

ART WORLD

50 PAGES OF NEW WORK

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John Stezaker

"The work only really gets going when I lose a sense of direction and get lost in digression. Distraction is essential"



- 1 **Tree VIII (2nd Series)** (2000-01), collage, 95 x 71cm
- 2 **Portrait II** (2007), collage, 18 x 14.5cm
- 3 **Nest I** (2007), collage, 26 x 21cm

JOHN STEZAKER has been an important artist across four decades. He is best known for his collages, in which he takes two or more photographs or images from books and magazines, and cuts, inverts or overlays them. The resulting images are lyrical, dreamlike and often unsettling. Numerous strands of his work are on view at international venues now and in the near future (see below), a sign of his increasing visibility and enduring relevance. **INTERVIEW: Ben Luke**

What's the origin of your surname?
Viking. The name Stezaker is listed in the Domesday book as residents of a place of the same name in Lancashire, which is now a ghost town (aker meaning acre or area of land). The Stez were a viking tribe shipwrecked in England. Stezaker is believed to be a 19th-century misspelling.

You showed widely but steadily for many years, before, in the last few years, seeming to be more in demand than ever. How do you account for this?
A late developer? Letting go of the pressure of teaching [Stezaker taught Critical Studies at London's Royal College of Art for many years] in the past couple of years has allowed me to bring to some sort of fruition the seeds of ideas scattered across decades of working in between the demands of teaching.

Has teaching affected your work?
Undoubtedly. Teaching has represented an important space of intellectual reflection over the years. Being forced to present one's ideas week after week in the form of lectures and seminars has helped make me consciously aware of the direction my adopted images have taken me at any given time.

When did you begin to use collage?
I have been making collages since I was a teenager. I collected found images long before I considered it to be a part of artistic practice.

How do you find your material?
I like to think that images find me. But of course there are routines of searching: frequenting secondhand bookshops, charity shops, postcard fairs, film memorabilia websites, etc. But finding, as Picasso pointed out, is not just the outcome of searching.

And you recently bought the stills archive of a defunct specialist shop.
It was a question of no longer having a source of this kind of imagery when the shop closed down. It was about to disperse this

collection of film stills on eBay. I decided to rescue them. But I am torn between the desire to use them and the need to conserve them. They are presently in a limbo.

In a series like *Marriage*, do you start with a pool of images and gradually find the right pairing, or is it less improvised?
No, even more improvised. Different phases of the film portrait collages, like the *Marriage* series, involved different games played along the seam between the different faces. Sometimes for example, the cut is through the eye or between three-quarters and profile vantage points or, as recently, a combination of the two. Lately I've been using the teeth as a point of alignment, creating an animalistic broadening of the face and the creation of a kind of snout out of doubled noses. Earlier it involved a thinning out of the face so the dominant figure was of the man in the moon or Punch. The rules of the game change and so do the improvisatory responses to them. In this way, the images seem to evolve independently of conscious decision.

What are the owl works about?
My first use of nesting birds in film stills dates from the early-80s and at the time was a reference to the artist Joseph Cornell. I used the titles *Nest* and *Habitat* to refer to him. The owl in particular, as a well-known symbol of the night, represents nocturnal reverie for me as well as for Cornell. The owl is also a symbol of the devil so its spaces of habitation are demonic. It is said that the owl was cast down by the eagle to its low-altitude nocturnal sweeps, much as Lucifer was cast down. There is a tiny owl which has always fascinated me in Bosch's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. With the saint, it inhabits a ruined temple dedicated to the devil. In a sense, my work is about a liberation of the image to a nocturnal afterlife of fascination.

Do you work on several series at a time?
There is usually one at the centre of my attention at any given time, but if a new

image-find creates an addition to another series then I follow that digression. The work only really gets going when I lose a sense of direction and get lost in digression. Distraction is essential.

What triggered the *Mask* series?
What's interesting about collage is that what triggers an idea in the work is immediately there in the found image or collage... I was looking for postcards that represented different metaphors for anteriority within the face, much as I had used railway postcards to cut into the interior space of the film still.

Is Surrealism important to you?
I don't actually like much Surrealist visual art, besides the work of Giorgio de Chirico. I taught courses on [French writer and philosopher] Georges Bataille in the mid-70s and so tended to take on his distrust of the Surrealist group. I do however share the Surrealist fascination with cinema. This I see as the fullest formation of a kind of image consumption designed to appeal directly to the unconscious. And Cornell, the most important 20th-century artist for my own practice, is often called Surrealist, but I would only describe him as that in the sense that Bataille used, when he said the difference between himself and the Surrealists was that he was a Surrealist.

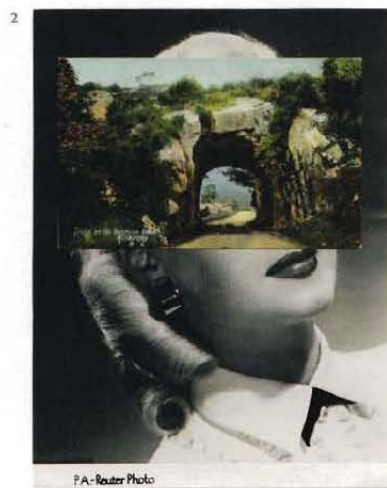
Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?
Beyond the *Blue Peninsula* or any other work by Joseph Cornell. On second thoughts, Vermeer's *The Painter*. Actually, I don't think I could live with any such great works of art. I imagine their presence would be disconcerting; it would be a perpetual confrontation with my own inadequacy. [©]

Exhibitions: Karsten Schubert, London, ends 21 Dec; *The Approach* (inauguration of new space at 74 Mortimer Street, London W1), ends 19 Jan; *Open Eye Gallery*, Liverpool, ends 19 Jan; *New Museum*, New York, opens 16 Jan; *Rubell Family Collection*, Miami, ends 28 Nov 2008

CV **Born:** 1949, Worcester, UK **Studied:** Slade School of Art, London, UK
Lives and works: London **Represented:** *The Approach*, London

Masks

In this series, Stezaker applies a postcard over a film still, often obliterating much of the underlying image. In a recent development, he has been using images of caves which have slowly developed into arches of rock: "I felt the recent shift from closed cave to rock arch was an evacuation. Seeing the light at the end of the cave doesn't seem reassuring. It's the death of that image of the cave."



1 Mask LXIII (2007), collage, 24 x 20.5cm

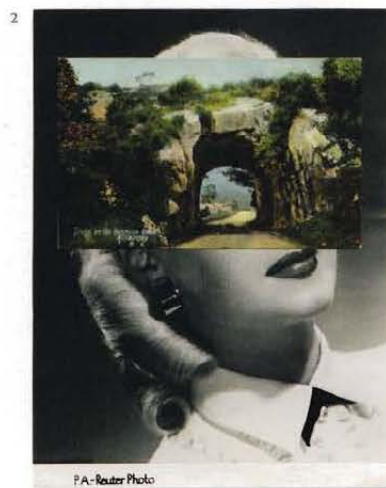
2 Mask LXXII (2007), collage, 24 x 20cm

3 Mask XLIX (2007), collage, 21 x 18cm

4 Mask I (2007), collage, 21.5 x 18cm

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