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Third Life

MARTIN HERBERT on the art of [John Stezaker](#)



Opposite page: John Stezaker, *Mask LXIV*, 2007, postcard and black-and-white photograph on board, 10 x 7 1/2".
This page: John Stezaker, *Marriage (Film Portrait Collage) XXXII*, 2007, black-and-white photographs on board, 9 3/4 x 7 3/8".

FOR SOME LUCKY PHOTOGRAPHS, there's an interval between disfavor and disposal—a hiatus that offers a second chance at life. In our disembodied age, this purgatory is usually the wilds of eBay, although prints and reproductions also linger on in actual flea markets, antiquarian bookstores, and thrift shops. Few photographs, however, are discarded and restored more than once—unless they happen to be swept up in the vicissitudes of John Stezaker's forty-year career. Some of the pictures the artist has used have inhabited this liminal state multiple times, their drift and resurgence tracing an extraordinary path amid our circulatory system of images.

In the past few years, a number of Stezaker's large-scale paintings and silk screens on canvas have been slowly exhumed from storage (where they'd sat, virtually untouched, for upward of two decades) and have begun to appear both in exhibitions and in the art world's version of flea markets, art fairs. Their anachronism has stopped many in their tracks, particularly those viewers who'd thought themselves familiar with Stezaker's work. A recent show at the artist's London gallery, the Approach, for example, featured works such as *Kiss I*, 1979–80, a fragmentary image of a passionately embracing cinematic actor and actress respectively washed in blue and yellow, at the center of a large field of inky blackness, and *Untitled*, 1990, a receding white rectangle on black (imagine one of Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of movie screens reduced to a near abstraction).

And yet most provocative among the body of canvases that Stezaker made from 1978 to 1993 are those that appropriate antique porn. By 1979, the year he turned thirty, Stezaker had spent several years making collages using found photographs. Working out an interest in Surrealism, especially in Max Ernst's *La Femme 100 têtes* (1929), among the first collage novels, and perhaps cued by the pun on *cent* and *sans* in Ernst's title, he decided on a formal inversion: If Ernst could try a hundred female heads, Stezaker could attempt a hundred headless females. He didn't reach the century, but it's notable that in many of his images featuring female nudes, the head is decisively cropped off, the naked body literally beheaded. The found figures were culled from those real-world



photographic repositories listed above—for example, the series “Naturalistic Torsos,” 1979, is based on images from 1930s naturist magazines like the Scandinavian *Charm*, which ostensibly reflected the prewar health fad for getting naked in the countryside but was essentially an excuse for nude shots. While this tactic reflected Stezaker's interest in the psychologically charged headless body à la Ernst and Duchamp, then, it also sought to articulate something implicit in the pornographic process these earlier artists did not seek to account for: the depersonalization and objectification of the female body, frequently achieved by turning the head away. The works thus radically unlock self-indicting dimensions of dissolution and obsolescence in their source material by following through on what the pornographic scenarios began—the downplaying of the face, the site of human identification.

Through a simple but decisive shift, these images inhabit a realm as much of visceral affect and pop connotation as of the indexical. Indeed, from the beginning, Stezaker has wanted to make the photographic image speak in registers beyond the physical trace. *Net 1*, 1982, for example, belongs to a secondary phase in which the artist used vintage soft-porn images from magazines dignified by titles such as *Grace and Beauty* and *Art Studies*. Stezaker here takes one heavily retouched photograph of a nude model posing as a mermaid, tints it blue, and repeats it four times, rotating it around an empty central square. This gap is created by the arrangement of the rectangular panels, internalizing the more aggressive cropping of the artist's other works. And while the quadruple image is obviously from the past, it seems perversely *present*. It speaks of the banalities and degradations that underlie porn but also—through repetition and the gaping void at its center—creates a link between those quotations and the vast desuetude of image flows into which such numbingly utilitarian pictures vanish once they have been used. We confront transience, a sense of the terminal.

Not that *Net 1* and its cousins were seen this way at the time, however. Stezaker's 1984 show of silk screens at London's Lisson Gallery was received with critical censure: The artist, who'd thought his project wholly in line with feminist thinking, had left himself wide open to interpretations of sexism, even of symbolic violence to women. Not only was Stezaker a man working with this imagery, he was doing so at a moment of highly charged cultural politics. Recall, for example, the negative first reaction on the part of feminists to Cindy Sherman's “Centerfold” series in 1981; Stezaker also remembers his friend Robert Mapplethorpe expressing amazement that he could get away with graphic photographs of fisting while Stezaker had landed in hot water for using images half a century old. Ironically, it was the latter artist's very success in revivifying and dissecting obsolete imagery that had backfired; by cropping the images, Stezaker had elided much of their *pastness*, their safe historical distance. (Furthermore, and while it partially redresses the gender balance, it might have been unhelpful that the one male entry in the cycle, the “Naturalistic Torso” *Giant*, 1979, features a notably *undecapitated* man.)

In any case, a Rubicon was crossed. After the Lisson show, Stezaker's CV languished markedly for twenty years. Ancillary factors were certainly in play—the long-term unpopularity of Surrealist-related art; Stezaker's consequent fidelity to an increasingly storied teaching career in London art schools, first at Central

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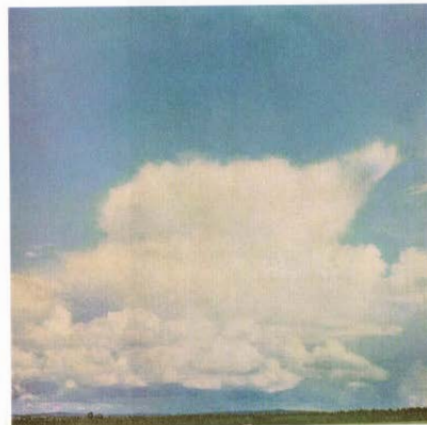
Saint Martins and then at the Royal College of Art—but it's clear that the charges of misogyny had a profound impact on the reception of his work. The episode demonstrated that in opening up photographic imagery to misprision, recursion, and prolepsis, to alternate codings and functions, there is a risk: the risk of being misread. Yet these are precisely the destabilized conditions of collage and silk screen. In some ways, then, Stezaker's discovery of how wildly he could invite misinterpretation was a Pyrrhic victory. ("I suddenly realized that half my audience didn't understand what I was doing," he says now. "I recognized that you're never in control: *Appropriation* is actually a misleading term, because it suggests mastery.") Nevertheless, the implications of this reception were something from which he would have to retreat—going "underground," as he put it—until a different context for his thinking was in place.

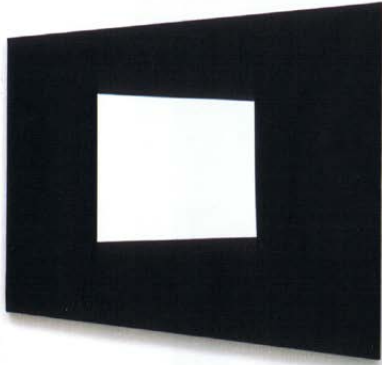
IN 2004, STEZAKER BEGAN SHOWING with the Approach, which effectively rebooted his career. (It should also be noted, however, that the recent renaissance of his silk screens has much to do with their championing by the artist's Cologne dealer, Gisela Capitain.) The Approach began by exhibiting extracts from Stezaker's early project "The Third Person Archive," started in 1976—a lengthy cycle of details clipped from photographs, featuring figures from panoptic urban scenes as centers of their own flaneurial drama—and subsequently showcasing both old and newer photographic collages. All of these works represent a resurfacing of Stezaker's core concerns of discontinuity and rupture, offering the potential for isolated or juxtaposed fragments of imagery to speak more expansively and polyvalently than one might expect. But they also give the lie to the idea that his work has developed in a conventional, linear fashion.

For both *Dark Star II*, 1979, and *Dark Star V*, 2008, for example, Stezaker cut the silhouette of a male film star out of a color field overlaid on black paper, an act of simultaneous subtraction and addition that turns the star into a black void, an uneasy, semiabstract site of projection. The function of the original portrait is inverted, generating both an anonymous form and a literal incarnation of the cookie-cutter condition of celebrity. What's more, the works look like they could have been made days, as opposed to twenty-nine years, apart. Indeed, it's not unusual for years or even decades to lapse between Stezaker finding an image he wants to work with and his actually using it in a piece.

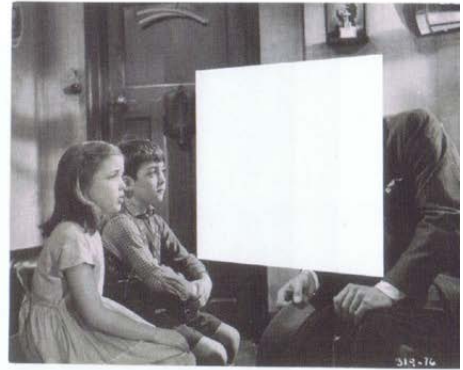
By temporarily setting aside the artist's silk-screen phase, then, one can see that Stezaker's dislocations and recursions are fundamentally rooted in image fascination—the irrational hold the image exerts on a viewer (or browser). The artist is drawn to archives of film stills, actors' head shots, Italian *fotoromanzi*, gaudy postcards from tourist destinations. In other words, he fixates on photographs that once performed a task, particularly the mechanical stimulation of desire, and every so often he finds a picture that detaches itself from its previous function through a visual aporia, a Barthesian *punctum*. In Stezaker's small but revealing body of found photographs, "Unassisted Readymade," 1973–, the artist reanimates images by mounting them at unlikely angles but otherwise leaving them untouched. Here, it's possible to see—or, rather, feel—the ambient peculiarity Stezaker is chasing: an accidental, "off" quality that exceeds and diverges from the workaday purpose of selling or desiring something. (An actress's smile will verge on the unhinged; a massive cloud will loom over a thin strip of green horizon; a pylon will sit at a crazed angle to the ground.) The image, "no longer disappearing into its use, *appears*," to cite Maurice Blanchot, a touchstone for the artist.

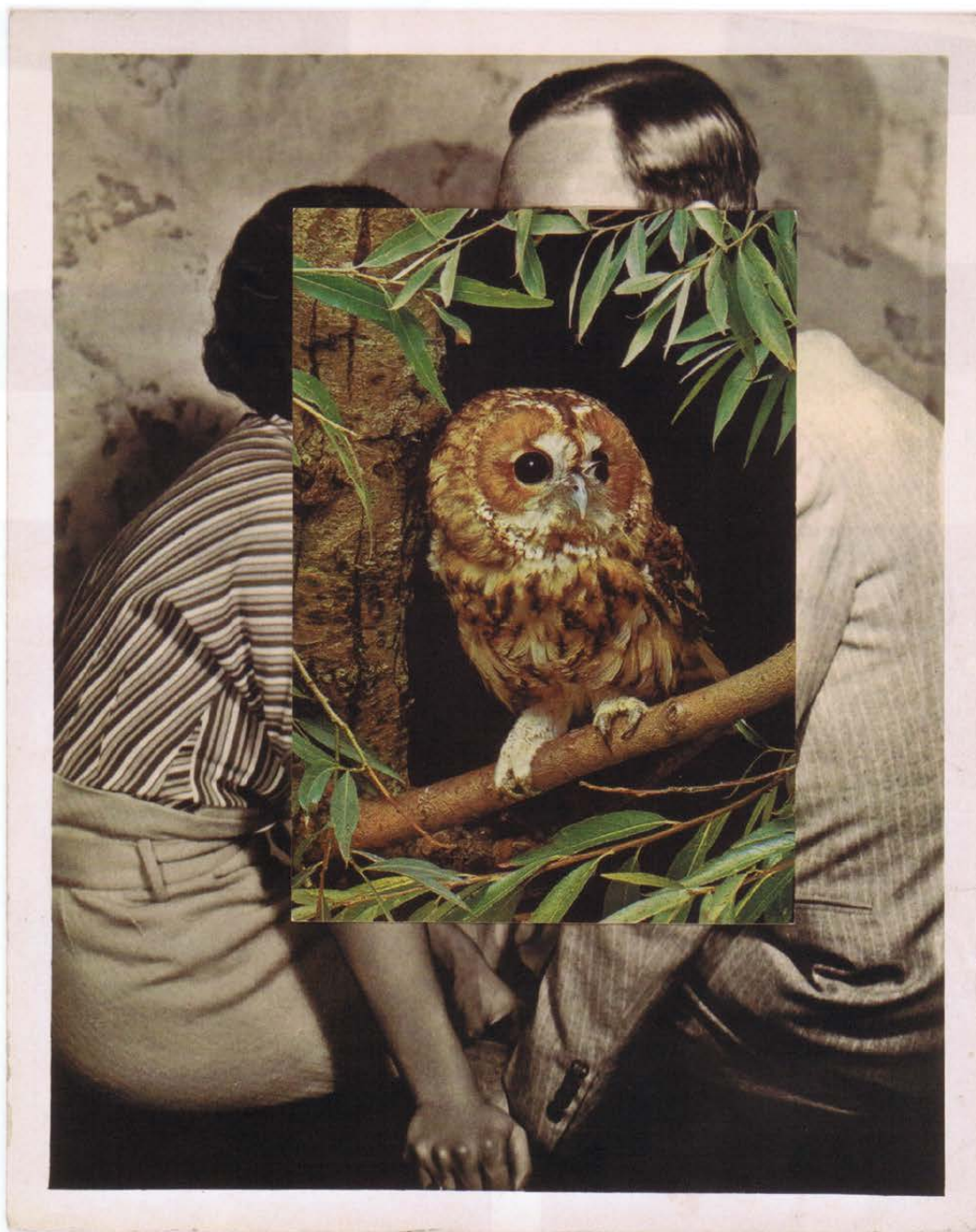
Stezaker's project is to dramatize that revelation glimpsed in the instrumentalized image. His methods for conjuring this appearance are diverse but always seem tied to the permuting series. Moreover, they frequently reflect what he described in a recent interview as "an apocalyptic possibility for art: that it could be reduced to a process of subtraction from the media image." The "Mask" series of 1982—potently illustrates this subtractive method: It features antique publicity head shots, each blocked by a landscape postcard that both





Opposite page, from left: John Stezaker, *Dark Star II*, 1979, color photograph on board, 29 1/2 x 21 1/4". John Stezaker, *Unassisted Readymade*, 1975, found book page, 5 1/4 x 5 1/4". This page, clockwise from top left: John Stezaker, *Untitled*, 1990, silk screen on cotton drill canvas, 53 1/4 x 55 1/2". John Stezaker, *Tabula Rasa XI*, 2008, black and white photograph on board, 7 1/4 x 9 1/4". John Stezaker, *Mask IV*, 2005, postcard and black and white photograph on board, 8 1/4 x 6 3/8". John Stezaker, *Mask I*, 1991-92, postcard and black and white photograph on board, 24 1/2 x 17 3/4".





This page: John Stezaker, *Nest IV*, 2007, postcard and black-and-white photograph on board, 7 1/2 x 8 3/4".
Opposite page: John Stezaker, *Tears (Painting, After Joan Miró) I*, 2006, catalogue page and black-and-white photograph on board, 7 1/2 x 8 3/4".

continues and vertiginously undoes the missing physiognomy. Gregory Peck's face in *Mask IV*, 2005, for instance, becomes a darkened cave, its contours extending the actor's hairline while transforming his face into an inhuman chasm. This alignment of virtuosic doubling and disconcerting difference reaches more flamboyant heights in the "Film Portrait" series, 1979–, where Stezaker sutures vertically sliced halves of actors' faces, creating fluent grotesques (particularly when he blends genders). *Tabula Rasa XI*, 2008, meanwhile, takes one sector of a film still—the head of a suited man addressing two rapt children—and censors it into unknowability using a large white quadrilateral, resembling another blank screen seen in receding perspective.

Here and elsewhere, odd parallels arise between Stezaker's work and John Baldessari's (perhaps recognizing this, the two have historically maintained a wary distance). So, too, the artist is clearly linked to the legacy of photomontage and the critique of mass-media imagery, from John Heartfield and Hannah Höch to Martha Rosler. Yet Stezaker differs from this oppositional lineage in emphasizing a chasmal multifariousness over polemic. Even as he trades in the fractured compositions of photomontage, he treats the fault lines between images with a curiously illusionistic hand: hence the uncanny continuity of Peck's hairline with a cave. Such seamlessness puts pressure on the fissure or suture, as if Stezaker were aware that one cannot attack images, only reroute them.

WHEN THE EVENTS OF MAY '68 UNFOLDED. Stezaker was in his second year at art school, and one might rightly assume a Situationist imprint on his attention to the visual accoutrements of spectacle (and on his ambiguous use of images of women). More specifically, though, a signal influence on Stezaker's thinking was William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin's cut-up collaboration *The Third Mind*, 1978, which the artist read when it was first published and which forged stuttering new narratives from spliced texts in an anarchic strike against the word as a vehicle of power and control. Such mutinous collage effects are still at work in Stezaker's *Nest IV*, 2007, a battered film still in which a couple canoodling is mostly obliterated by a postcard of a roosting owl. Bark and foliage ghost the actress's missing profile and torso; the owl's branch becomes another appendage reaching between the two.

Stezaker's recent collages, however, seem to repurpose the disorder of the cut-up, just as Hollywood historically co-opted the tactics of dialectical mon-

tage. If mainstream cinema is based on two images implying a third, then Stezaker's putative "third image" is a ghost arising from fleeting visual continuities between collaged elements and the psychological sparks flying between them. It presents a flickering, stammering vision that simultaneously refuses the pabulum and bondage of narrative and opens onto an unbounded space for reverie. What Stezaker constructs is a dark double of the mainstream culture of images, which itself reflects a kind of administered collective imaginary. If Hollywood is the dream factory, Stezaker's art might be considered its antithesis: the bad-dream factory.

Such a shadow system is a result of the artist's formal economy. Paralleling Douglas Huebler's famous desire not to add anything to the world's overflowing image banks, Stezaker decided early on that he didn't want to create anything from scratch—he only wanted to "subtract" from the found media image. The artist thus discovered that collage and montage were ways to make meaning out

of misprision, out of disjunction. It is in this sense that the very act of combination or deletion draws out multiple registers of viewing—the pornography related silk screens, for example, riding the knife-edge of literalized violence against depicted bodies and structural violence against pornographic images. Likewise, the silk screen is the midpoint between the painting and the photograph, and one might consider Stezaker's entire career (which began in painting) as an attempt to gift the flat screen of the photographic, its mimetic literalness, with something of the depth of painting—a polysemy occasioned by the juncture of two incongruous elements; a depth literally expressed by all those ingresses, caves, voids, deep spaces of landscape, that he puts onto, and into, his pictorial grounds. We are now in a position to recognize that in using these various strategies, Stezaker seems to be trying to see what is *behind* the immense repertoire of images that engulfs everyday life.

And what is behind it? Something larger than an engagement with the image world, or something that reveals what the image world is distracting us from. Underneath it all, Stezaker seems to say, is the unavoidable prospect of extinction. Not many of the people pictured in Stezaker's work are still alive (he favors the 1940s, the period, interestingly enough, just before he was born); those who are always seem menaced by occlusion or annihilation, by a process that seemingly returns imagery to life so it can speak knowledgeably of death. We see this destructive drive in the silk screen *Sky*, 1982, with its sepia-toned, headless odalisque (a cousin of the nude in Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, another "painting by other means"), rotated four times against an abyss of sky, and in *Untitled I*, 2008, featuring a cigarette-smoking film star whose head is razored out of the frame by a sharp wedge. Yet there is a redemptive dimension to such morbid thinking. For mortality, while our deepest anxiety, is also our deepest bond, and a collective confrontation with it might be a route to authentic intersubjective experience. Stezaker's art stages precisely such a confrontation, a process in which one loses oneself, becomes objectified and annulled; a process in which images are always on the edge of disappearing. We are all leaving for the void. Stezaker reminds his audience, part of its parade of the gone, forgotten, an obliterated. But it is in the gaps between images and subjects, in the abyss, that new and shared meanings may emerge. □

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