

## John Stezaker

FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY

MAY 2009 235

John Stezaker's methodology—take a found photograph, do something to it, do something else to it—is an audaciously simple one, but it works. Stezaker, a British veteran of first-wave Conceptual art and the New Image group, has been enjoying something of a comeback, and his recent first exhibition at Friedrich Petzel made the revival seem entirely explicable, even overdue. Stezaker is a master of selection and presentation; his vision emerges all the stronger when he keeps evidence of his own hand to a minimum. That Matthew Higgs helped design the show's crisp installation makes perfect sense, since both artists have a clear-eyed aesthetic.

Of Stezaker's recent works, the most striking—and the best known in New York, following their inclusion in "Unmonumental" at the New Museum—are his "Film Portrait" collages, which he began in the 1980s. In each of these eerie cut-ups of vintage movie-actor headshots, a slice of one face is positioned atop a different whole shot, partially obscuring it, the two becoming a hybrid no less monstrous for the transparency of its origin. For most entries in the series, Stezaker retains the overlaid half-shot's original border, making no attempt to convincingly blend the two pictures. Yet far from disrupting the result's uncanny effect, this formal decision heightens our awareness of something having been removed and of something else having been hidden. When applied to so familiar a category of image, the sensation is profoundly unsettling.

Stezaker calls some of the collages "Marriages," meaning that they link two worlds, but in bringing together such disparate pairs, he hints at less harmonious relationships than the term generally implies. Male is fused with female and young with old, while the skewing of scale and perspective makes for all manner of freakish mutations. This may be one of the most primal tricks in the book—aside from recalling Dada, Hannah Höch in particular, it has the flavor of a childhood game—but the decisive clarity of Stezaker's elegant framing keeps the project contemporary in spite of the photographs' obvious age (some are faded or dog-eared; all are black-and-white).

Most of the portraits' subjects are obscure, though old-time Hollywood buffs might recognize the odd face. More memorable is what Stezaker has done to them. In one work, a pretty but stern-faced nurse is merged with a neat young man in a pinstripe suit, their outfits clashing but somehow adding up to more than the sum of their parts. In another, two substantial male figures are collapsed together into a slender third, equal parts Zippy the Pinhead and burn victim. Additionally, in a trio of collaged film stills, Stezaker takes a knife to some larger scenes, to similarly disorienting effect. His world is a hall of mirrors, and elicits the same combination of amusement and horror.

Also on display were six of Stezaker's recent "Bridge" collages. Appropriating photographic illustrations from mid-century guidebooks to Prague, the artist combines shots of the city's enormous ancient castle (an inspiration to Kafka) in a sequence of vertiginous tableaux that suggest real-world prototypes for M. C. Escher's impossible interiors.

Each work is organized around a single diagonal divide, an architectural fault line that causes otherwise solid structures to slip past one another like drifting ice floes. As in the portraits, there is no space between the images' two halves, suggesting that a kind of refraction is taking place, a perceptual warping that positions representation itself as an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable.

—Michael Wilson

John Stezaker,  
*Betrayal (Film  
Portrait Collage) VIII*,  
2007–2008,  
black-and-white  
photographs on  
board, 10 1/2 x 8 1/4".



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