

John Stezaker

Spells

kaufmann repetto is pleased to announce *Spells*, John Stezaker's second solo show with the gallery. The exhibition presents an overview of the artist's recent work series characterized by a new interest in color, alongside with a nucleus of rare *Photoroman* collages from the 1970s.

In the dreamlike *Spells* the cut-out silhouettes of actresses from 1950s cinema publicity images are imposed on natural history illustrations of mostly aquatic invertebrates of the same period. The collage technique drastically inverts the narrative functions of the found image sources, performing a substantial change of perspective. The film stars – captured in glamorous and mildly erotic poses reflecting Hollywood standards of that time – appear disencumbered from codified aesthetical prescriptions, and transfigure instead into weirdly attractive, almost mythical characters. The symbiosis with the strange and wondrous marine creatures, floating inside the female bodies as in a magical underwater world, is imbued by archetypal references, ranging from accounts of metamorphosis in ancient myths and fairy tales, to Shakespeare's metaphoric 'sea change' in *The Tempest*, to Surrealism's representation of uncanny female sexuality as in the *Lobster Dress* conceived by Elsa Schiaparelli and Salvador Dalí.

The reflection about hybrid identity addressed in *Spells* also underpins the *Double Shadows* series, another recent group of works included in this exhibition. Here, two cut-outs of actors are superimposed, merging male and female silhouettes into grotesque, unsettling shadow figures. Recurrent throughout the artist's practice as in the earlier *Dark Star* works, this *doppelgänger* motif resonates with Nordic tales of the underworlds, as opposed to the more optimistic and dreamlike atmosphere of the *Spells*. "These two series could be seen to reflect different relationships to cinema – a shadow world of deception and psychological entrapment on the one hand and a space of magic and enchantment on the other", says the artist. This ambivalent fascination is not only true for his take on cinema, but it epitomizes his relationship towards the photographic medium at large.

Shedding light on the early years of Stezaker's career, the Milan show also presents a group of works from the *Photoroman* series. Travelling in Italy in the 1970s, the artist had discovered *fotoromanzi*, a particular editorial genre hitherto unknown to him. These were low-cost photographic novels which presented melodramatic stories, reduced to simple plots of love and sex, told in stereotypical, romantic images arranged in layouts that recall comic strips. Attracted by the outlandish unfamiliarity of its canons, the artist used these magazines throughout the late 1970s in his *Photoromans* collages, where many of his formal and phenomenological concerns that are at the core of his five-decades long practice were set to work.

John Stezaker (b. 1949, Worcester, UK) lives and works in London, UK. He studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in the 1960s, and has since taught at Central Saint Martins School of Art, Goldsmiths College and the Royal College of Art. His work has been exhibited internationally in several solo exhibitions at institutions and museums such as Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples (2021), National Portrait Gallery, London (2019), City Gallery Wellington, Wellington (2017); Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv (2013); and Whitechapel Gallery, London (2011), which then travelled to MUDAM in Luxembourg, also in 2011. Stezaker has been included in many group exhibitions as at Centro per l'arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato (2022); Museum Of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago (2018); Aishti Foundation, Beirut (2017); 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014); New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2008); Tate Triennial, London (2006); and the 40th Venice Biennale in 1982. Stezaker's work is held in museum and public collections around the world, including Museum of Modern Art, New York; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; MUDAM Collection, Luxembourg; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle; Tate Modern, London; and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.