

John Stezaker



Captain Petzel, Berlin, Germany

Hindsight is bittersweet. While it might illuminate and perhaps vindicate the past, it is also necessarily tinged with a frustrating thought: why the hell didn't I know then what I know now? John Stezaker, an artist whose work has enjoyed in recent years a justly deserved second spring, is no stranger to pictures from the past resurfacing. He is best known for his razor-sharp collages made from vintage photographs and printed matter, which are far more accomplished than those of the slew of artists using the same technique in the last decade. A recurrent motif in these works is a combination of duelling black and white headshots of now anonymous performers. Typically posed and quietly confident portraits meet, producing a disquieting third person, one whose presence is forever fractured along the contour incised by Stezaker's scalpel. More of this kind of work might have reasonably been expected from his recent solo show. Instead, the exhibition offered a major surprise and a double-take: a selection of 19 paintings that the artist produced during the 1980s, the majority of which have never been shown.

There is perhaps nothing more satisfying than an exhibition that initially confounds and then reconfigures our presumptions. If one peered from the street through the cinematic glass façade of Captain Petzel's commanding space, the show revealed itself as an ensemble of duo-tone pictures in varying sizes of rectangles, circles and other shapes. Nothing looked rescued or musty – the date of the works' production was one of a series of surprises in the exhibition. Fresh, pointed and graphic, the works recall a Postmodern intersection of both Pop and Minimalist painting, while also resonating now as an aesthetic antidote to art made in the last decade that looks like it wishes it were older. Take, for example, *Untitled* (1982), a two-panel work employing the striking colour combination and motif of an acidic yellow, headless female nude on a matte black background. The figure both sits and hovers on a dark field without any spatial coordinates opposite her mirrored self. She is both full-bodied and flattened out, a coy pin-up and oddly neutral, recalling at once soft porn and a decorous life drawing study. Similar

cohorts accompanied her, most impressively in the gallery's darkened subterranean space, including *Untitled* (1980), a composition consisting of multiple overlapping screenprints of a red female nude forming an eerie, stroboscopic peepshow chorus line of clones. Andy Warhol's screenprints came to mind – a direct reference that the artist intended, then and now.

But it wasn't this art-historical lineage that led Stezaker to withdraw these works as much as his sensitivity to feminist objections to depictions of naked and headless women made by a male artist. To my mind, the dogmatic policing of images was never the objective of much feminist theory, which rather acknowledged and deconstructed the gendered gaze. Stezaker's nudes are both iconographic and, even at the time of their making, programmatically dated, based as they are on images culled from 1920s and '30s Swedish naturalist magazines. Ironically, these works contribute to a feminist art-historical debate about the cultural constructions and representations and how they have changed around the body, sexuality and freedom. As opposed to Warhol's Pop feedback of the cultural everyday, Stezaker's works posit image ideas from the past to underwrite the now; the mass-produced image is not plucked from a continuously new present but is already a historical artefact.

Complicating this picture is a work such as *Catcher* (1982), which seems like a formal pun on an early Frank Stella painting, consisting of a man-sized square with a central square hole on which Stezaker screenprinted the torso of a topless man. His arms push at the frame of the composition on a pinstriped fabric. Here the man's musculature seems no match for the real and metaphorical framing of an image in painting. He is also a fragment and a kind of aberration on the abstract ready-made surface. It's often said that the past comes back to haunt us; in Stezaker's works, that is a good thing.

Dominic Eichler

John Stezaker
Untitled
1980
Silkscreen on canvas
1x3 m

