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The witty collages of John Stezaker

The British conceptual artist John Stezaker's sliced and spliced images have earned him a place on the shortlist for this year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize

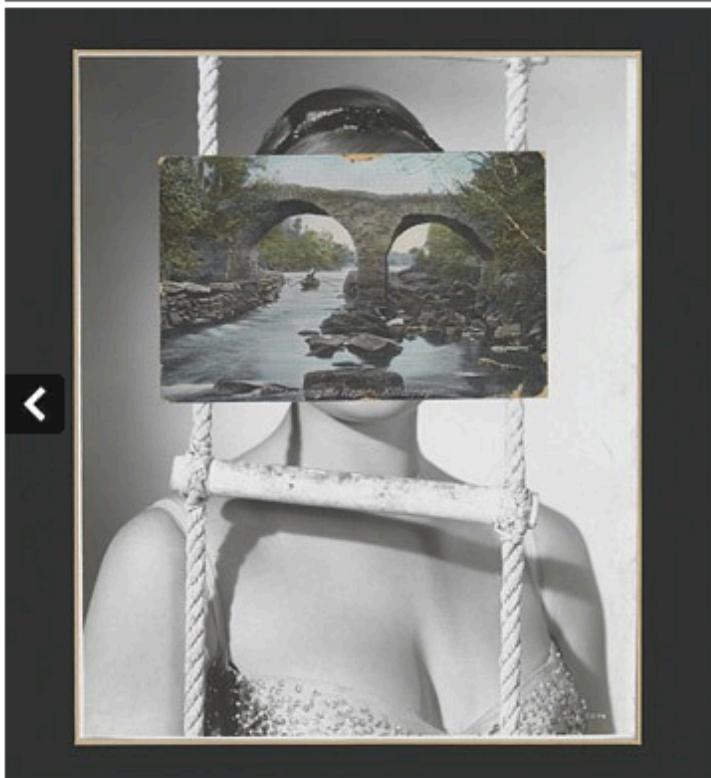


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Mask X, 1982 Photo: John Stezaker

By Lucy Davies

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John Stezaker has been nominated for this year's Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for his 2011 retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Recognition has been a long time coming – now 63, he has been making his photo-collages since the 1970s, all the while sustaining a teaching career at Central Saint Martins and the Royal College of Art. The exhibition was his first major show. His ingredients are simple: studio portraits from cinema's golden age, Baroque pastorals, Victorian gothic and humdrum postcards. In scoring and slicing, rotating and recombining, he mixes moods, histories and locations, manoeuvring the images until they step outside their former roles and slip into something more creepy, more witty, more vital. 'It's how you might imagine reincarnation,' he says, 'or the way you can never quite remember your dreams. Moving an image from one world into another, it's

as if it has forgotten its original function, but retains that trace of its former life. I am attracted to the trace.'

Fifty years of collecting have left him a house full of images of every imaginable variety. 'I lost count at around 300,000. It's like collage limbo: rooms with piles of unfinished work going back 20 or 30 years, but that's how coincidences and overlaps occur. When I find a link, it's a physical sensation. I feel the hairs on my head prickle. Sometimes I emit a shout – "Yes!"'

Stezaker prefers damaged images – 'I feel less guilt cutting them up' – and eBay has been a boon, 'but that is when I know what I want. When I don't, I try secondhand books, of which there is a diminishing number. It makes me realise that I am chasing obsolescence: these things are interesting because they are disappearing.'

The portraits must be of unknowns. 'The moment you recognise a face, it disrupts the picture.' During the Whitechapel show, one of the subjects, now 80, recognised herself and came forward. 'It had been a one-off test shot – she never made it as an actress. She was rather tickled.'

A show in Los Angeles attracted a film buff curious to know if Stezaker was making a point about the particular matinee idols he spliced. 'He knew them all. He went through the list – suicide, alcohol, one terrible death after another. I had no idea.'

The Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2012 will be on display at the Photographers' Gallery, 16 Ramillies Street, London W1, from July 13 to September