



John Stezaker, *Train*, 2012–21, HD video, color and black-and-white, silent, 9 seconds.

John Stezaker

FONDAZIONE MORRA GRECO

The basement of the Palazzo Caracciolo di Avellino, home to the Fondazione Morra Greco, is a dark, cavernous space with a vaulted tuff ceiling resembling the mouth of a tunnel. The air is heavy with history; during recent renovations, an ancient Greek wall was revealed—a reminder that Naples is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, one whose myriad histories literally grew on top of each other. It's no wonder that British artist John Stezaker, whose solo exhibition took over the five floors of the palazzo, chose the basement as the site for the film loop *Train*, 2012–21, which he completed for this exhibition. With 221 photographs of steam engines speeding by in less than nine seconds, *Train* pays homage to the Lumière brothers and to underground trains that never arrived, as subway construction work in central Naples gave way to archaeological excavations.

With a practice spanning some five decades, Stezaker has been unwavering in his commitment to ambiguity, quasi-Surrealist juxtapositions, and in-between spaces that open up to new histories. An obsessive collector of images and a habitu  of flea markets, vintage bookshops, and thrift stores, Stezaker roots his imagery firmly in the first half of the twentieth century, often focusing on Hollywood-infused glamour—impossibly cool headshots of anonymous actors, film stills, and promotional materials—but also on naturalistic postcards and other printed matter. On the second floor, Stezaker’s collaged book works neatly echoed the architecture of the sixteenth-century building, with its labyrinthine layout, vaults, and stone staircases. In *Observatory II (book work)*, 2015–20, an open book featured an Escheresque black-and-white photographed interior that has been repeated to present two spiral staircases and a double archway. Further along, a selection of works from his “Crossing Over” series, 2005–13, offered exquisite tiny images of various bird’s-eye scenes of human figures traversing urban landscapes set against white sheets of paper, like Constructivist photographs in miniature. Stezaker’s mastery lies in his ability to isolate a fragment of an image in such a way as to hint not only at past worlds but also at new narratives, which he invites us to weave according to our own lived experience.

The third floor was dedicated to the large silk screens on canvas comprising Stezaker’s imposing “Shadow” series, 2014. In these works, black silhouettes cropped from noir films loom large; our reverence for male power and glorified violence is laid bare. In *Shadow 2*, a pair of male silhouettes in fedoras are caught in a tense physical exchange, multiple shadows playing on the walls behind them, while in *Shadow 4*, two men with bow ties are captured, laughing, in an image turned 90 degrees, their teeth perfectly and eerily defined against a leafy backdrop.

Discussing his penchant for collage, Stezaker once said that there were enough images in the world, and that his concern was negotiating through that multiplicity by cutting through the volume. Imbuing discarded anachronistic images with new life, slicing through them just so with a scalpel, he propels images into new territory. Among the many arresting collages on the top floor, including selections from the recent series “Star” and “Dis-Astro,” both 2017–18, an older work, *Father Sky*, 1989, stood out: a darkened silhouette of a man superimposed on a blue sky with clouds. The silhouette is not simply black, however, but contains a night sky with shooting stars. This image, the artist has said, always reminded his mother of his father, and she kept it until her death, a story that bears testament to how shadows, with their open-ended ambiguity, give us space to remember on our own terms.

— Ana Vukadin