

## John Stezaker Loses Control at Petzel

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John Stezaker's "Shadow 1," 2014, currently on view at Petzel in New York. (Courtesy Petzel Gallery )

"Women's hair is a problem," said John Stezaker, walking me through his latest exhibition at Petzel in New York (through November 8), which contains a new series of large-scale silkscreen-on-black-canvas paintings adapted from film stills. "It's amorphous, it's all sorts of strange shapes. So the only women I could use are ones with very specific coifs." Outlines and contours are important to these works because Stezaker has excised the main figures, leaving their silhouettes (and the shadows the actors originally cast on the image's background). The 65-year-old British artist is perhaps best known for his collage works that jam together conflicting images — natural landscapes, or trains, layered over human faces — as well as a series, titled "Marriage," for which he creates fictional hermaphrodites by folding together portraits of male and female actors. But "removal — taking things away, is one of the strategies in my work," Stezaker clarified, and has been for quite some time.

It's tempting to read a narrative into these silk-screens — the police interrogation! A violent scuffle! A man and a woman confronting their dying romance! — but Stezaker is against that sort of thing. "My work is about removing images from those kind of readings," he said, "taking them out of that context of legibility and trying [to] confront what's left of the image when it's drained of signifiers." The basic contours of this latest series, the artist said, were fleshed out in a 1989 piece. That silkscreen was based on a film still depicting young children and their parents; Stezaker blotted out the parents.

Scale itself has waxed and waned over the artist's career; in comparative terms, these new works are huge. Stezaker, back in the late '70s, received a fan letter from recent art-school grad Sherrie Levine, who wrote that she and her friend Richard Prince had noticed his work in a magazine and found it interesting. "[They said] if I was ever in New York to pop in and join the discussion," Stezaker recalled. "It was my first positive feedback — I almost caught the next plane!" During that pivotal visit he remembers the impressive scale that young artists like Robert Longo were working on; he also visited the Museum of Modern Art and found himself floored by the physical dimensions of Barnett Newman's paintings.

"I went back to England desperate to start working on that scale," he said. And he did, until life intervened: Stezaker hurt his back, which made silk-screening difficult; he started teaching and suddenly "small-scale suited working on the evenings and weekends." In many ways this new exhibition is a return to larger form and also, he said, a way to visually compete with the vastness of Petzel's relatively new exhibition space on West 18th Street. (The viewing room at the gallery does hold a series of recent, intimate collages, made from cutting and layering two different film stills atop each other.) Picasso, oddly enough, also had an effect on these larger silhouette works — or at least what Stezaker termed the "bodily scale, that sense of bodily presence" in Picasso. In some ways, the silhouettes allow the viewer to enter into the painting, to fill that emptied-out role.

The exhibition changes gears quite abruptly with a 2014 film, "Blind," that gets its New York debut here. It's a 90-second loop composed of nearly 2,000 film stills from Stezaker's archives, each flashed on screen for a mere 1/24th of a second. Its part of a series of films the artist has made by combining stills of varying types: He's got one about horses, one about churches, one about large, German crowds. "Blind" isn't thematic — there's no underlying connection between any of these images — and it's actually the result of a fortuitous mistake. Stezaker had gone through his archive, placing stills into two boxes — one to scan for the film, one to skip. "Anything with text or color was out," he said. "I had all sorts of ideas — I had conceived it as black-and-white. But the person who was scanning them happened to be Brazilian, and her English wasn't very good. She thought the box I wanted scanned was the one I didn't want scanned. When it came back it was unbelievably beautiful."

Letting yourself get absorbed by "Blind" is a disorienting experience. There's no real way of knowing how long the film is, before it loops; you see things but can't really explain what they are (or if they're even there). Stezaker said that he originally intended the film to be purely abstract, since technically the brain isn't able to process images at 1/24th of a second — but then he found out that this is somewhat of a fallacy, since flashes and snippets of imagery are indeed retained. "Everyone sees something different," he said. When Stezaker screened an early cut for Jack Miller, his dealer with the Approach in London, Miller approved, but said he was "concerned about all the swastikas." They went back through the thousands of stills and indeed found some Nazi imagery — but it was a mere eight stills in total, which somehow Miller's brain had processed in the blur of images.

Gisela Capitain, Stezaker's Cologne gallerist, was one of the next advance viewers. "She said, 'It's strange, the way the nudity stands out,'" Stezaker recounted. "And there was no nudity — these are 1940s, '50s [stills], there's no nudity in films of that period. That's when it first began to click: everyone does see something different, because it's operating beneath the conscious radar of ordinary perception. What you're seeing is going directly to your brain." Not everyone is happy with his recent film-collage experiments, Stezaker admitted. "My work is generally very contemplative, and about stillness, halting the image," he said. "This is about violence, and mobility, and the incessant cinematic image: Too-muchness." As a counterbalance to his usual working methods — grappling with the source material, changing it or obfuscating it, redirecting its potential meanings — "Blind" was an exercise in abandon. "Every time I look at this film, I see a different film, and I find that disconcerting," he said. "I'm a control freak."