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John Stezaker

The Approach *East End*

A compact retrospective dating from the 1970s onwards, John Stezaker's first solo show in London in eight years is less notable for tracing a line of development than for revealing an artist fruitfully prowling round the same set of concerns. Stezaker combines, edits or modifies found photographs and illustrations until they hit an uncanny pitch. The 'Third Person Archive', for example, extracts tiny figures from a series of vintage topographical photographs. Filling miniature compositions, these unknowing strollers teeter on the verge of becoming a commentary on loneliness and companionship. In several images, he digitally interweaves multiple views of landscape; one example seamlessly splices together a beach scene, a civic park and vertiginously inverted terraced houses. As with Victorian fairground amusements, peering into these condensed, topsy-turvy spaces makes the brain throb as much as the eyeballs.

A series of 'portraits' features faces

from a half-century ago; icily blonde women and slick-haired smokers are partially obscured by human silhouettes that have been cut from pictures of bats and flamingos. There's an echo of Ukiyo-e painting in these smoothly superimposed worlds, but Stezaker's take on narrative is slippery – calculatedly so. His work may exude a dreamlike emotional charge, but it is also the outcome of a finicky individual tinkering with dusty documents, and the resultant tendency to blow hot and cold simultaneously is central to the work's deep appeal. *Martin Herbert*

