

Stezaker: King of cut and paste

A long overdue retrospective of John Stezaker's unsettling collages of found images and vintage postcards is a bewitching hit, says Laura McLean-Ferris

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The face in the silver photograph belongs to a woman. It is a portrait – a headshot – of someone, we imagine, particularly lovely or beautiful.

Her head is turned and fractionally tilted, revealing her slender neck; her hair, in rippling waves that catch the light, is swept to one side. She has a full lower lip

and though the photograph is black and white one can see from the dark grey sheen on her mouth that she is wearing red lipstick. Her upper lip, however, is made of craggy rocks.

A colour postcard, an image of “Lydstep Cavern, near Tenby”, has been placed over her face by the British artist John Stezaker, so that boulders in the foreground of the image coincide with woman’s mouth. The postcard shows a view from inside the cavern: we see the blue sky outside. It is a simple gesture – to cover a face – but the result is an image that is deeply absorbing. First of all, there is the newly forceful desire to see the woman’s face – the photograph becomes lovelier to us because something escapes us. But soon we are exploring the cave, too. It seems as though we might be looking through the woman’s head, seeing sky on the other side. But look again and there is the sense that we are inside a head. Are we in a memory? Or are we peering out at the world from inside a cave-like skull?

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This work, Mask XXXV (2007), is part of a series which features in a bewitching Whitechapel Gallery retrospective of Stezaker’s work. In another of the Mask works, gushing waterfalls spill out of the spaces where a woman’s eyes might be: impossible floods of tears. In another, a train track runs out of a head. Working with found photographs – often actors’ portraits and film stills taken from the golden age of cinema – Stezaker manipulates them with cuts, rotations, removals and collaged elements, managing to invigorate images that were already compelling so that nearly every work in this exhibition has a tangible seductive force.

Stezaker has been working this way since the 1970s and his work is held in high regard by artists, curators and critics. He was also, for more than 30 years, an influential teacher at Goldsmiths, Saint Martins and the Royal College of Art. So it is somewhat surprising that this is his first major exhibition in a British public

gallery. It is, however, an exhibition that has the power to bring in a broad public, including many who will be unfamiliar with Stezaker's work.

The four works that open the Whitechapel exhibition, on a wall that has been put up directly facing the front door, are made from portraits of Hollywood stars. They seem to welcome or address you, like four sentries. Stezaker has made three of them by taking two copies of the same image, of a film star gazing at the camera, and laying one on top of the other. A slice has been made through the centre of the eyes and the two pieces of the top image have been pulled apart slightly, to reveal another set of eyes underneath. Who is that other person, lurking below the surface? It makes the stars seem like androids or tricksters, putting on a different face (as they often do) to fool the world. In the fourth picture the eyes have been sliced away and the head closed, eyeless and shut, like a dumb bin lid.

Vision and blindness are themes that arise again and again in this exhibition, both in the work and in the elegant curating, which obscures works at various moments and plays with lines of sight. If you are looking at a face, turn around – there is probably a face looking at you from across the room. Key works and linking works are often hung alone on the extruding walls, as though they have the responsibility of ushering work forth. One such piece is an early work in which Stezaker has taken a found image and simply displayed it upside down – the artist has said that he kept the image for some years, because it intrigued him, before he realised what he should do with it. The original image features a man playing the piano with a woman watching, her image reflected in the shiny piano. When the picture is rotated, the woman's reflection becomes the dominant character, like a muse with an unbreakable hold over the piano player, whose eyes now appear to be closed in sleep, rather than cast downwards at the keys.

The drama builds. A man looks down at a bed and the duvet rushes up to cover his face. Men and women have their faces spliced together, creating freakish forms of beauty or wild comedy. At the back of the room is a series of tiny figures that Stezaker has scalped out of landscapes in which they played a small, faraway role. Now, isolated and close up, their minute dramas becoming thrilling and intriguing. The tiny figures seem to be running, chasing each other or arguing.

There is associative drama in *Underworld III* (1988-90), from a series of works in which the shape of a figure is cut away from an image. From a picture of a woman – we see a glimpse of Hitchcock-blond hair and a stripy garment – another woman's silhouette has been cut away to reveal colourful, swooping birds and bats, hiding beneath her in a mauve sky and creating an atmosphere of portent. Bridges appear in courtroom dramas; men and women become trees with branches, reaching out to touch one another, or cliff faces, dead, cold and unreceptive.

Stezaker's found photographs retain power even when they have been slung in an attic or a junk shop somewhere, or held between the pages of a dusty book. The artist has said that he thinks of the pictures that he collects for his enormous archive as "orphans" that he rescues. Their heyday might be over but Stezaker channels their remaining power in new, thrilling directions.

The great joy of this exhibition is that nearly every image surprises and wrongfoots the viewer. If you think you know what to expect from Stezaker, each time you will be wrong. It is an experience that is at times romantic and at times chilling – it is a grand seduction. Stezaker's works suck you in and demand your attention, revealing images as the all-consuming, needy things they are. We love and mistrust them, as they do us.