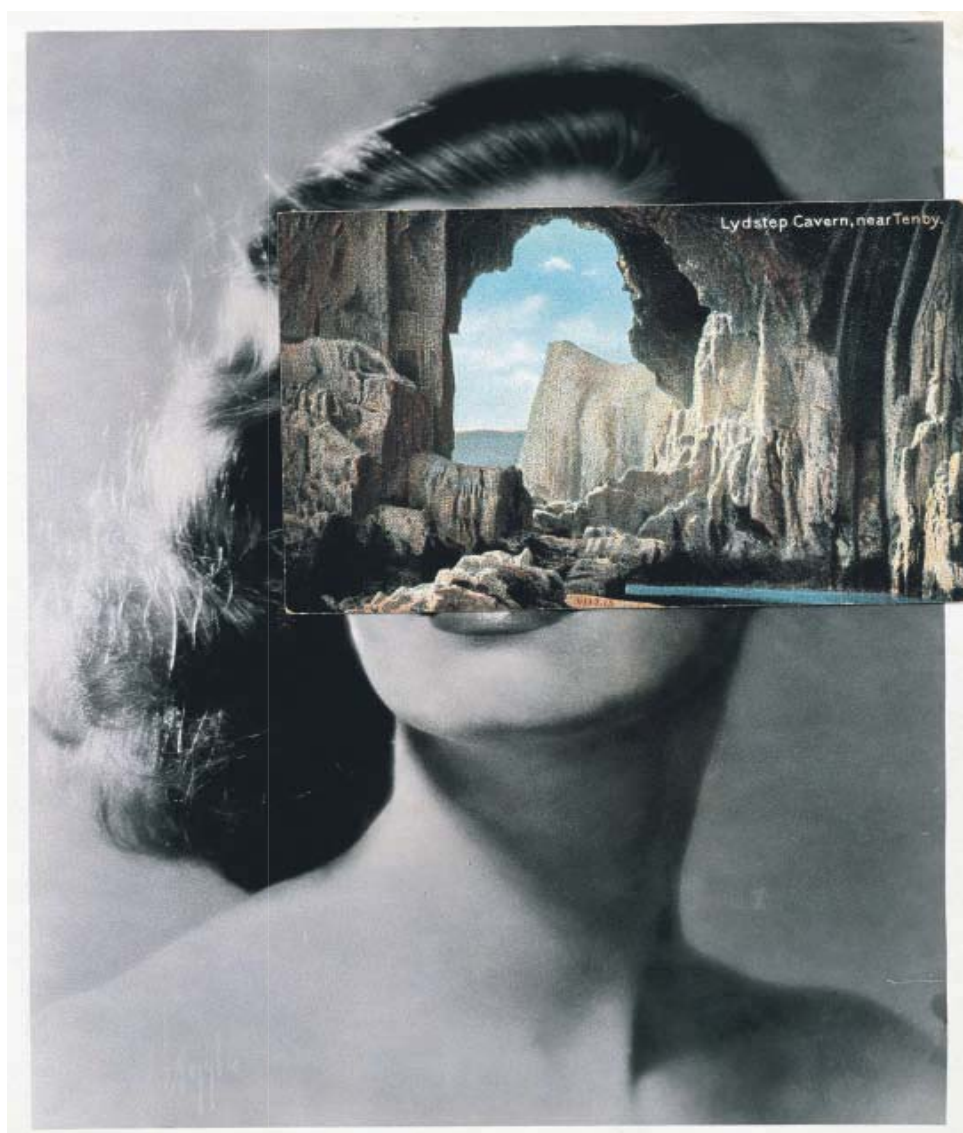


John Stezaker's collages using black-and-white film photos and old postcards are nostalgic but also uncanny and absurd. As a career-spanning exhibition of his work opens at the Whitechapel Gallery, [Brian Dillon](#) pays tribute to a sly romantic

# What a carve up





The English artist John Stezaker, whose uncanny collages are the subject of a career-spanning exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, tells a revelatory tale about the origins of his luminous art. Stezaker was born in Worcester in 1949; when he was 13 his family moved to London, and around this time his parents supplanted their crackling old snapshot albums with a new slide projector.

The teenager was fascinated by the apparatus, and especially by the single demonstration slide that came with it: a wide-angle photograph of two men overlooking the Thames, with the Palace of Westminster and a lurid sunset behind them. Stezaker swiftly grasped that the projected image might be used to make art, thus obviating the tedium of free-hand drawing. But when he took the machine to his bedroom, he found all he could squeeze on to a sheet of paper was a corner of the picture: Big Ben, a few turrets and a stretch of red sky. He tried painting over it in his best approximation of an “expressionist-psychedelic” style, but when he turned off the projector the result was “horrific”.

In light of the artist’s subsequent romance with the found photograph, this anecdote is almost too apt to be true. By the time he enrolled at the Slade in the late 60s, his main influences were Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke: painters whose use of photographs overlapped with and trumped, in expressive terms, the pop art of a few years earlier. But Stezaker was a student too at a time when a wholesale critique of the pop-cultural image was being launched by such thinkers as

Guy Debord; the Situationists’ scurrilous repurposing of media imagery became an exemplary strategy for him, alongside his abiding, and then unfashionable, interest in surrealism. (He recalls being shown Max Ernst’s *Une semaine de bonté*, based on the illustrations to earlier novels, by William Coldstream on his first day at the Slade.) Schooled also on the recently translated writings of Walter Benjamin, for whom the conjunction of photograph and caption had altered forever how we looked at images, Stezaker began making work with text and pictures, intent on exposing the mystique of the visual.

It was a move that was very much of its time - London-based artists such as Victor Burgin and Susan Hiller (whose own Tate Britain show opens on Tuesday) were doing parallel things in very different registers - but for Stezaker it was a dead end. He suspected that his territory was the collective fascination with image itself rather than the

conceptual urge to undermine that fascination. At this point, in the mid-70s, that sliver of sunset from his adolescence unexpectedly returned. He had since learned that the complete photograph was also a hugely popular postcard, but it was still the skewed portion in the corner that obsessed him. And he began to realise, with a mixture of conceptual insight and lingering emotional attachment, that it required little or no artistic intervention beyond his first excision of the haunting fragment. (The resulting work, *The End*, is in the Whitechapel show.) The image itself was the work of art and, although the various painstaking subtleties of his style remained to be worked out, the mature Stezaker aesthetic was coming into focus.

He was not, of course, the first artist to deploy the found photograph, or combine such photographs, without comment. It was a favoured trick of his surrealist precursors, from Ernst to the pages of Georges Bataille’s late-20s journal *Documents*. But it’s important

to gauge his careful distance from the tradition of photomontage - a term he avoids, in favour of “collage”. As Stezaker sees it, the great *monteurs* such as John Heartfield and George Grosz always worked at some remove from the image itself - indeed, this was often the critical or satirical point of their work: to conjure radical ideas out of pictures that otherwise allured the everyday viewer. With his residual romanticism and often frank embrace of 20th-century glamour, Stezaker is perhaps closer to an artist such as Hannah Höch, whose *Album* of 1933 juxtaposes press imagery with ravishing fashion illustrations and fragments of a sublime or disturbing nature. In Stezaker’s collages as in Höch’s, images sidle up to and seduce one another, shying from overarching arguments or narratives.

That’s not to say that there isn’t a degree of knowing distance - and a strain of disturbing violence - in Stezaker’s work. It is first of all a historical distance. Early on, he began to work with actors’ portraits (mostly black-and-white) and film stills - from the middle of the 20th century - images he culled from defunct cinemas and picture agencies that were then

going out of business. (Stezaker once bought the entire contents of one such establishment, although the prints are now so precious and rare that he cannot bring himself to make work out of them.) The film stills are especially peculiar artefacts: posed publicity shots taken during production rather than frames reproduced from the finished film. Like the colourful, scenic postcards with which Stezaker often overlays them, they hold the same kind of attraction that Victorian engravings held for the surrealists. The distance - inflected with nostalgia and absurdism - is essential, because one of the things Stezaker is engaged in is a daring rescue of images from the memory dump of the recent past.

It’s hard to say precisely what the artist does with such images. In a sense, practically speaking, it’s ludi-

crously simple: he places one picture on top of another. Consider *Negotiable Space I*, from 1978. The larger, “background” image shows a psychoanalyst at his desk, his analysand stretched on a couch, a medicine cabinet in the corner and a photograph of Freud on the wall. In the centre of the image, and seeming to threaten the foreground of the scene, is a colour postcard showing a train emerging from a tunnel - its edge obscuring the face of the patient. The inference seems clear at first: this is a comically “Freudian” emanation from the unconscious of the figure on the couch - except that this initial schematic response won’t exhaust the collage. The crude intrusion of the postcard makes us notice oddities about the film still - a lattice of shadows around the Freud portrait, the surprising expanse of empty floor at the bottom of the picture - as well as curious details by which the two images rhyme: railway tracks aligning with the desk so that it, too, looks about to charge out of the frame.

There are many other works of this type. In the *Trial* series classical ruins, a picturesque waterfall and the Bridge of Sighs at St John’s College, Cambridge, all erupt among the anxious monochrome attitudes of a cinematic courtroom scene. In an untitled collage from 2008, a crowd of Hollywood bathing beauties is framed and almost overwhelmed by a sideways-on photo-

graph showing the complicated sculptural entanglement of St George with his dragon. But the signature Stezaker gesture is more frequently the cut and splice of two or more images, doing suggestive violence to both. Here is a young Lauren Bacall, her face diagonally bisected by roiling floodwaters or - the series is entitled *Film Portrait (Disaster)* - obliterated by an image of torn-up trees. Here, in a series titled *Third Person*, are lesser stars whose faces are half-hidden by anonymous silhouettes, from the depths of which a third image obtrudes: a garish landscape or an eerie flight of birds. And in recent works the background picture may also explode through the centre of the interposed image, in a cartoon flash worthy of Roy Lichtenstein.

The mystery of Stezaker’s art may be said to reside in these precise and shocking cuts. He has spoken of the

moment when he takes a blade to the sleek surface of an old bromide print as one of heightened anxiety and tension - having handled and gazed at these images for months or even years, he likes to get the incision over and done with as swiftly as possible. Unfinished works in his London studio have the look of gaping wounds, something like the suddenly opened slit, product of a slip of the thumb in the kitchen, described by Sylvia Plath’s poem “Cut”: “a sort of hinge / Of skin, / A flap like a hat, / Dead white.” They remind us that historically photographs have been as much things to be touched as looked at, that our fascination with them is at once visual and tactile, almost grisly.

This impression of keen-eyed assault is strongest (and frequently funniest) in Stezaker’s cutting and suturing of close-up portraits. Everywhere

in his work there are faces made monstrous, comical or weirdly attractive by their carving up and careful wedding with others. In fact one series is called *Marriages*, and shows pairs of men and women - mostly, it seems, they are actors’ studio portraits - incongruously conjoined to suggest new faces. A mustachioed man in a pullover meets a wavy-haired blonde to produce a figure with an oddly raffish cavalier look; a middle-aged woman with a complex hairdo acquires the aquiline nose of the actor she obscures. For all their strangeness, however, the faces are also exquisitely aligned, the arc of an eyebrow or the thrust of a jaw running on from one image to another, so that the whole is bizarrely credible as a glamorous or grotesque new being. One’s eye moves tirelessly, entranced, between the two faces and their Frankenstein offspring.

What is less endearing, and more alarming, about these “married” faces is the extent to which their own eyes have frequently been attacked by Stezaker’s scalpel. (There’s a reminder here of the founding image of surrealist oculism: the slitting open of a woman’s eye - replaced at the last edited moment by that of a cow - in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s 1929 film *Un chien andalou*.)

**M**ore generally in his work, it’s often through the eye that the incision passes: whether

vertically (as in the splicing of two faces) or horizontally, as in a series titled *Love*, where a narrow strip of the same image is inserted along the eye line, so that the subject stares out at us with expanded, blurred and alien orbs. The result is that the people in Stezaker’s collages seem to suffer a variety of austere optical afflictions, from a squint or strabismus to full enucleation: in the series *Blind*, the eyeballs have been razored out along a straight line and the edges of the photograph brought together again.

Such images are part of Stezaker’s

continued investigation of the intimate strangeness of the photographed human face, the way it exposes and veils at the same time the feeling, thinking creature within. This fascination finds its fullest expression in his *Masks* series. Here there are no cuts, just the judicious placing of colour postcards over monochrome portraits. They’re among Stezaker’s slyest and most unsettling works, because what they intrude into the portraits is a series of gaping holes: chasms and waterfalls that cleave faces in two, yawning caves and sunlit sea arches that tunnel into unknowable interiors. These collages are the more ghastly and comical for once again being perfectly aligned: clumps of rock become noses, the arches of a stone bridge a pair of gaping eyes.

The *Masks* return us to another, less nostalgic, story that Stezaker tells us about his development as an artist. As a student, he happened on a photograph in an old medical textbook that showed a woman’s face half eaten away by a rodent ulcer - inside and outside had become horribly confused. Stezaker closed that book with the thought that he must never look at it again, but in other ways he has not stopped looking since.

John Stezaker is at the [Whitechapel Gallery](http://whitechapelgallery.org/), London, until 18 March 2011. [whitechapelgallery.org/](http://whitechapelgallery.org/)

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**Main photograph: *Mask XXXV*, 2007;  
*Marriage (Film Portrait Collage) LXI*, 2010,  
above; and left, *Untitled*, 1977**