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**CONTEMPORARY
COLLAGE
MAGAZINE**

ISSUE #7



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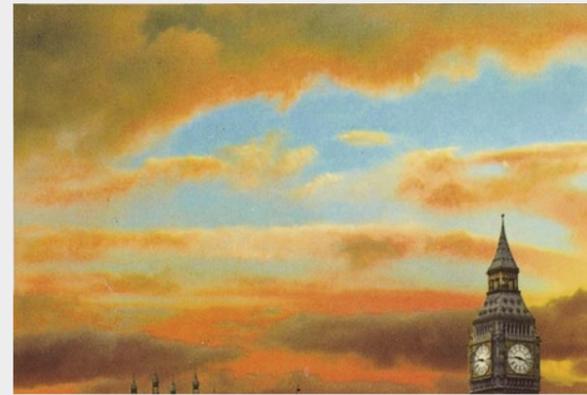
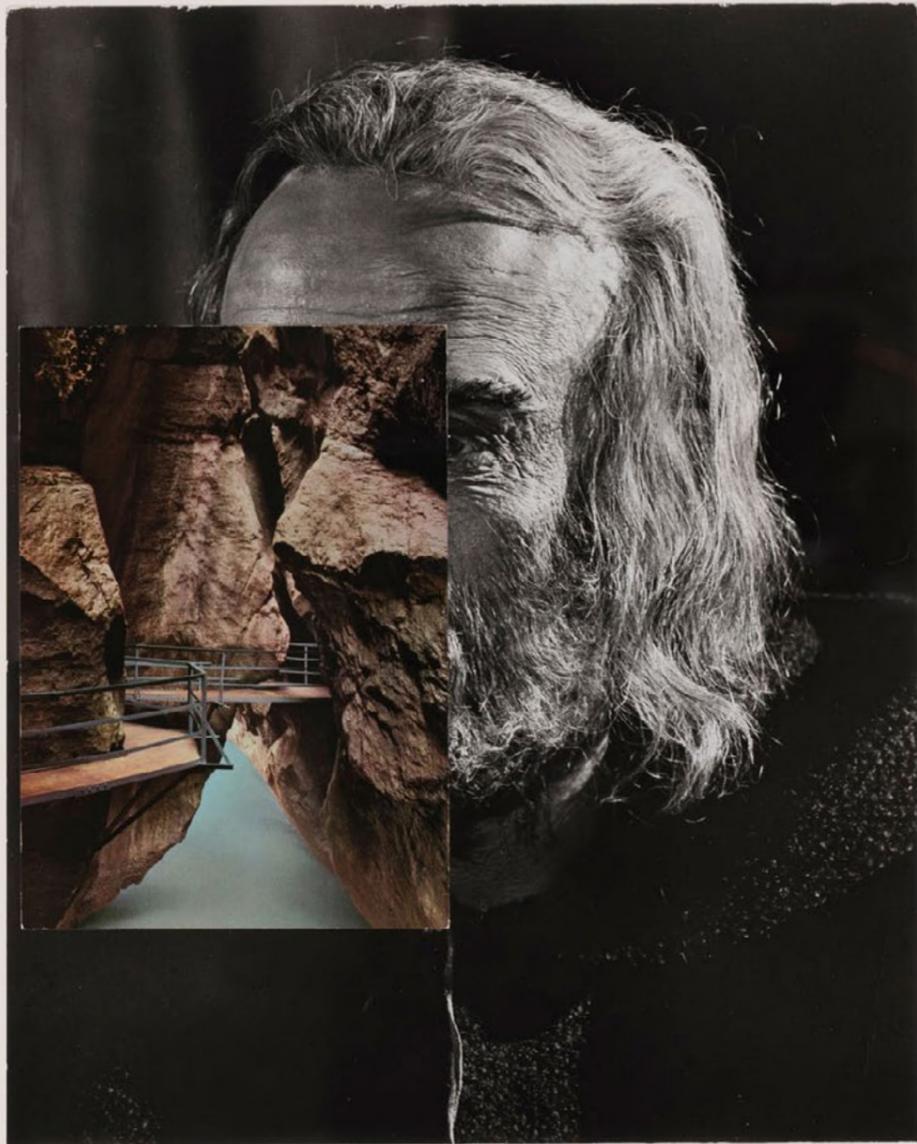


Left : **John Stezaker** by *Les Jones*
Below : **Mask**, 1992



John Stezaker

John Stezaker has been a pioneering force in contemporary collage for over five decades, known for transforming found photographs into unsettling, poetic new realities. Since the 1970s, he has used simple cuts and unexpected juxtapositions to disrupt familiar imagery and reveal hidden meanings. His work blends elegance with disquiet, inviting viewers to question identity, memory and the nature of the image itself. Stezaker's collages slow us down, and remind us of the strange magic in the photographic fragment. **Les Jones** met him in his studio in St. Leonards-on-Sea to look back at his career and talk about recent projects.



This page : 'The End' 1967-73
Left : Prophet, 2019

...One day art could be reduced to being just a recycling department of the culture industry. I thought this was an apocalyptic possibility. "

Hi John, can we start with your little image called *The End*, which is a very early piece that you described as your 'apocalyptic possibility'...

That goes back a long time. When I was 13 years old, my father changed jobs, and his leaving present was a projector, which I duly appropriated. There was only one demonstration slide that came with the projector. It was a picture of the Houses of Parliament, with two men standing by the Thames in the foreground. I had been to a show at the Tate Gallery where a number of famous artists such as Monet, Derain, Kokoschka had represented variations on that scene.

I'd never liked drawing buildings much, so I projected the image onto my bedroom wall to trace from it. However, the projection was large, and I could only get the top left-hand corner onto the paper I was painting on – it was an evening sunset with the top of Big Ben in the corner. I thought, '*this is amazing, it's going to be up there with the greats – psychedelic expressionism*'. The painted sunset was insane. But when I opened the curtains, I realised it was a complete disaster. However, the intensity of that image stayed with me and I wanted to recapture it somehow.

By the age of sixteen, by which time I'd decided I wanted to be an artist, one day, I was walking towards the Tate by Westminster Tube station and I saw the entire image from the slide on a giant postcard. I bought the card and I took the fragment from the top left corner and I tried a more

conventional way of enlarging by squaring up, but that never went anywhere. I began to realise that what was already there was better than anything I could do with it. I kept it with me and thought that one day art could be reduced to being just a recycling department of the culture industry. I thought this was an apocalyptic possibility.

In my later teens, I became a film enthusiast. I used to go to the local cinemas and I'd deliberately miss the A feature and wait for the black-and-white B-movies, which I loved. And I noticed, over and over again, that I would see images of Big Ben, with that exact scene with the sky behind, usually at night and then the words... 'The End'. So, I started collecting from cinema. I tried to take pictures in the cinema but failed. But eventually I worked out that I could take images from TV with a slow shutter speed, which meant I didn't get that bar going through the image. So I built a collection of Big Ben images, with the words... 'The End'. And that's when the title came.

It was a seminal moment. It made me realise that what was out there already in the world was a great deal more interesting than anything I could conspire to create. And, more importantly, I realised that my fascination for images was not for things I could possibly create – it was quite the opposite. It was for things that I hadn't had any effect on. I realised that I somehow lacked the imagination that a lot of artists have to create their own images. Mine had to be out there in the world already.



This page, left : **Mask**, 2016
Right : **Marriage VIII**, 2006
Opposite : **Mask**, 2022

Was that the start of your route into collage?

Not exactly. As it happened, my mother, who loved getting rid of things, was throwing out some old shopping catalogues sometime in my teens. And I retrieved them. I had a particular interest in adverts for stiletto heels and, at the time, the catalogues had adverts for stiletto shoes and handbags. The way they were photographed, with the stiletto shoe hovering above the bag, was like a kind of bird flitting around its nest. I started to make collages with them. But I preferred the original images just as they were. They looked bizarre. When I got into the Slade School of Art, one of the first paintings I did was an enlargement of one of these images in silhouette.

Was collage on your radar at that point?

No, I didn't know much about it. That came after another seminal moment. On my first day at The Slade, we were being shown around by Sir William Coldstream (who became a great friend and supporter). Like all the other students, I was bored. But then he took us into the rare book section of the Library and he pulled out a first edition of *Une Semaine de Bonte* by Max Ernst. Everyone moved on, and I was left there alone. I was transfixed and I knew immediately, this is what I wanted to do. From that point onwards, it became my major interest.

I read that you were anti *Pop Art* at that time...

Yes, kind of. In my second year in 1969, I opened up a magazine with a very small reproduction of one of Gerhard Richter's *Politburo* series. That seemed to offer up a different way of painting from found images. I was still trying to find a way into painting. I always have. In fact, I still see myself as a painter, just by other means. I travelled across Europe to see the Richter show that the reproduction advertised. But, when I encountered the real painting I was a little underwhelmed. But I came across another artist, Sigmar Polke, whose work I found fascinating. I kept in touch with him over the years. Both Polke

and Richter were making collages at the time and as I was also collecting images I felt I could do so too without it being regarded as Pop. I felt an affinity to this approach to the found image.

It seemed very retrogressive at that time to call myself a collage artist, but I did call them collages. For a long time, my collage practice was quite secretive. I had stopped going into the Slade after my first year. I never got used to being overseen by tutors.

Let's talk about your *Mask* series which has been an ongoing theme in your work since 1982...

It is my most famous series and it probably represents some of my best work. Actually, for years, I've been trying to find an end to the *Masks*. In those works, I'm obviously suggesting a face, but simultaneously suggesting what's behind the face, and also that ambiguous space between what's in front of you and what's behind, which is very much like the way you look at a face and an image as well. When I see a face, I see a mask. I see the eyes and mouth, which are tangible, but when I look at you, I'm also looking behind the expression. In many ways, that's where art begins in the space behind.

About 10 years ago, I more or less stopped doing *Masks*. They had kind of petered out anyway, and they're not really as ongoing as you might imagine. They do still come into my work sporadically and that's because I have my two main collections of portraits of film stars and postcards. So, inevitably they come together. Even if I'm working on something else, I'll suddenly see two images and think, *'that would make a great mask'*. Throughout the different periods in which I have been working on the *Masks*, I've been focusing on and emphasising different things – eyes, mouths, other features. Sometimes the works seem to close off the head as a mask, sometimes they seem to open as a face. When they work, they are ambiguously both.





One of my attempts to terminate the *Mask* series resulted in probably the most reproduced of my works. I decided that instead of trying to find a feature of a face in the postcard I would use imagery that created the illusion of looking straight through it. The postcard I used was of a sea arch, so there was only empty space behind. That's how I thought I would finish this series, but it only opened up a new dimension to them. For several years, I have avoided faces and masks and focused on their absence. That approach resulted in the *Shadow* pieces and the *Double Shadow* series and nearly a whole decade of silhouette work, which was a deliberate attempt to get away from the face.

Recently, I've had this urge to go back to the face and to presence rather than absence. I recognise that the face is really at the heart of the image. Not only in my work, but for the whole of art – it all starts with the face, with the death mask. I've been reading a great book by Hans Belting called *Face and Mask*, on the histories of the face and mask which hints at the origins of the 'image', and it really begins with the way that human remains were treated in Neolithic culture. Portraiture seems to come out of the death cult and the need to create a space for the return of the dead. It helped me realise that I had to return to my more familiar territory, and the result was a new series of collages called "*Comics*" which were recently shown in Vienna. That has led me back to some new *Mask* pieces.

There's a small number of *Mask* collages in my studio at the moment which I think will survive. I never know. It takes a month or two to see what works survive. It's a sifting process. It always is. I get terribly excited when I'm inspired and in the throes of creating new works. I can get to the stage where there's a lot of work. And then, slowly for any number of reasons they fall by the way-side. It's sometimes like sand through the fingers until there's nothing left. But that's fine, because I will have learned something. These cul de sacs may open up later with subsequent insights.

There's an interesting juxtaposition between the simplicity of your images versus the complexity

of meaning and interpretation...

I absolutely go for simplicity. My favourite pieces are the pieces I do nothing to at all. I call these my '*unassisted ready-mades*'. To me, they're God-given. They have a purity. There's a rule in logic called 'minimum mutation', I've adapted the idea to 'minimum mutilation'. My maxim for collage is to do the least to the image possible. Because the less I do to an image, the more I'm interested. To be honest, I often feel that I am the interference in what I want to achieve – I'm the one that gets in the way. So, the less I'm involved, the better it is for me.

So, what represents success for you in an image?

There are some pieces when I know instantly that they work. It's impossible to say what that is, because it defies the understanding that would give me some grasp on it. It's something to do with otherness, it's the otherness of the image, the sense of the image that doesn't belong, and that somehow dispossesses me.

Is there an element of surprise involved...

Oh yes, it has to be that. And it has to be that for everyone else. That's the key thing. I don't know why, but I always know what's going to work, because when I see something that absolutely works, everyone sees it. It doesn't matter whether that's the cleaning lady or the head of a gallery, they all get it. And that's what I love about it, because it's absolutely beyond me and beyond explanation.

But perhaps they never quite get it at the level that you do in that moment of creation...

Maybe. A lot of people attempt to do what I do. I was recently shown a series of online videos on 'how to do a John Stezaker'. I didn't do more than glance at one or two of the images they created, but they just didn't get what I was doing at all. There are so many awful interpretations of what I do. I feel contaminated by these imitations. However, people say to me, '*but John, you're appropriating from the media in the first place*'. I guess I don't like being the victim of appropriation myself. In general, I dislike the re-appropriation of collage by the media as graphics.

I like photography to be instrumental and transparent. Only against this can I reveal its hidden, enigmatic and opaque qualities.

How big a moment was winning the Deutsche Börse Prize?

It was my show at the Whitechapel Gallery that got me that prize. I suddenly found myself the object of a lot of media focus. I'd worked for thirty odd years without anybody paying too much attention. I'd been showing with Approach Gallery for five years before this, but the Whitechapel show seemed to bring me a much bigger audience.

The prize is given to the photographer whose exhibition has the biggest influence. I didn't see myself as a photographer and felt I wasn't eligible for the prize.

Was there a reaction to you winning on the basis that you are not a photographer...

Well, I've never been very popular with photographers for obvious reasons. I'm appropriating their work. I'm cutting it up. What could be more offensive to a photographer? But, of course, the images that I collect and cut up would normally fall under the category of vernacular photography. But that in itself has been quite controversial in that many people believe vernacular photography should be taken a lot more seriously. I am definitely one of these, but I cannot escape being described as a vandal when it comes to my work with these images.

I can only use photography that's somehow innocent, that isn't trying to be aesthetic in any way. I couldn't possibly use anything that was attempting to be art. Not because I wouldn't want to offend. It just gives me a feeling of distaste. I like photography to be instrumental and transparent. Only against this can I reveal its hidden, enigmatic and opaque qualities.

Let's move on to another project, *The Spell* project, which is relatively recent body of work...

Yes, it is. It's a by-product of the *Double Shadows* series which was done right at the end of lockdown. I had spent a lot of time on cut out silhouettes. I enjoyed the way that these absences within the photographic space enticed the viewer to fill in.

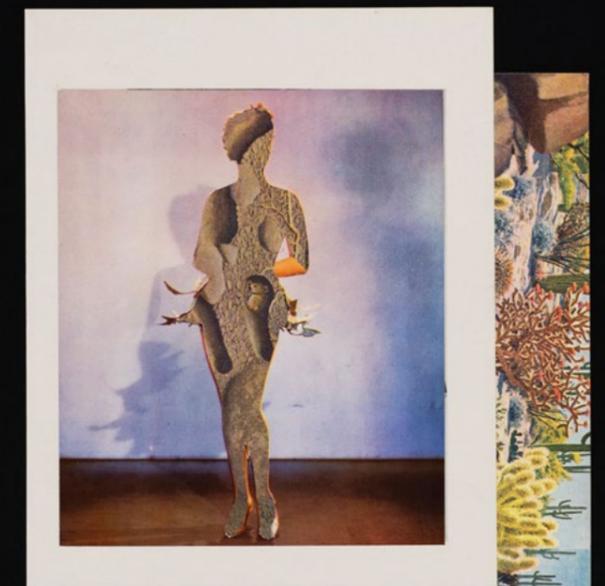
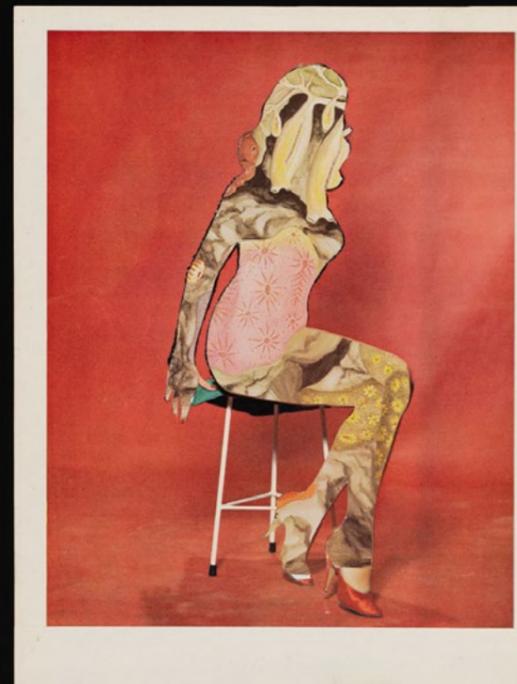
When I doubled these absences by using two silhouettes I felt that I was drawing, inventing figures and faces. There was an element of caricature in them. The *Double Shadows* occupied me for nearly two years and so I had a lot of available cut out when I came across a 1960 illustrated book of invertebrates in a junk shop and started to combine these with my cut out silhouettes to make my "*Spell*" series. At the time I had been reading '*Literature and the Gods*' by Roberto Calasso, which is about the relationship of metamorphosis to myth and poetry

The idea of metamorphosis has interested me for a long time. With a lot of my works, including *Masks*, you're actually looking at a visual process of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis, Calasso suggests, is where we project ideas of an afterlife and of death. The images in the invertebrates book represented this slimy, degenerative breakdown of the body in death. As soon as I combined the two, I knew straight away that there was a new series of works there.

My wife likes to be read to at night and she's particularly into magic realism. We'd finished all the available books by our favourite magic realist authors so I pulled out some of the illustrated books of fairy tales that my mother had read to me when I was a child. It was the end of lockdown and I had recently inherited these books, but hadn't opened them for over 60 years. As I did so, I was suddenly struck by where so many of the images in my work had come from. All of this fed into the *Spell* series of works – it's a complete mix of influences and I'm still not sure where I was going with these.

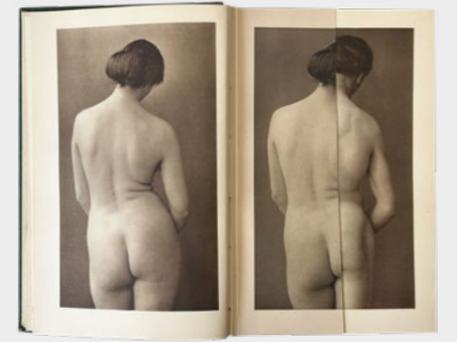
Did the fears and fragility of lock-down also seep into that series?

Do you know, I think you're right, but that had never occurred to me until you said it. I saw lockdown as a wonderful relief from the pressures of exhibiting. But there is definitely a very dark side to these pieces. When you're in the midst of apocalypse, you cannot see the apocalyptic dimension.





Left page, top : **Life Room**, 2023
 Bottom : **Mask**, 2018
 This page, right : **Anatomy Book**



Do people who view your work find meanings in pieces that you've never even considered?

Oh, yes, everyone does it. I'm the last person to know what I'm doing. Maurice Blanchot, the French writer, was famous for saying that the writer is the last person who can read their own work. I really don't feel I'm confident enough to be an authoritative voice on my own work. I think images find me rather than the other way around. I'm always surprised by what critics say.

At my New Zealand show I had hoped to use an essay by a feminist critic in the UK who had written about my work as exposing the strangeness of sexual stereotypes. However, the curator of the exhibition thought of me as a nostalgist. They came to me to adjudicate, and I said, *'I can't, because I don't know myself'*. In the end, the curator pulled rank and dropped her essay. So, inevitably, I became a nostalgist for sexual stereotypes!

How much do you feel there's an element of fate or destiny in images finding each other.

Very much so. More and more I feel that my work is guided from elsewhere. In the early days I was inspired by William Burrough's *'Third Mind'*, which introduced me to Jung's concept of synchronicity and I realised that collage was a way of exploring this dimension of our experience, Burroughs suggests that we look at what happens coincidentally in the space of consumption as in itself significant. Rather than seeing everything diachronically in terms of cause and effect, when we actually look at the simultaneous present of image culture, what Burroughs called the *'naked lunch'* of consumption, we see everything very differently and ordinary things take on a strange significance. My image collection represents a kind of synchronous universe which for me is an extended open field for games of chance – my collage series.

I suppose you have to be receptive as well.
 Yes, absolutely. But only at certain moments.

If I start work in the morning and think I know what I am doing, I am already lost. The magic happens when, at some point in the day, I might stumble across an image and think, *'Ah, that's interesting'*, and go off on a tangent. When I have lost a sense of what I am pursuing is when I am open and receptive to finding. I often think finding is the opposite of searching and that the search can be an impediment to finding.

Your series, *The Life Room*, combines male and female silhouettes. What was the concept behind that series?

I have been collecting photographic books of *"surface anatomy"*, essentially life room studies of men and women in approximately the same poses. I have made collages with these since the 70s. The first Thompson's *'Elements of Surface Anatomy'* was the recommended book for anatomy classes at the Slade right up to the year before I arrived. After that, the anatomy lectures were discontinued. The book was immediately redundant and I became fascinated with the images in it, which I have worked with first as paintings, as a student, and later as collages. As I acquired more copies of this book over the years, I have made book works by collaging them. I found different ways of combining the male and female figures. A recent find, an American book, became the source of the *"Life Room"* series, which like many of its precursors contained photographs of male and female nudes in similar positions. By adopting the strategy employed in the *Double Shadows* I was able to extend the sense of drawing I felt in the *Double Shadows* with full figures and in a context which had an association with drawing itself, the life class. They started on black grounds, like the *Double Shadows* and slowly they moved through various tonalities until they were on white.

At that moment, as they nearly disappeared, they started they started to look like faint life drawings. I really felt a spooky sense that I had arrived back in the Slade life room in 1967.



Everything starts with an image and then the concept develops gradually, it unfolds. I have to see something before I want to apply an idea to it."



The project is too recent to reflect on. Only four of them have ever been shown, but there are about 40 or so in the series. The last few years have been incredibly productive. I think lock down was very important, many of the real breakthroughs occurred during that period. It freed up the work, it was liberating. I miss the space, and I associate that time particularly with my studio in St. Leonards. A lot of colour work emerged during that period. But when I came back to London, I instantly went back to black and white with the *Life Room* series.

How much would you consider yourself to be a conceptual artist. You seem to start with a concept and then explore where it takes you...

I'm not sure I agree with that. I actually think it's the opposite. Everything starts with an image and then the concept develops gradually, it unfolds. I have to see something before I want to apply an idea to it.

I think it was Sol Le Witt who talked about the concept as being the engine of the work, but I disagree with that. That is where my defection from Conceptualism began. My work first emerged in the context of British conceptual art, but I quickly realised that I was sacrificing the most important thing, the image. It has to start with the image.

A lot of collage has this idea of detour (détournement), of turning an image from one purpose to another. But, in the end, I didn't want my images to serve any purpose, even in a subversive way. You could take an advertising image which served the purpose of advertising something and turn it into a commentary on consumerism. But I didn't want to do that. I thought I did for a while. I realised that's not what compelled me about images and that in the application of any concept to an image shackles its meaning.

Interestingly, it was another image that changed my view. It was an encounter with an old film still image. At the time, my conceptual appropriations were emphatically contemporary, influenced by Situationism in the early 70s. But, I realised I was drawn to older images. I had a parallel practice of collage in which I was using photographs which were incredibly out of date, and I realised I didn't like the contemporary photos. I was always looking for older ones. It was the act of looking backwards that made me realise that I wasn't making a commentary on contemporary culture. I wasn't being critical. I wanted to follow the image and see where that took me. Rather than trying to guide the image, I wanted to be guided by it and that's where I've been ever since.

Are you still searching, and being surprised by where things take you?

Yes, though I don't have the same enthusiasm for going around second-hand book shops. I have a vast collection of images and I can endlessly go around searching for them without leaving the studio. Though having said this, I do occasionally find new image sources. I feel as though I've spent my life in a little bubble where I'm free to do what I want to do without external pressures. I've tried to shut out the outside world and have never been very political. I don't pay much attention to politics. Until this year when I have become almost the opposite – hyper attentive to what is going on in the world. Looking at the state of the world I am just grateful to have lived in a stable enough environment to be free to play within the chaos of images I've accumulated. Somehow, when the outside world is in chaos, it seems to challenge my freedom to play in my own invented chaos

Above : *Mask*, 2024

Right, top left : **Untitled**, 2021
Top right : **Untitled**, 2024
Bottom right : **The Ventriloquist**
Bottom Left : **Comics**
-
Next spread, left page : **Mask**, 2016

I began to think that all art really comes down to the face and to making present what is absent. "

Another very recent project is your *Comic series* – how did that come about?

My mother used to have a collage of mine on her wall, called *Father Sky*, which was a silhouette of a man with a night sky inside his silhouette and a daytime sky outside. She said that she saw more of her husband in that silhouette than in all the photographs of him assembled on the mantelpiece. It made me realise just how powerful the silhouette is for recalling what has been lost – the dead or the fallen. Silhouettes have always been used in that context.

For the best part of a decade after my mother died, I did almost nothing but work with silhouettes of one kind or another. Then it was around two or three years ago that I began to feel that dwelling on absence the whole time, however powerful it was in allowing people to create their own figures within the works, maybe wasn't really where the heart of the image was.

I realised that I needed to get back to more familiar territory. I started with a very simple idea of using a horizontal cut substituting female eyes on a male or vice versa. They didn't really work. And then I put a pair of female eyes with makeup onto a girl. And that was really strange. And I thought, *'I like that'*. Then I tried a boy with male eyes and that worked. But I didn't pursue it, sometimes you have to allow time for things to happen.

Down in St. Leonards I have a collection of mannequin heads of children and I had some photographs taken of them. I used just the images of their eyes and used these to blindfold portraits of film stars. I called that series *The Ventriloquist* because it was a sort of reversal of human and mannequin.

I thought this was going to be a new series, but in the end I realised only certain combinations worked. It had to be men and they had to be showing their teeth. Only a couple of these have survived. I carried on pursuing this idea later, using the eyes from Gothic sculptures. I had been reading Hans Belting and in another of his books he talks about the age of innocence of the image before the advent of the concept of art and the aesthetic when the image was dedicated to making present the sacred.

These images centred on the eyes. They were not so much eyes to be seen by the viewer or worshipper but were eyes from which to be seen. It was important to be in the presence of the sacred gaze. Something about this idea informed on the *"Comics"*, which started with images of comedians, though the title also suggests to me the graphic novel sense of comic and of caricature.

When you go to a comedy, you're not going there to immerse yourself in another reality, you're going there to laugh at yourself. It's life reflected back on you. I was happy somehow to be back thinking about the face and the portrait. I began to think that all art really comes down to the face and to making present what is absent.

The role of the religious image is to bring the sacred, the unknown into our space. And if you really focus on what part of the face you're looking at, it's the eyes. In fact, it's the two or three millimeters of the pupil, which is our aperture into the grotto of the world of another, the unknown, the otherness of the world you can never know. And yet, all communication is based on the idea that somehow you can surmount that obstacle, that you can share a world.





I get very depressed if I'm not working. I've just been through an unproductive period of about six weeks, when that happens I begin to doubt everything."



All of art, everything, is based on this myth. The whole of society is based on it. And it occurred to me, that the image is absolutely central to the whole of our civilisation, our culture, everything – much more than language. It's difficult to look intensely into someone's eyes for very long because of the discomfort with that intimacy. Our culture is based on that deflection from the face to the image of the face. The image, by contrast, allows you the illusion of access. We're attracted to what we can never go to and all art is based on that. That's the realisation I've come to recently, which is a rather depressing one in some ways, but in other ways it is liberating. Anyway, those thoughts were somehow connected to the new *Comic* series and as a result of it, a new series of *Masks* that have emerged. These represent a change of direction with the *Masks* focusing on the eyes and the pupil.

Your career seems to be littered with little epiphanies, moments of enlightenment...

Yes, that's true. But, believe me, I go through long periods where nothing happens. I get very depressed if I'm not working. I've just been through an unproductive period of about six weeks, when that happens I begin to doubt everything.

How much are you aware of your influence and your legacy? Along with Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, Rauschenberg, Peter Blake, your name is often mentioned as a major influence on the collage artists we interview.

Well, I feel in very good company there. And yes, I am aware of my influence to a degree. I hope my influence goes beyond the microcosm of collage and it is worth pointing out that I do a lot of things beside collage. There are my image fragments,

which I often collect in books. I also make films, silk screen prints on canvas and small 3D works. A lot of people think they know what I am doing, but they would be surprised if they saw the scope of my practice.

I'm not really too aware of my profile. I don't pay much attention to it or social media. That said, I was really dismayed when they put me on the A level curriculum. I thought, *'That's it...career over!'*. And then, when I was dropped from A levels to O levels, I thought *'it's going to be the kindergarten next'*. Full circle.

Do you think collage still has a relevance as a medium in this digital age?

Yes, of course. However, if I can be frank, there's not much that I see going on that I like. I've actually stopped doing a lot of the big group collage shows because I'm dismayed by some of the content. I'm a big supporter of collage though, and I've always deliberately called my work collage to make that connection with history, with some of those people that you've mentioned. I'm very interested in early collage, but contemporary collage, for the most part, I don't like, but there are some exceptions. That said, I'm so busy, I don't actively look at a lot of contemporary collage. Maybe I should take more of an interest. But to answer your question I definitely think that collage is as important as ever in the process of disrupting, fracturing and alienating the seamless continuum of the image world of our digital age.

You can see more of John's work on Saatchi Gallery : saatchigallery.com/artist/john_stezaker