oeuvre has obscured what his work itself conveys. As you would expect from an artist who died before reaching middle-age, he was in fact making immature work for at least half of his career. That is to say, his art relied heavily on the synthesis of several significant influences right up until the early 1970s. These influences may have been transformed by

¹ Grishin, 2014, p.405.

² Cross, 1997, pp. 9-18.

Baldessin himself, but they present no mystery. Far above any other influence on the young Baldessin stands the figure of Alik Cavaliere, the Milanese sculptor and instructor at Marino Marini's atelier at the *Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera* (the Brera Academy), with whom Baldessin studied for a semester in 1962-3. A photograph of Marini's students at the Brera Academy shows Baldessin and his instructor, Alik Cavaliere (Fig. 1).



*Gli studenti di Marino Marini negli
anni cinquanta*

Fig. 1. *Marino Marini's students at the Brera Academy*, including Baldessin (second from left) with instructor, Alik Cavaliere (wearing a tie, at rear; the caption on the photograph is incorrect). Source: Cerritelli, 1995, p. 203. (Courtesy Marco Meneguzzo, photographer unknown).

Although Cavaliere was one of Baldessin's most important, most direct influences, their connection has never been elaborated upon in any depth. This oversight has stunted the understanding of one of Melbourne's foremost printer-sculptors of the 1960s and 70s, because, in many ways, Cavaliere is the key to unlocking the complexities of Baldessin's oblique art. In a youthful interview, Baldessin recounted an oft-quoted anecdote about Marini complementing him on the balance and form of one of his sculptures, only to then order 'Now, go out there and make it ugly!'³ This story was told again by Baldessin over a decade later, yet this time it was Cavaliere, not Marini, who was the mentor imparting this most 'significant' of criticisms.⁴ During his lifetime Baldessin was not shy about acknowledging his debt to Cavaliere.⁵ So perhaps in 1965 Baldessin thought Cavaliere too obscure of a reference for an Australian arts journalist. This amendment has never been recorded in any of

³ Baldessin & De Berg, 1965

⁴ 'I would show a simplified figure to Cavaliere... and he would say "that's nice there and there, now go back and make it ugly".' Baldessin quoted in McGrath, 1978, p. 7.

⁵ Edwards-Baldessin, 2013.

the literature on Baldessin, however, the switch is enlightening. Baldessin originally intended to study with the internationally renowned Marini, but it was his contact with Cavaliere's methodology that became of singular importance to the young Australian artist. This anecdotal alteration appropriately positions Cavaliere as Baldessin's predominant Italian influence.



George (Giorgio) Baldessin was born not far from Milan, in the Veneto region of Northern Italy.⁶ With one small exception, Baldessin could be an almost stereotypical figure in late twentieth-century Australian art: a post-WWII immigrant whose family travelled far from Europe only for their promising child to become, not a businessman or a skilled tradesman, but an industrious artist, devoted to undertaking work as a professional. The exception in Baldessin's case is well-known. For reasons many have speculated on, but none can truly know, Baldessin chose to lie about his biography, and would repeatedly claim to loved-ones, friends, colleagues, researchers and the media that he was born in Melbourne.⁷ In truth he lived in Italy until he was nine and met his mother for the first time after infancy when he was ten.⁸ The details of this private portion of Baldessin's life, his later denial of it, and the revelation of it after his death, have been mythologised in most posthumous interpretations of his work.⁹ It may seem clichéd to suggest that this most reluctant of Italians flourished as an artist only *after* returning to his mother-land, nevertheless Baldessin's time in Milan was a catalyst for his earliest work of consequence.

At the completion of his diploma in painting at RMIT, Baldessin set sail for London in 1962 intending to focus on printmaking and sculpture. Before the year was out, he left England for the chance to study with Marini in Milan.¹⁰ At the Brera Academy, the 23 year old Baldessin came under the instruction of Cavaliere (1926-1998). In contrast to Marini, Cavaliere represented a new generation of sculptors. At the dawn of the conceptual art movement, Cavaliere's concerns anticipated the more interactive, less monumental sculpture of the 1970s onward. The other celebrated Melbourne sculptor who worked in Milan during these years was Norma Redpath, who practised at Marini's foundry. In this respect, her work provides a sharp point of contrast for Baldessin's. Back in Melbourne Redpath and the Centre Five sculptors would enact a new sculptural program. This program encouraged sculptors to

⁶ In the immigrant heavy, post-World War II Melbourne arts scene (and indeed in wider society), names were commonly anglicised. The native Latvian Jan Senbergs initially exhibited as 'John Senbergs'; originally from Hungary, Julius Kane changed his name from Julius Kuhn, Guenter Stein became Bill Stevens and Lithuanian Teisutis Zikaras went by 'Joe Zikaras'.

⁷ For example, 'This is George Baldessin. I was born here in Melbourne', is from the opening lines of Hazel de Berg's recorded interview, Baldessin & De Berg, 1965. This early interview features moments of light self-mythology, a young artist testing the outlines of his 'story'.

⁸ Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, pp. 25-26. It was only after Baldessin's death, by the time his memorial exhibition was staged in 1983, that this early period of his life was exposed. This process took some time. For example, in the year after Baldessin's death, Ken Scarlett's encyclopaedic *Australian sculptors* was published and while it records his death, it still lists Baldessin's birthplace as Melbourne, Scarlett, 1980, p.28.

⁹ Indeed, some commentators have gone down the difficult path of retrospective, casual psychoanalysis: 'Being deprived of his parents and growing up as an Italian in Melbourne during the fifties would have taught Baldessin the meaning of loneliness and alienation.' See Palmer, 1991, p. 3.

¹⁰ Edquist, 2009, p. 44.

actively consider architectural applications for their work. Members of Centre Five – such as Lenton Parr, Teisutis Zikaras and Vincas Jomantas – were Baldessin's instructors at RMIT. By his own admission they "introduced" the study of sculpture to him.¹¹ Yet their influence is scarcely visible in his work. Baldessin's alternative voice evolved from a less authoritative sculptural vision.

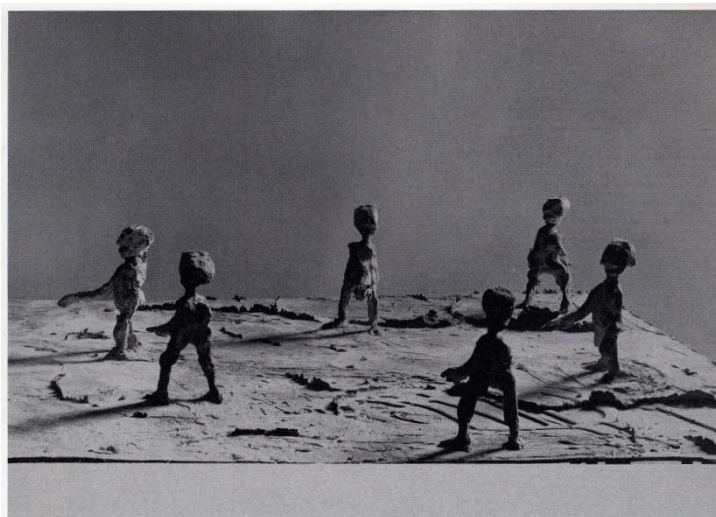


Fig. 2. Alik Cavaliere, *G.B. and his brothers*, 1962. Bronze, 13 x 75 x 67 cm, Milan, Cavaliere Archive. (Photographer unknown.)

Marini, due to his international success, was forced to have a hands-off approach to his atelier.¹² Cavaliere, the studio's principal instructor in Marini's stead, was a bold sculptor in his own right and, when Baldessin arrived, he was about to exhibit for the second time at the Venice Biennale.¹³ Informed by what Pierre Restany described as 'the strictest phenomenology',¹⁴ Cavaliere was openly influenced by the philosophical phenomenology of writers such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as Italian Husserlian philosophers Enzo Paci and Giuseppe Semerari.¹⁵ Throughout the 1960s Cavaliere became increasingly attracted to interactive sculpture. He leaned toward depictions of alienation which aligned him in spirit with the mainstream, post-war existentialist sculptors, such as Alberto Giacometti and Germaine Richier. Unlike those artists, and their focus on the figure, Cavaliere was fixated on environment and situational absurdity. His series *The Adventures of Gustave B.* from 1961 chronicled the interactions of a minute figure (named 'Gustave B.' to

¹¹ George Baldessin in interview with Tony Morphet, 1964, quoted in Scarlett, 1980, p. 30.

¹² Marini's distance to the class was commented upon by Baldessin in his interview with Hazel de Berg (Baldessin & De Berg, 1965), but his impression is supported in the published history of the Brera Academy, Cerritelli, 1995, p. 178.

¹³ Cavaliere's first showing at the Venice Biennale was in 1956. His second exhibition (a solo exhibit), was at the thirty-second Venice Biennale in 1964, Argan, 1964.

¹⁴ Restany, 1969.

¹⁵ Pontiggia, 2011, p. 19.

reflect Franz Kafka's protagonist in *The Trial*, 'Josef K.'¹⁶) in a disproportionate world (Figs. 2, 3, and 5).

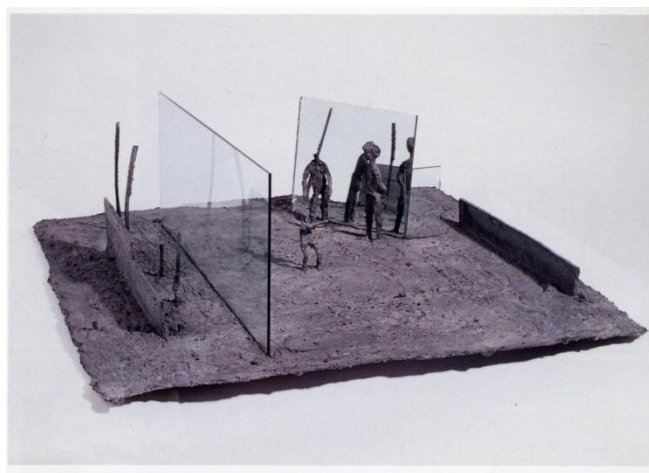


Fig. 3. Alik Cavaliere, *G.B.'s first view of the city*, 1960. Cement, wood, wax, glass, 22 x 77 x 61cm, Milan, Cavaliere Archive. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci).

The indistinct protagonist Gustave B. is 'unable to dominate the situation or impose a trial of strength, he hides himself behind an apple, or gets lost in a forest of branches.'¹⁷ This bronze series, and its structure of narrative tableaux, impressed Baldessin greatly. After he returned to Melbourne, he came up with initialled characters of his own: P.H.B., followed by MM and E.M. The name 'P.H.B.' was apparently derived from a character in James Joyce's *Ulysses*,¹⁸ whereas MM initially stood for the French mime Marcel Marceau.¹⁹ Baldessin created a series of fiddly *bronzetti* which narrate the small, scrappy story of P.H.B.'s entire life-cycle. A glance at the titles sees poor P.H.B.'s existence summarised in a handful of pointed scenes: *The ancestors of P.H.B.*; *P.H.B.'s elements*; and, *P.H.B.'s inheritors*. These works, shown at Baldessin's first solo exhibition at the Argus Gallery, Melbourne in 1964, were soon followed with other similar narrative or character pieces, all of which were closely fashioned after Cavaliere. In one fascinating example, Cavaliere's work, *G.B.'s First view of the city* (*Prima venduta della città di G.B.*, 1960, Milan, Cavaliere archive (Fig. 3) is referenced in

¹⁶ In the late-1950s Cavaliere produced the sculpture series with the Kafkaesque title of *Metamorfosi*, Pontiggia, 2011, pp. 17-18.

¹⁷ Restany, 1969.

¹⁸ Baldessin spoke about Joyce in a recorded interview, Morphett, 1964. Unfortunately there is no mention of a 'P.H.B.' in *Ulysses*. There is, however, a single mention of a 'H.P.B.' which Baldessin could have been referring to; the sculptures of the 'P.H.B.' series are actually listed in an early catalogue with the titles: *The ancestors of H.P.B.*, *H.P.B.'s elements* and *H.P.B.'s inheritors* (Melbourne, 1964). The appeal of this name to the young Baldessin is perhaps revealed by its context in *Ulysses*, which explains the reference as a bawdy joke about female genitalia:

'Mrs Cooper Oakley once glimpsed our illustrious sister H.P.B.'s elemental.
O, fie! Out on't! *Pfuiteufel!* You naughtn't to look, missus, so you naughtn't when a lady's
ashowing of her elemental.' (Joyce, 1922, p. 174.)

¹⁹ Cross, 1997, p.11.

Baldessin's *P.H.B's second view of the city* (1965, private collection, Fig. 4). Not only do the two works seem to share a narrative (the first view, then the second), they also feature remarkably similar compositional elements.



Fig. 4. George Baldessin, *P.H.B's second view of the city*, 1965. Bronze and resin, private collection. (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin).

Harriet Edquist, author of the second of Baldessin's two monographs, acknowledges the influence of Cavaliere's narrative pieces, but she fails to highlight the phenomenological consequences of such works.²⁰ Toward the end of the 1960s, Cavaliere scaled up his tableaux to produce what he called 'theatre sculpture'. These large, set-like installations had body-casts standing in for characters, and included implied love stories set within an environment of props: all is 'suspended, so only the spectator's time can vary – but quite pointlessly.'²¹ These works were huge stages where the viewer was the uncertain component of the piece: 'whether he is pushed back into the stalls... or whether he is left free to walk around within the sculpture, he finds he is extraneous and unable to perform or bring about anything by his presence' (see for example Cavaliere's *A and Z are waiting for love*, 1971, Cavaliere Archive, Milan, Fig. 6).²² Existential angst was not illustrated via a proxy figurine; it was projected on to the participating spectator. For Cavaliere in the 1960s, the inability to interact with an environment was an enduring metaphor for alienation and made his work consistent with the wider context of post-war, European figurative sculpture.

²⁰ Edquist, 2009, p. 44. The other monograph is Lindsay & Holloway, 1983.

²¹ Cavaliere, 1967, p. 20.

²² Cavaliere, 1967, p. 20.

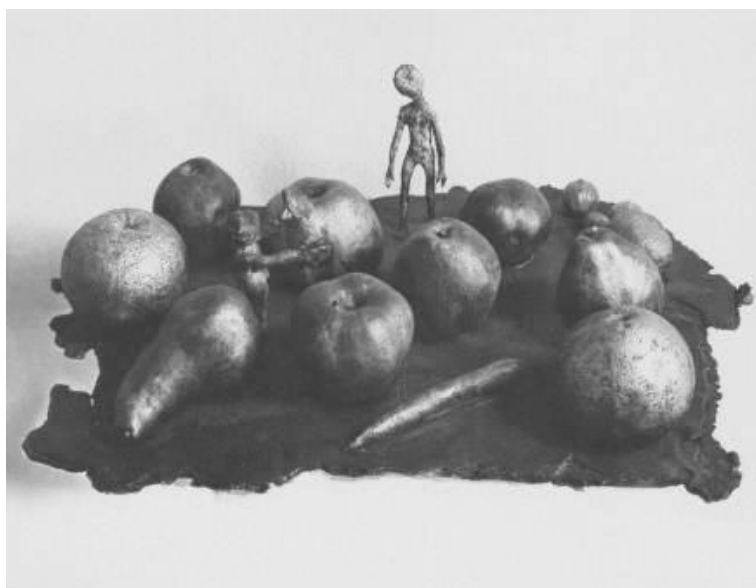


Fig. 5. Alik Cavaliere, *G.B. and nature*, 1962. Bronze, 16 x 55 x 44 cm, location unknown. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci).

As mentioned above, while Baldessin was under his tuition Cavaliere was preparing for his first solo exhibition at the 1964 Venice Biennale. By this time Cavaliere had begun to develop a motif of phenomenological 'objects'. These objects of interaction were natural objects ('props' in Cavaliere's vocabulary), such as trees, apples and pears. From the *Gustave B.* series of 1961-2 to the 1964 Venice Biennale pieces, Cavaliere slowly began taking figures out of his tableaux. This magnifies the symbolic resonance of the remaining objects. Cavaliere's bronze work from 1963 is best described as spindly trees and heavy fruit arranged on thick, slab-like bases.²³

The apple – Cavaliere's most ubiquitous sculptural 'prop' – appears alongside an endearingly collaged 'GEORGE' on a hand-made card given to Baldessin by Cavaliere for his twenty-fourth birthday.²⁴ Cavaliere's apples were firmly located within their biblical connotations, but they were also a direct tribute to René Magritte.²⁵ One of Cavaliere's apple pieces from this time was inscribed with the words: 'Homage to Magritte: Portrait of a rennet apple'.²⁶ Magritte's apple, a humble presence in everyday life (and the beginning of logic: 'a is for apple'), has become an absurd vision. As big as a room or a human head, Magritte took the trustworthy apple and used it as an unreliable prop in many an untrustworthy scene.

²³ Much of this work from 1963 would eventually be shown at the 1964 Venice Biennale, and was exhibited before Venice as a collection under the title *Arbres (Trees, French)* at Galleria Schwarz, Milan: Milan, 1964.

²⁴ Edquist, 2009, p. 44-5. The apple on the card (produced in an edition of 100 for dissemination by Cavaliere's stable Galleria Schwarz in Milan,) features a collage of woodchips arranged to resemble Cavaliere's Venice Biennale sculpture *The tree with a black apple (L'albero con mela nera)*, 1963, bronze, private collection, Brussels. See the catalogue for the 1964 Venice Biennale, in which the work is titled *Terras frugiferentis concelebras*, Argan, 1964).

²⁵ In December 1962, the Belgian surrealist was shown at Galleria Schwarz, Milan.

²⁶ 'Omaggio a Magritte: Ritratto di una mela "renetta"', inscribed on the sculpture *Homage to Magritte*, 1963. Bronze and silver, Pontiggia, 2011, p. 149.



Fig. 6. Alik Cavaliere, *A and Z are waiting for love*, 1971. Acrylic resin, bronze, aluminium, perspex, reinforced polyester, brass, iron, dimensions variable, Milan, Cavaliere Archive. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci).

Crucially for Baldessin, pears – the misshapen cousin to the apple – also often appeared as a complement in Cavaliere's arrangements during the early 1960s. In *Fruits* (1963, location unknown, Fig. 7),²⁷ matte bronze pears and a few apples are scattered across a table-like base. It is difficult to ignore how suggestive they are of the modelling of Baldessin's pears, especially in the sculpture (*Banquet*) (c1976, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, Fig. 8.). Pears became the most enduring and enigmatic element of all Baldessin's personal iconography. Cavaliere's pears, like Baldessin's (both in sculpture and in print), are lean, textural things. They resemble the brown Bosc or the gradated Seckel pears used for spicing and poaching, which, as Robert Lindsay and Memory Holloway speculate, were possibly served in the fine-dining room of the Menzies Hotel, where Baldessin worked as a waiter for seven years.²⁸

²⁷ Pontiggia, 2011, p. 147.

²⁸ Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, p. 78, and McGrath, 1972, p. 18.

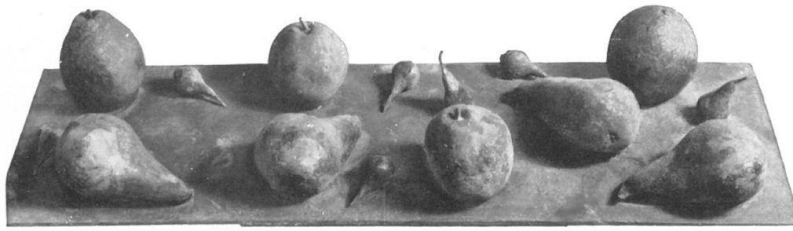


Fig. 7. Alik Cavaliere, *Fruits*, 1963. Bronze, 7 x 41 x 71 cm, collection unknown. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci.)

Baldessin and Cavaliere shared pears as a conceptual symbol as well as a stylistic one. Gary Catalano noted that the famous pears in Baldessin's *Pear-version no.2* (1971-2, The National Gallery of Australia) are surreal and yet also go 'hand in hand with a kind of literalism.'²⁹ He meant that the works are decidedly not metonymic (for example, they are not just substitutions for the female form). To put it a different way, the pears are simply a group of pears, albeit very *large* ones; as Magritte had demonstrated so well, distorting scale is one of the simplest ways to create an uncanny impression. Enlarging the pears to size of people and showing them in flowing, dance-like poses confers on these 'literal' pears a symbolic human-like, or human-equivalent, presence.

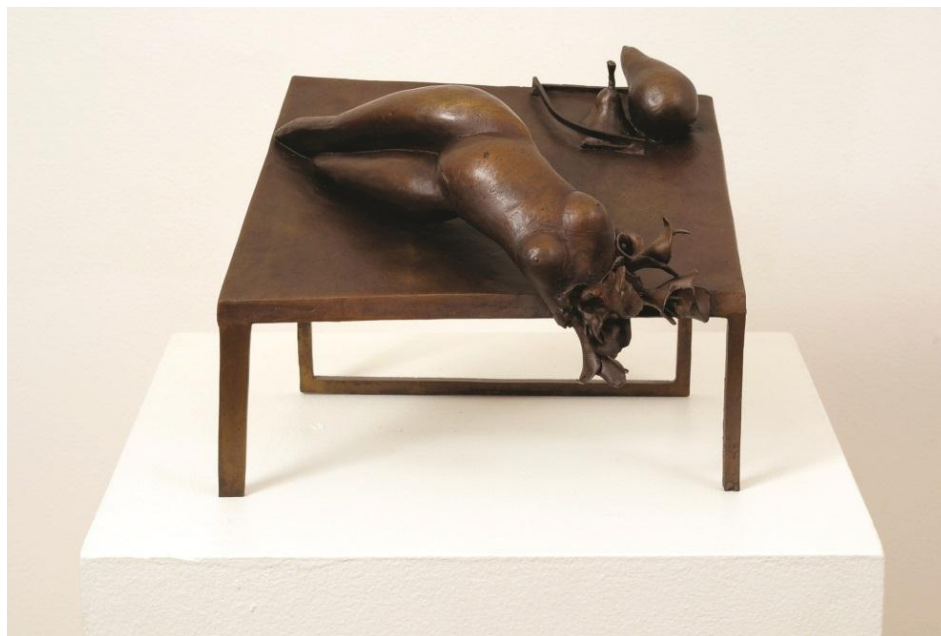


Fig. 8: George Baldessin, (*Banquet*), c1976. Bronze, edition of 9, 26 x 26 x 31.5 cm, Melbourne: Australian Galleries. (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin). Note the modelling of the pear in the back right corner.

²⁹ Catalano, 1984, p. 20.

This impulse toward both the literal and the uncanny is part of a phenomenological program. Phenomenology gives us the task of assessing our environment (and the people and objects of which it consists) as at once tangible (i.e. literally there) yet also estranged (in other words, external to our subject position). This dynamic is the secret electricity of Baldessin's pears. Maurice Merleau-Ponty evokes the experience of being a subject in the world from a phenomenological position in the following terms:

My existence does not come from my antecedents or my physical and social entourage, but rather goes toward them and sustains them. For it is I that make exist for myself that tradition which I chose to adopt or that horizon whose distance from me tends to disappear, since it would have no such property as distance were I not there to view it.³⁰

The problem of whether or not Baldessin's pears are human, or objects, or human-objects, is secondary to the concern that humans experience objects around them ('my physical entourage'), other subjects ('social entourage') and the limits of their environment broadly ('that horizon') from the position of a roving subject. Baldessin's pears are complete when a human stands amongst them and reckons their proportions and presence as comparable, yet different to hers. The pears are just pears, but their curious largeness and elegance makes us re-evaluate their existence in relation to ours. Simultaneously we recognise and we do not recognise them. The experience is both sensual and affecting. It imparts a basic phenomenological message (or, to recall Restany's phrase, it considers 'the strictest phenomenology') with lyricism, curiosity and humour.

This dynamic is replicated almost identically in Cavaliere's art of the period. Baldessin's famous pears bring to life the action in Cavaliere's *G.B. and nature* (1962, location unknown, Fig. 5), in which Gustave B. (and now you, the spectator) has stumbled across a landscape of huge fruit. Suddenly dwarfed by giant fruit, the figure's existence is out of proportion with the world, and possibilities of interaction must be immediately reconsidered.³¹ If Cavaliere's phenomenological environment is extended to Baldessin's pears, and they are seen as analogous to Cavaliere's 'props', they can be appreciated as existential phenomena that are participating in a space of interrelation with the spectator. Although currently there is no evidence to indicate that the two artists had any contact post-1962, Cavaliere's later 'theatrical sculptures', set up like stages for spectators to enter upon and exit from, are the most sensitive reference for Baldessin's pear installation.

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Proof of the novelty of Baldessin's newfound sculptural approach can be found in a comparison with his contemporary, the Australian sculptor Norma Redpath (1929-2013). A little over a year after Baldessin returned from Milan, he was featured in the 1964 travelling exhibition *Recent Australian Sculpture*. In the catalogue essay Gordon Thompson wrote that

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 1956, pp. 59-70.

³¹ Interaction is perhaps the experience that Baldessin was referring to when he claimed that the pears 'were really people in the form of pears' (Baldessin, quoted in Sandra McGrath, 1978, p. 7).

'George Baldessin brings new acerbity to Australian art, and promises well.'³² However, his achievements were measured against what were seen as the more soaring accomplishments of established Melbourne sculptors, in particular Redpath, who was highly praised for her 'strong yet delicately balanced' form, which expressed 'enormous architectonic authority.'³³

The group of sculptors Centre Five, of which Redpath had been a member, made a special effort to pursue a partnership between sculpture and architecture.³⁴ Although this partnership was intended to be more of a professional nature, rather than creative one, Redpath was one of the few members to respond to this relationship literally. From the 1960s her sculptures increasingly became projects of vertical monumentality, intended to balance huge architectural dimensions. The reason for this development was Redpath's increasing familiarity with Italian – specifically Milanese – sculpture during this time.

Redpath was ten years older than Baldessin, and had also studied at RMIT. In 1963 she too was in Milan beginning work at the Fonderia d'Arte Battaglia & Co., a historic foundry with a close association with the Brera Academy.³⁵ She was a zealous convert to the Milanese vision, describing the foundry with reverence: 'I note among my contemporaries one or two who are destined to become future world leaders... The frame and large panels for Giacomo Manzù's great new door of St. Peter's was constructed and cast here,' and, 'now and then a massive Marino Marini goes through'.³⁶ Inspired by the dynamic, monolithic shapes that came out of the Fonderia d'Arte Battaglia, Redpath looked towards Milanese sculptors such as Francesco Somaini and Giò Pomodoro.³⁷ She became a follower of the contemporary Milanese aspiration of towering, remote civic monument.³⁸

The duality of Redpath's work – being both a Melbourne and Milanese-inspired artist – makes her a surprisingly suitable contemporary contrast with Baldessin. However, the inspiration that Baldessin latched on to in Milan was of a completely different nature to the one that Redpath found. Redpath's *Treasury Fountain* (1965-69, Canberra) (Fig. 9), which was cast and assembled at the Battaglia & Co foundry, nurtures a romantic presence, something akin to a life-force – or even a 'personality' – that emanates from the work. James Gleeson described Redpath's *Immortal Warrior* (1963, Adelaide, Reserve Bank of Australia), as having a 'monolithic power and almost aggressive certainty', which, slowly gave way, to reveal a 'disturbing subtlety and psychological depth'.³⁹ This description could easily be a

³² Baldessin was showing the plaster cast *Figure in an enclosure* (1964, National Gallery of Victoria) and *Aged Dancer* (1964, location unknown). Thompson, 1964, unpaginated.

³³ Thompson, 1964, unpaginated.

³⁴ Tenet number three of the five point programme of the Centre Five group was: 'To foster a closer relationship to architects.' Sturgeon, 1978, p. 138; see also Parr, 1961.

³⁵ Redpath commenced work at the Brera Academy late 1962. Thompson, 1963, pp. 2-3.

³⁶ Redpath, 1966, pp. 164-165.

³⁷ Sturgeon, 1985, p.26.

³⁸ In an obituary, Redpath was celebrated as 'the only Australian-born female sculptor of her generation to have developed self-initiated links with Italy. She was the only Australian-born female sculptor of her generation to have gained personal knowledge of the long Italian traditions of civic sculpture; this is unique in Australia's multicultural history.' Wach, 2013.

³⁹ Gleeson, 1966.

description of Francesco Somaini's *Monumento ai marinai d'Italia* (1965-7, Milan) or Marini's *Miracolo* (1969 -70, Berlin).

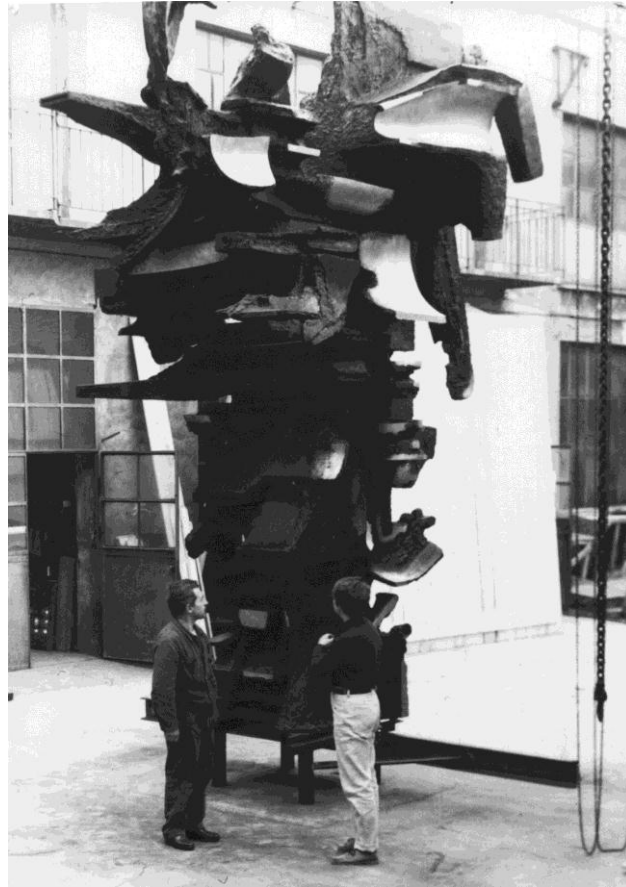


Fig. 9. Norma Redpath's *Treasury Fountain*, 1965-69, in construction at the Fonderia d'Arte Battaglia & Co, Milan. Canberra, National Capital Authority. (Courtesy Estate of Norma Redpath and the State Library of Victoria, photographer unknown).

During the 1960s Cavaliere expressed his frustration at the pervasion of local monumental sculpture, the kind that Redpath was so enamoured with. He stressed in 1967 that his “improper” theatrical sculpture was:

ultimately intended to contribute, as far as it can, to breaking the bridge with commemorative sculpture, particularly the monumental, official kind that has become *object sculpture* and permeated our homes and our table, perpetuating the commemorative type of reduced-size monument for private (and very rarely emblematic) use.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Cavaliere, 1967.

Cavaliere's alternative vision for sculpture: tentative, interactive, beguiling, anti-monumental, is reflected in Baldessin's sparse, ironic 'architectural' fragments, such as *Monument to the third architecture* (1971, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria) and *Disillusionment of the third entrance* (1972, Victoria, George Baldessin Estate), and the earlier prize-winning sculpture for the 1966 Alcorso Sekers Travelling Scholarship, *Personage, window and factory smoke* (1966, private collection, George Baldessin Estate).

Closely related to Cavaliere's environment sculptures, the dynamics of Baldessin's *Personage, window and factory smoke* (Fig. 10) are diffused through the intentionally flimsy composition – viewing it, it seems about to topple over. The flatness of the aluminium panels are at odds with the female legs and piping (the 'smoke') that protrude from the piece in high relief. For this the legs are unusually distracting (perhaps 'because they have shoes on', as Baldessin himself helpfully suggested).⁴¹ Eventually you may realise they lead up to the rest of the body which is depicted in low relief on one of the panels. The figure has two small, bare breasts and a triangle cut-out for a torso. Its head, barely in relief, is scratched out of the surface of the panel. She has lidded, asymmetrical eyes, a long impossible nose, and sweet pink lips. The symbolism here is enigmatic: an odd 'half-woman' in an odd half-room, with a half-closed window and strange, solid smoke. Far from dynamic monumentality, it is a light, lateral work with an absorbing, curious symbolism.

Although there were other Milanese sculptors producing subtle pieces of intrigue, quiet tension and interaction (for example, Fausto Melotti's light and playful works), Baldessin developed this approach from his encounter with Cavaliere. It is hard to know from where Cavaliere adopted his appreciation for playful, light work of lateral form.⁴² However, one fact is clear: Cavaliere was not beholden to his mentor, Marini, or the monumentality of contemporary Milanese sculpture. The alternative emphasis of Cavaliere's methodology estranged Baldessin's art from sources familiar to a Melbourne audience. It distinguished him in as so foreign to Australian commentators that they would struggle to locate any antecedent at all for his seemingly original style and vision. With oceans between them, Cavaliere's approach swiftly became Baldessin's.

⁴¹ George Baldessin, as quoted in *The Sun* (Sydney), 1966, p. 3.

⁴² A 1958 photograph taken of Cavaliere by Ugo Mulas, showing him admiring the David Smith sculpture, *Australia* (1951, New York, Museum of Modern Art) suggests a fascinating potential source.

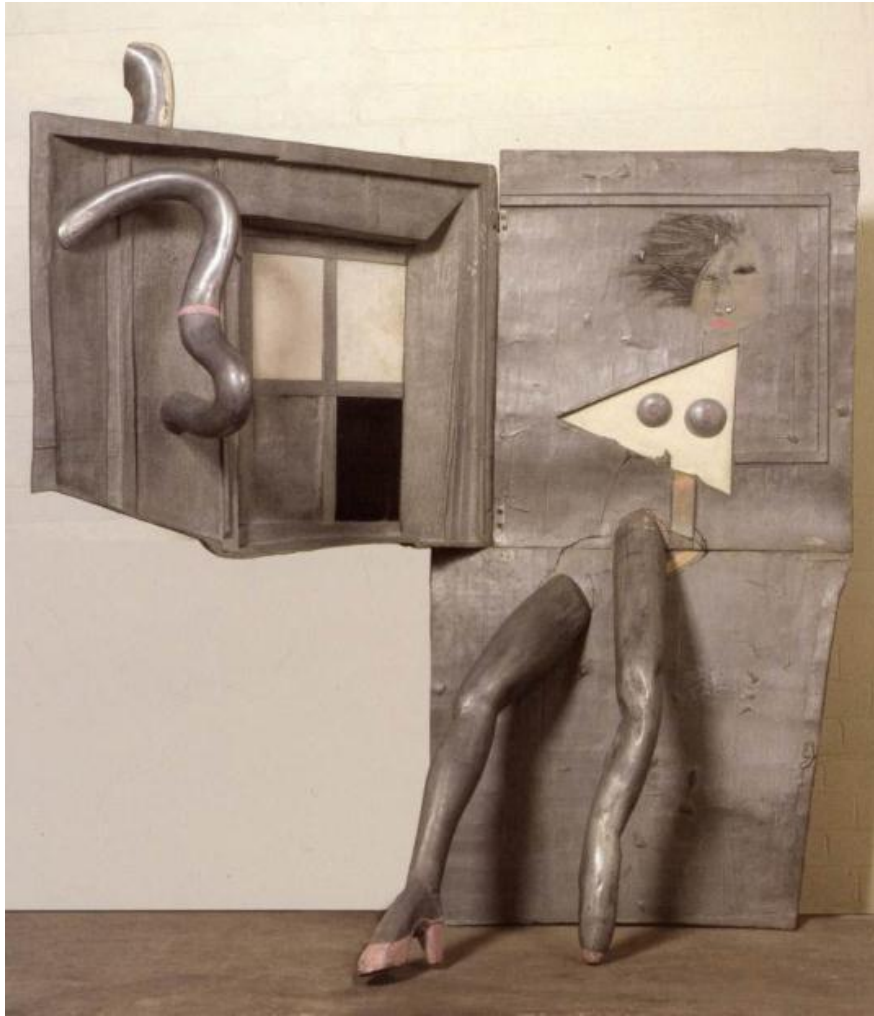


Fig. 10. George Baldessin, *Personage, window and factory smoke*, 1966. Synthetic enamel on cast and fabricated aluminium, private collection (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin.)

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As the saying goes, talent borrows, genius steals. Cavaliere taught a phenomenological approach to sculpture. Just how this debt was developed and transformed by Baldessin we have seen in fairly direct examples like his narrative tableaux and his *Pear-versions*. It is important to remember that if Baldessin's own philosophy was stimulated by the ideas of mainstream thinkers, his personal interpretation remained notably down-to-earth and, to an extent, intuitive. For example, when the artist spoke to Hazel de Berg in 1965, he expressed this tentative sentiment on the importance of environment in sculpture:

figures themselves are only figures and they need to be related, connected. People make contact with things and other people every day, every minute of the day, so there should be some relationship between the figure and its environment; this is what I'm concerned with. This is even more evident in the

small bronzes where I actually put the figures in an environment, and I think I will develop this idea.⁴³

Here Baldessin retains a hesitantly phenomenological focus, while divesting it of any sort of philosophical jargon. To his credit, philosophical illustration was not his interest.⁴⁴ Rather, Baldessin became sympathetic to Cavaliere's approach to sculpture, and it was Cavaliere who was engaged with these authors.⁴⁵ This influence enabled Baldessin to think intuitively about sculpture as a phenomenological concern; it gave him a mediated and purely sculptural interpretation of the phenomenological discourse. In this way Baldessin developed an involved, if not a very cerebral, approach to environment in sculpture.

This concern with environment stayed with Baldessin throughout his career. Consider the oddly phrased 'banquet for no eating' motif where the table-top is expected to act as a platform for frustration and (non-)action.⁴⁶ Fragmentary enclosures, stages or settings are rife in Baldessin's sculpture and prints. The experience of a "figure" or "spectator's" experience is vital to the scene presented. In the *Pearl-versions*, the spectator's engagement holds the key to unlocking the full experience of the work. Earlier, it was the *performer* character – who appeared in 1963 – and was followed closely by the *personage* figure in 1964.⁴⁷ The figures of the *performer* and the *personage* were revised obsessively by Baldessin throughout his career.⁴⁸ The usage of either title can overlap and are often interchangeable, but broadly the 'performer' represents the façade of a woman (for it is almost always a woman) subsumed within a role, while the 'personage' title is used to distance the figure from personhood. In each case, neither figure is granted personality. Instead the personage and the performer are puppet-like creatures who staged the interactions Baldessin required.⁴⁹

⁴³ Baldessin & De Berg, 1965.

⁴⁴ In one interview, after shying away from distasteful abstract expressionism and disingenuous intellectualism, Baldessin is left with a (vaguely unsatisfying) appeal to artistic introspection: 'I think that my contemporaries in Melbourne and I have this in common ... We are not trying to express our innermost feelings in an emotional way ... I would not like to say that we are intellectual either. The paintings are thought out, that's closer to it' Campbell 1969, p. 34.

⁴⁵ There is currently no evidence of Baldessin having studied phenomenology while in Australia. Although it is no test of literacy, in what survives of Baldessin's library today there is no indication that he owned books by the phenomenological authors listed in this article. However, Tess Edwards-Baldessin, the artist's widow, notes that 'over the years [his books] have been dissipated or lost.' Despite this, she observes, 'In Paris he read a lot, and Imants Tillers and [Baldessin] loaned each other books and talked about them a lot.' See Edwards-Baldessin, 2014. This period of productive reading in Paris, after Tillers and Baldessin represented Australia at the 1975 São Paulo Bienal, deserves attention, but dating after *Occasional screens* and *Occasional images* this late period is largely outside of the current study.

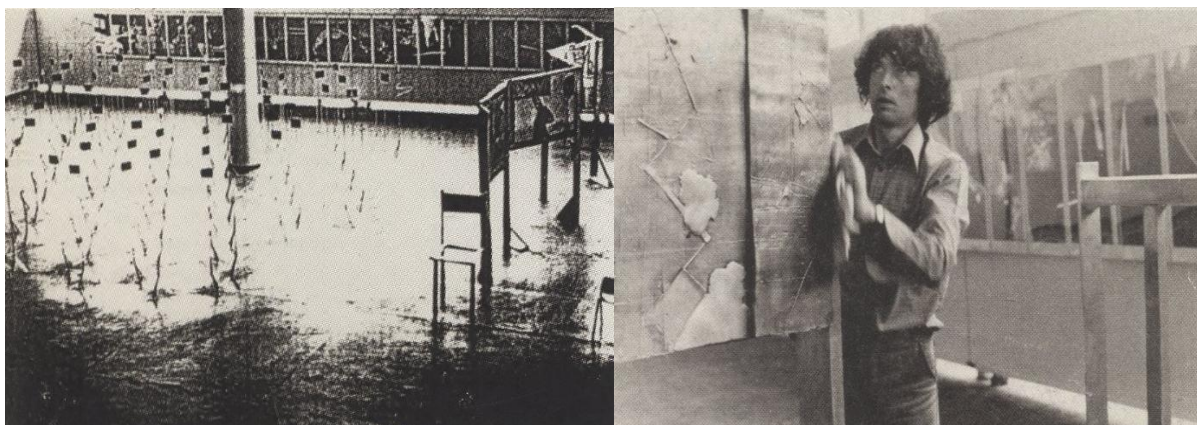
⁴⁶ In Baldessin's wonderfully succinct phrase, '[If] you subtract the people or the food the consequence is a banquet for no eating.' Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, p.81.

⁴⁷ *Performer before own monument*, 1963, etching and aquatint, and *Personage and monument*, 1964, etching, aquatint, both in the National Gallery of Australia collection.

⁴⁸ The term 'personage' may have been affected after Cavaliere, who from 1953 frequently titled sculpture with *personaggio* (instead of the Italian for person, *persona*). The title of *personaggio* was given by Cavaliere to at least two figures in 1963, the year Baldessin was in Milan (Pontiggia, 2011, p. 141 and 151). The term 'performer' may have stylistically originated from Fred Williams's *Music Hall* etchings which Baldessin saw being editioned at RMIT. Another significant source was the gloomy, circus-themed film *Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953) directed by Ingmar Bergman, which Baldessin directly referred to in prints from 1963.

⁴⁹ Baldessin was not given to depicting actual people. A print entitled *Window – Tess* (1969, etching and aquatint, National Gallery of Australia), presumably of the artist's future wife, Tess Edwards, is a rare example

The performer/personage figure in Baldessin's environments developed throughout his career. Eventually, perhaps inevitably, Baldessin began to use his own physical presence as the bodily experience at the heart of his work. For this act of intimacy Baldessin produced an enormous master work, the installation of the sculpture *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* with the print suite *Occasional images from a city chamber*, both created for the 1975 São Paulo Biennial (Figs. 11-14). While Edquist infers that the prints were exhibited as a complement to the sculpture, Lindsay and Holloway report that it was the exact inverse.⁵⁰ Neither emphasis is supported by the co-dependent works. What the dialogue between the São Paulo works ultimately suggests is one large chicken/egg production (which came first, the sculpture or the print?). Internationally and locally, artists whose work moved between the second and third dimension were not unheard of.⁵¹ Indeed, Baldessin's immediate circle included several notable printmaker-sculptors.⁵² He should, however, be noted for his attentiveness to cross-dimensional communication.



Figs. 11 and 12: Installation view of the 1975 São Paulo Biennial, featuring Baldessin's *Occasional images from a city chamber* and *Occasional screens with seating arrangement*. Note the scale and the original placement of the seating arrangement away from the screen (also with Imant Tiller's work, *Conversations with the bride*, 1974-5). Source: Ryan, 1999, p. 4. (Photographer unknown.)

Apart from its size, easily the most commented upon element of the São Paulo work is the meta-technical dynamic of the print suite. *Occasional images* was printed on shiny silver 'JAC' laminate, intended to reference an inked and polished zinc plate.⁵³ The aluminium

of an identified sitter. Along with the print *Arcade (R.K.)* (1973, etching and aquatint, collection: NGA), in which the artist's dealer Rudy Komon is shown with his signature suit and slicked-back hair. These may be the only two actual portraits in Baldessin's entire oeuvre; and one, Komon, does not even have a face.

⁵⁰ See Edquist, 2009, p. 173, and Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, p. 138.

⁵¹ See the important Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) touring exhibition from 1966, titled *Contemporary painters and sculptors as printmakers*, which featured Giacometti and Jean Dubuffet; Johnson, 1966.

⁵² Teisutis Zikaras, Les Kossatz, Jock Clutterbuck, Wendy Stavrianos and Jan Senbergs have all worked in prints and sculpture.

⁵³ 'The idea came from looking at a plate, polished and inked up just before printing – we wanted to recreate the same look in the final print.' Tate Adams cited in Ryan, 1999, p.8. For the definitive description of the technical elements of the São Paulo prints, see Ryan, 1999, pp. 3-5.

laminate welds *Occasional images* to the activity that produced it. Looking at the sculpture too, it is clear that it too aspires to the look of printing plates; constructed as it is of five distinct, flat, panelled reliefs in polished aluminium, featuring black scored lines. Being a sculpture, however, Baldessin's screen obstinately refuses to remain flat. Small roses bloom across the surface of panel two, and an arm pushes out of the plane in panel five (not reaching out, but just quietly coming into the round). Baldessin did not just work on the two mediums concurrently, he worked them *toward* one another. This harmonious cleverness is one of Baldessin's greatest, most satisfying artistic statements. Therefore it is accurate to describe Baldessin as a printmaker, a sculptor, and maybe even as a painter (if one is being thorough). Nevertheless, the more involved compound title of printmaker-sculptor is necessary to explain the artist who made *Occasional images from a city chamber* and *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* (Figs. 11-14). Moreover it is more helpful to understand the São Paulo piece as being *about* a printmaker-sculptor as well as being *by* one. The influence of Cavaliere on Baldessin has hitherto been discussed as a sculptural transference, while it is fair to say that Baldessin is better known today as a printmaker. For Baldessin the distinction was far smaller than one might imagine. The metal etching plate was considered the best place to 'work out' sculptures, given that etching into metal is more comparable to sculpture than drawing on paper.⁵⁴ *Occasional screens* and *Occasional images* (Figs. 11-14) share both a lateral form and a thematic scene. For this the prints and the sculpture must be thought of in terms of an installation in order to fully realise Baldessin's intent. It is here, in terms of its 'installation' character that the influence of Cavaliere returns once more.

In fact the sculptural aspect of the work has enjoyed far less consideration than the prints. Large in size and held in a private collection, *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* (Figs. 11-13) has not as yet attracted any substantial scholarship. Accordingly the sculptures importance for the São Paulo installation has remained under-studied and ill-defined. Edquist suggests that the idea for the screen-form came from Vincas Jomantas' polished aluminium *Screen* (1968, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia), which was produced in response to an architectural directive to manage indoor area with art.⁵⁵ While this may be an inspired suggestion, the form of *Occasional screens* (Figs. 11-13) has precedents in Baldessin's own art from before the Jomantas commission, for example *Personage, window and factory smoke*, (Fig. 10), from approximately a decade earlier than *Occasional screens*. Assembled primarily of panels, both sculptures feature incised surfaces, low relief, and also high, protruding relief. Typical of Baldessin, the imagery is familiar across both works; the personage, the window and the factory smoke appear again like old friends in *Occasional screens*.

⁵⁴ McGrath, 1978, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Vincas Jomantas, *Screen*, 1968, polished aluminium, National Gallery of Australia. Edquist, 2009, p.172.



Fig. 13. George Baldessin, *Occasional screens with seating arrangement*, 1975. Cast and fabricated aluminium and black oxide pigment, 76 x 244 x 68.6 cm, private collection. Installation view (Side A), *George Baldessin*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 21 November 2009 – 14 March 2010'. (Estate of George Baldessin, courtesy of TarraWarra Museum of Art).

On the other hand, *Occasional screens* is a substantially more complex piece, and a comparison of the two works shows Baldessin's growth as an artist over that decade. The figure in *Personage, window and factory smoke* (Fig. 10) was imagined by Baldessin 'as an office girl; a person who people look at and see every day. But the only thing they're really interested in is perhaps her, um, breasts or her legs. No-one's interested in her personality.' Therefore the remainder of the sculpture refers to her phenomenological experience: 'Her reality is virtually what she's surrounded with, her environment such as the window and the factory smoke.'⁵⁶ Her existence is so bonded to her environment that Baldessin has depicted her as literally part of the scenery. Despite its playful appearance, it contains a bleak statement about mundane human existence, exemplified in an undesirable profession (in the same interview, Baldessin recalls his negative experience of being a waiter – this physical, demeaning profession was famously highlighted as Sartre's definitive example of bad faith).⁵⁷ Formally the sculpture is enigmatic and intriguing. Conceptually, Baldessin's interest in a phenomenological environment is well-articulated. Yet at the heart of the piece is a caricatured perspective (the 'office girl'), and therefore the work orbits around a fairly hollow emotional crux.

⁵⁶ Baldessin cited in the documentary *Sculpture Australia* 69, Burstall, 1969.

⁵⁷ 'I know how it feels to have my personality pushed into the background so that all I consist of, virtually, is a hand that serves and a few odd related objects.' Burstall, 1969.

In contrast, *Occasional screens* features no figure bold enough to be designated as the protagonist of the sculpture. The work has no 'office-girl'. The screen itself is mammoth – almost two and a half metres in height. In the presence of this large sculpture, it is conceivable that the spectator (like the spectator in the *Pearl-versions*) is being called upon to act as the presence at the heart of the work. The *Alice in Wonderland* allusions invoked to describe Baldessin's earlier sculpture aptly describe the strange dwarfing sensation *Occasional screens* (Figs. 11-13) can produce as it looms over spectators.⁵⁸ The entire work seems unsteady. Delicately painted Japanese domestic paper screens, are full-length and grounded; yet Baldessin's screen is balanced on long, awkward, braced posts. The posts are up-ended pennant flags ('emblem flags' in Baldessin's vocabulary), but formally they give the impression that the structure cannot stand up without the extra reinforcements of these clumsy triangle buttresses. The spectator's existence is suddenly out of proportion with the world, as her immediate environment has become dangerously divorced from her dimensions.

The spectator's interaction with the work is also suggested by the 'seating arrangement' referred to in the title of *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* (Figs. 11-13), which consists of two chairs flanking the sculpture. These empty chairs look like invitations to sit within the work. Yet, upon inspection these chairs are much too large to sit on and, in any case, both chairs lack actual seats. They are the suggestion of chairs, rather than chairs.

In the most recent photographs of the sculpture at the exhibition 'George Baldessin' at TarraWarra Museum of Art 2009-10 (Fig.13), the two 'chairs' that make up the seating arrangement have been positioned at either end of the sculpture, facing the screen. However, in documentation of the São Paulo Biennial installation, in which Baldessin himself had placed the work, the two chairs were positioned pointing away, with their backs to the screen; more the position for sentinels than spectators (Figs. 11-13). It has been suggested that the chairs were either a personification of the artist, or invitations to spectator to immerse themselves.⁵⁹ Yet in light of the original arrangement other possibilities arise. For instance, perhaps the chairs are for the artist and a spectator to share. One compelling suggestion is that the chairs are for the printmaker and the sculptor; the two halves of Baldessin's artistic persona. Whatever conclusion is made about the chairs, the intended sitters are clues to the bodily experience intended by the installation.

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While some analysis has been done on the imagery of the São Paulo installation, it has mainly been directed toward the extensive technical complexity of the print suite, *Occasional images from a city chamber* (Figs. 11-12, and 14). Commentators have been silent, however, when it comes to interpretations of Baldessin's oblique imagery. Sue Davies suggested that the meaning of the work resides solely in its material existence and, in one phrase, seems to decide that the 'occasional' iconography within *Occasional images* is 'unburdened with

⁵⁸ Edquist, 2009, p. 154, Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, p. 126, and McGrath, 1978, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Whereas Lindsay and Holloway suggested that the chairs were a stand-in for the artist (Lindsay & Holloway 1983, p.126), Charles Merewether claimed that the chairs were, 'added for the comfort of the spectator as he moves around the display' (Merewether, 1975). Although both readings are plausible, neither is substantiated further.

revelatory metaphor'.⁶⁰ Baldessin eventually preferred the term 'emblems' for individual images, and identification of these individual 'emblems' has generally stood in lieu of analysis. For example, Charles Merewether identifies the setting of *Occasional images* as Baldessin's studio in the Winfield building on Collins Street, and that the faces in panel one are 'references to two small paintings by the artist'. He goes on to point out that the 'figure with the top hat' in panel three could be the artist, and that the 'geranium flower and mourning dove' exist here unnaturally, for they are indoors.⁶¹ There is nothing especially wrong with these assertions (except that the 'mourning dove' was actually a resident pigeon who had taken up roost in the Winfield Building studio⁶²); however, they are only the beginnings of an investigation.

Towards the end of his life Baldessin was rapidly accumulating a stable of personal emblems. This is not to say that he created a repertory of *confessional* or *intimate* symbols. Rather his collection of emblems is 'personal' because the recurring signs share nothing aside from their frequent appearance in Baldessin's art. Performers and banquets, chimneys and smoke, windows, city monuments, hair, stripes, extendable hinge arms and pears: the singular communal characteristic of these various phenomena is their connection to Baldessin, the artist. When in the 1970s Baldessin added triangular emblem-flags to the smorgasbord of idiosyncratic imagery he was overtly suggesting that his interest was not in the meaning of symbols, but rather symbols of meaning themselves.

Before examining what the accumulation of these occasional emblems might mean, it is sensible to examine the domain in which they exist – namely the *city chamber*. The setting for *Occasional images* (and *Occasional screens*, which is sometimes forgotten as a source of imagery) is, as Merewether has said, Baldessin's studio. Anne Ryan extends this to the studio and the city around it, Melbourne.⁶³ The *Occasional images* (Figs. 11, 12 and 14) present a view, an elongated panorama, an illusionistic lateral space. The design moves the eye across the work. In the manner of Japanese screen painting, none of the twenty-five etchings are self-contained. Baldessin begins a plume of smoke in panel two, and ends it in panel three. The centrepiece of an arched performer stretches across three panels: her head and torso begin in panel eleven, yet she ends with a pointed toe in panel fourteen. While edging away from reality, Baldessin retains a link to actual space by turning the long skirting board into a formal device that elegantly anchors the work. The skirting board acts as a constant spatial reminder that, despite appearances to suggest otherwise, you are looking at a room. It is a winding, unstable room, but a room nonetheless. It is a room pulled and twisted, full of smoke plumes and conceptual mirrors. It sometimes appears to be placing a venetian blind over the outside world (panel eleven), then it suddenly breaks open, to show a dark and distant horizon (panel twenty-five).

⁶⁰ Davies, 1975, p. 8.

⁶¹ Merewether, 1975.

⁶² Davies, 1975, p. 8.

⁶³ Ryan, 1999, p. 5. Edquist also takes on this analysis in her study, 2009, p. 181.

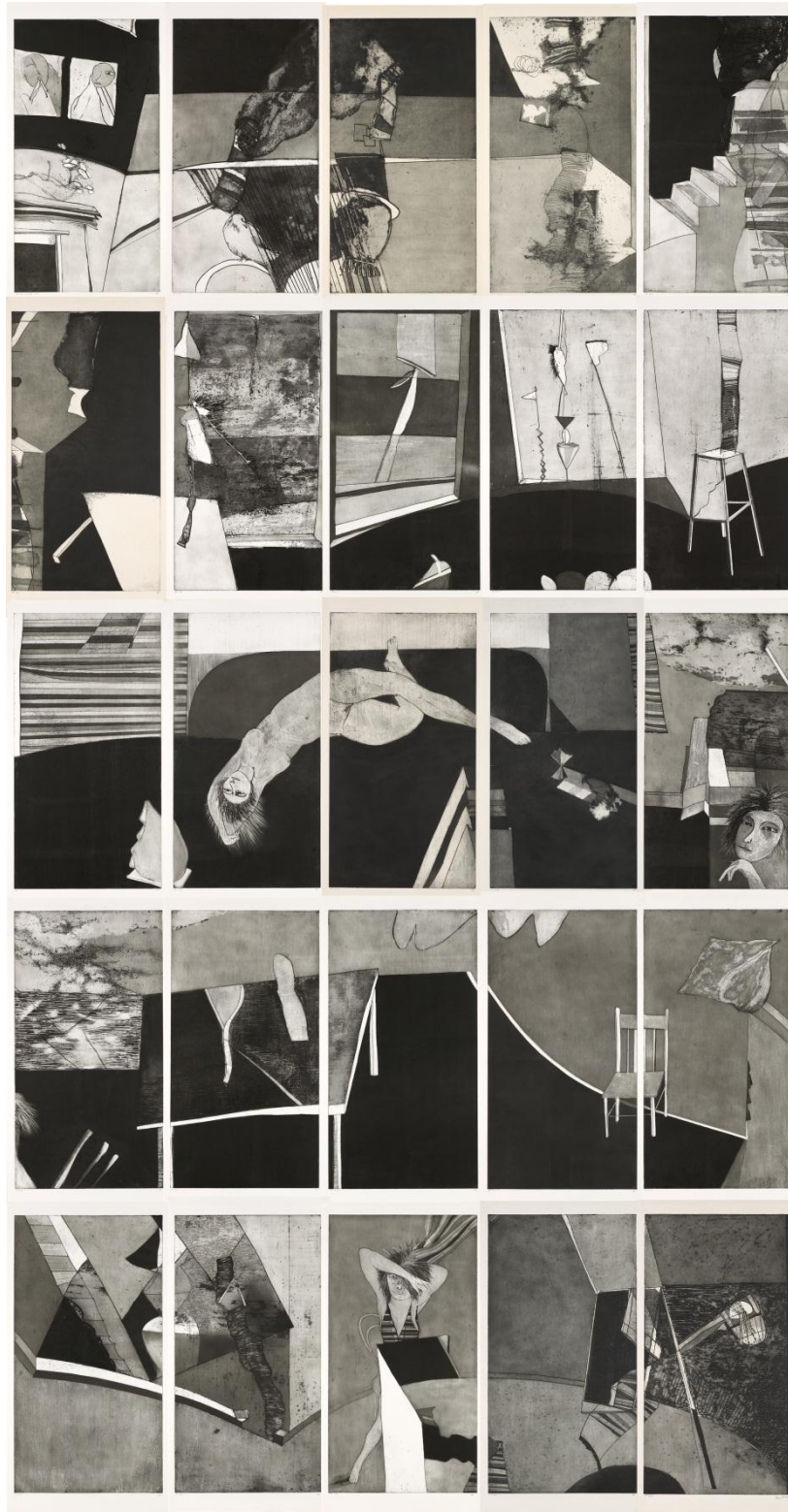


Fig. 14. George Baldessin, *Occasional images from a city chamber*, 1975. Etching, soft ground and aquatint, printed with 25 zinc plates on 25 sheets of paper, artist's proof. (a-y) 102.0 x 1400.0 cm (overall), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Miss Flora MacDonald Anderson and Mrs Ethel Elizabeth Ogilvy Lumsden, Founder Benefactors, 1992. (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin).

When the existential writer and statesman, André Malraux, wrote that 'Art... creates a world scaled to man's measure' he very much meant 'man' in the singular.⁶⁴ Art creates a world scaled to *one* man's measure, more specifically, the artist's measure. The imagery of the print series indicates that we are being presented with a world scaled exactly to *Baldessin's* dimensions. It is not only the setting (his studio in the Winfield Building in Melbourne) and the imagery which is personal to Baldessin, but the formal perspective of the work itself is personal. The non-linear perspective show that Baldessin's world is not meant to represent reality, as he once said, 'One has to get away from reality'.⁶⁵ So the question remains: if not a 'real' perspective, whose non-objective perspective is being presented? Malraux again offers a suggestion for this when he continues '[Art] wrests forms from the real world to which man is subject, and makes them enter a world in which he is ruler.'⁶⁶

Maurice Merleau-Ponty looked out at the world and saw himself defined in the view:

The world that I distinguished from myself as a sum of things or of causally connected processes is re-discovered 'in me' as the permanent horizon of all my thinking and as a dimension in relation to which I never cease to situate myself.⁶⁷

The consecutive panorama of *Occasional images* (Figs. 11, 12 and 14) implies a viewpoint. The origin of this viewpoint is the artist, for it is a vision populated by a plethora of *his* iconography, and given an impossible, unrealistic view born from an *actual* position in his own studio. Attempting to understand the entire installation by the account of the imagery quickly distracts from the unified presentation. The symbols depicted: the performer, the pear, the banquet are individually legible, yet their significance here is that they are amassed in an assemblage. For that, the São Paulo installation is a highly personal, albeit inverted impression of Baldessin's artistic existence, his physical entourage and his imaginative horizon. It seems to say: if on further inspection the world can be rediscovered 'in me', then perhaps I too can be rediscovered in a vision of my world.

The environment created here, by the perspective of the prints and the space delineated by the sculpture, provides an area representing the length and breadth of Baldessin's existential position. In other words, in between the illusionistic, two-dimensional room of the suite and the actual, physical, three-dimensional 'wall' of the sculpture, a significant personal space is created. Between the panorama of the prints and the partition of the sculpture, the São Paulo

⁶⁴ Malraux cited in Allan, 2009, p. 81.

⁶⁵ McGrath, 1978, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Malraux cited in Allan, 2009, p. 81. The influential French writer, popular in Baldessin's time, is a particularly valuable reference here. Malraux's theories included the conceit that the world of phenomena was absurd, and was much like a dictionary. In other words, the world is a collection of elements which can individually have meaning – like individual words in the dictionary – yet when combined show the mass to be incoherent and arbitrarily arranged. Malraux positions artists as god-like, for they amass emblematic elements and arrange them in a pattern which has meaning. In other words, art is not a representation of the world (which, being absurd, has no meaning), but the artist's internally coherent *rival world* (Malraux's 'Les Voix du Silence,' translated in Allan, 2009, p.81-2). Malraux's concept helps to illuminate Baldessin's 'emblems' in a fresh and particularly contemporaneous mindset.

⁶⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 1956, pp. 59-70.

installation uses your bodily relation in physical space to put you in the artist's own position, a surrogate in his phenomenological environment. He has cast a mould of his existence into which a spectator can step. That position is an uncertain one: it is in between sculpture and prints; in between dimensions; and, in between being a room and not being a room. Yet the work is about a real city and a real place that had a real pigeon roosting in it. In that same way, the artist is absent at every turn, yet his real existence is the only thing that the piece is constantly referring to. Like the invitation implicit in the empty chairs, the empty space between the works is expressive space.

Baldessin insisted that the uniqueness of his subject position was of the utmost value. Consider his disdain for the suppression of 'personality' experienced by the objectified 'office girl' or his dissatisfaction while performing in the position of a waiter. Moreover, Baldessin accepted that this unique subject position was able to be articulated, as demonstrated in his assertion that 'A successful piece tells you everything you want to know about the artist, about his ideas, his processes and materials.'⁶⁸ This statement is especially telling because it demarcates exactly what Baldessin was willing to offer about himself to the spectator. When saying that the São Paulo piece is personal, that word 'personal' must be understood unambiguously. It is not meant to imply that the works are *confessional*, for the piece reveals no confessional information. Rather the piece is about the Baldessin that George Baldessin wished to share.

It is also important to observe that the person whom the spectator is invited to experience is a construction, tailor-made by Baldessin for the occasion. He is represented purely by a phenomenological position. The 'permanent horizon' to which Baldessin situates himself is of an artist, who lives in Melbourne, who is a printmaker-sculptor, and is the keeper of these images, which he understands as his own emblems. What at first appears to be an intimate proposal turns curiously alienated. The identity we are invited to experience is a neatly formed persona; an artist rather than a person. Baldessin, in his masterwork, embodied the specific, desirable, and *professional* position of an artist – in his studio, reflected in his art. He elected to fill a role, to be a performer.

The setting of *Occasional images from a city chamber* (Figs. 11, 12 and 14) and the space delineated by *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* (Figs. 11-13) combine to stress an exceptional preoccupation with the core phenomenological concerns of the self and *being-in-the-world*. After Baldessin's death, the depth of his immigrant complex was revealed.⁶⁹ The denial of his place of origin became an almost mythologised aspect of his biography. The emotional interpretations that were offered included, but were not limited to: trauma, sadness, and nostalgia for his youth.⁷⁰ The work shows little of these sentiments. Baldessin was nothing if not a very controlled, restrained artist. However, what can be explained as his

⁶⁸ Baldessin in interview with Duffy, 1978 (the year of the artist's death), quoted in Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, p. 7.

⁶⁹ The extent to which Baldessin concealed his origins is disputed. But, certain deceits, such as claiming Melbourne as the place of his birth, are a matter of record. Anecdotal reports persist, for example only the Italian-born printmaker Bruno Leti claims to have ever heard him speak his native Italian, in which he was obviously fluent. Turner, 2007, p.31.

⁷⁰ Palmer, 1991, pp. 3-4; Cross, 1997, pp. 9-10; and Catalano, 1984, pp. 20-21 respectively.

affinity for phenomenological investigation, can be strongly and probably rightly assigned to a deep concern for place.

The São Paulo installation could be read as a very bold assertion of Baldessin's place as proverbial mayor of his *city chamber*. Yet the world presented is approximated and distorted, and the figure of Baldessin himself remains absent. The space between the works is empty. For all Baldessin's gesturing at the self, it remains *just* gesturing. His exact location is still uncertain, still undefined. When Merewether confidently deduced that the figure in the top-hat in panel three of *Occasional images* could be Baldessin, he fails to mention that the figure has no face.⁷¹

It is often said that George Baldessin never made a self-portrait. In regards to conventional portraiture that may be true. Baldessin published no likeness of himself – in print or in sculpture – that would be recognised as his face, or his body. There is a pervasive interpretation that Baldessin's iconographic concept of the "assemblage", as is visible in the São Paulo installation, was simply a summary of all of his metaphorical thought into one form.⁷² We should not label his beguiling room of smoke and mirrors a "summary", as this denies Baldessin the complexity of his formal construction. Indeed it is better understood as a sophisticated self-portrait. Its sophistication is drawn in part from its personal nature, in part from its articulated phenomenological presence. Yet we must also acknowledge Baldessin's difficulty at gesturing at the self, for this is no conventional self-portrait. This is a portrait haunted by uncertainty and the precariousness of being. Both a portrait and an illusion; the tension that rages in the São Paulo installation is like an old magician's trick: now you see me, now you don't.



This interpretation of Baldessin the artist applies contextual evidence with close visual analysis of the work, which ultimately supports the idea that Baldessin, as someone who was intimately affected by his own immigration, was primarily concerned with environments, place and his physical position in the world. It is important then that, unlike past interpretations of Baldessin's art, this visual analysis is used here to affirm biographical details of Baldessin's life, instead of *vice versa*. For too long the consequences of Baldessin's life have overshadowed the consequences of his art.

Having said that, both *Occasional images from a city chamber* and *Occasional screens with seating arrangement* (Figs. 11-13) are intimately engaged with Baldessin as an individual. His preoccupation with (non-)personhood is perhaps the reason why biographical explication of the artist has sufficed as commentary for so long after his death. However, simply asserting the factual details of Baldessin's existence is a denial of the ambiguity of his artistic one. It is an unsubtle, brutal task; smashing the hall of mirrors to find the source of the reflection. Baldessin in his *magnum opus* must be uncompromisingly recognised as an absent artist, who has created densely layered images and environments around his person and then

⁷¹ Merewether, 1975.

⁷² Lindsay & Holloway, 1983, p. 138; Ryan, 1999, p. 3; and Edquist, 2009, p. 180.

has vanished, leaving smoke and mirrors as his only relics. Merleau-Ponty was convinced that if he were 'not there to view it', his perspective of the horizon would disappear. Baldessin, however, has managed to arrest the horizon of his subjective view. It is an achievement with special poignancy after death prematurely made his absence a permanent reality.



In his youth Baldessin was professionally precocious. Although his work in the 1960s was stylistically confident, his art remained the product of a synthesis of the work of many artists – the most influential in both practice and philosophy being Alik Cavaliere. He sought out other artists as instructors and brazenly adopted the visual lessons that he learnt. The exposition of Cavaliere as his formative source is not the end of the work that needs to be done on Baldessin's influences. While Cavaliere was a foundational force, Baldessin's magpie-like accumulation of stimulus saw him collect artists such as Fred Williams (in his *Music Hall* series) and Japanese woodblock artist Shikō Munakata as equally vital role-models in printmaking. Other influences waiting to be identified and dissected are: the exact nature of Tate Adams' mentorship, the artistic concerns shared with Les Kossatz, his debt to Francis Bacon, his interest in Brera Academy painter Valerio Adami, and a case for the ephemeral presence of Italian sculptor Emilio Greco. It has been acknowledged that Baldessin's artistic career tragically extended only from 'early' to 'mid'. The first decade of Baldessin's work, perhaps even more, should therefore be more fully appreciated as a formative period without fear of diminishing the artist's achievements.

Baldessin did produce satisfying, personal, mature work in his short career, but this does not mean that he grew beyond Cavaliere's sculptural approach. Locating the figure within an environment, heightening the dynamic between the art and the spectator, and arresting the subject-object perspective, all remained important concerns in the later years of Baldessin's life. Baldessin poured his energy into transforming Cavaliere's influence into an intimate vision. The acknowledgement of this journey – the process of artistic maturation – reinvigorates the memory of this most intriguing artist of the 1960s and 1970s. Pinpointing influences and placing an artist's work within his philosophical context amounts to a very basic art-historical project, and it is unfortunate that hitherto such a survey has been lacking. As Margaret Plant astutely noted in 1982, '[t]he degree to which Baldessin offers not just a range of identifiable and fluent images but also a range of meanings near to the mainstream of twentieth-century conjecture is not yet fully understood.'⁷³ It is only through Cavaliere's lens that Baldessin can be identified for the first time as a phenomenological artist.

⁷³ Plant, 1982, p. 23.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. *Marino Marini's students at the Brera Academy*, including Baldessin (second from left) with instructor, Alik Cavaliere (wearing a tie, at rear; the caption on the photograph is incorrect). Source: Cerritelli, 1995, p. 203. (Courtesy Marco Meneguzzo, photographer unknown.)

Fig. 2. Alik Cavaliere, *G.B. and his brothers*, 1962. Bronze, 13 x 75 x 67 cm, Milan, Cavaliere Archive. (Photographer unknown.)

Fig. 3. Alik Cavaliere, *G.B.'s first view of the city*, 1960. Cement, wood, wax, glass, 22 x 77 x 61cm, Milan, Cavaliere Archive. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci.)

Fig. 4. George Baldessin, *P.H.B's second view of the city*, 1965. Bronze and resin, private collection. (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin.)

Fig. 5. Alik Cavaliere, *G.B. and nature*, 1962. Bronze, 16 x 55 x 44 cm, location unknown. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci.)

Fig. 6. Alik Cavaliere, *A and Z are waiting for love*, 1971. Acrylic resin, bronze, aluminium, perspex, reinforced polyester, brass, iron, dimensions variable, Milan, Cavaliere Archive. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci.)

Fig. 7. Alik Cavaliere, *Fruits*, 1963. Bronze, 7 x 41 x 71 cm, collection unknown. (Courtesy Attilio Bacci.)

Fig. 8: George Baldessin, (*Banquet*), c1976. Bronze, edition of 9, 26 x 26 x 31.5 cm, Melbourne: Australian Galleries. (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin.) Note the modelling of the pear in the back right corner.

Fig. 9. Norma Redpath's *Treasury Fountain*, 1965-69, in construction at the Fonderia d'Arte Battaglia & Co, Milan. Canberra, National Capital Authority. (Courtesy Estate of Norma Redpath and the State Library of Victoria, photographer unknown.)

Fig. 10. George Baldessin, *Personage, window and factory smoke*, 1966. Synthetic enamel on cast and fabricated aluminium, private collection (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin.)

Figs. 11 & 12: Installation view of the 1975 São Paulo Biennial, featuring Baldessin's *Occasional images from a city chamber* and *Occasional screens with seating arrangement*. Note the scale and the original placement of the seating arrangement away from the screen (also with Imant Tiller's work, *Conversations with the bride*, 1974-5). Source: Ryan, 1999, p. 4. (Photographer unknown.)

Fig. 13. George Baldessin, *Occasional screens with seating arrangement*, 1975. Cast and fabricated aluminium and black oxide pigment, 76 x 244 x 68.6 cm, private collection. Installation view (Side A), *George Baldessin*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 21 November 2009 – 14 March 2010'. (Estate of George Baldessin, courtesy of TarraWarra Museum of Art.)

Fig. 14. George Baldessin, *Occasional images from a city chamber*, 1975. Etching, soft ground and aquatint, printed with 25 zinc plates on 25 sheets of paper, artist's proof. (a-y) 102.0 x 1400.0 cm (overall), Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Miss Flora MacDonald Anderson and Mrs Ethel Elizabeth Ogilvy Lumsden, Founder Benefactors, 1992. (Courtesy Estate of George Baldessin.)