

The approach

John Stezaker

Spell



John Stezaker, *Spell*, 2022

6 – 28 September 2024

Preview: Thursday 5 September, 6-9pm

The Approach is pleased to present *Spell*, a solo exhibition by John Stezaker celebrating the gallery's 20-year working relationship with the artist. The exhibition brings together two new bodies of work, the *Spell* and *Life Room* series, alongside Stezaker's ongoing *Mask* series (1982 – Present).

Created during the emergence from lockdown, the *Spell* series is inspired by images of animal/human hybrids in Classical mythology and fairytales and their associated themes of magical enchantment and metamorphosis. By cutting silhouettes from his preferred source imagery of 1950s publicity portraits of film stars, Stezaker imposes his cutouts onto natural history illustrations. These contemporaneous illustrations of invertebrates and their aqueous underworlds are used as metaphors for the instability of human identity, through interspecies hybrids and gender fluidity. Figures, like the nymph and the siren, are what the late writer Roberto Calasso (1941-2021) would refer to as mediators between worlds: real and unreal, sacred and profane. In their metamorphic states they bring the magic of the unknown into the everyday world. For Stezaker, 1950's cinema cast a similar spell: a shadow world of deception and psychological entrapment on the one hand and a space of magic and enchantment on the other.

The *Life Room* series superimposes male and female silhouettes from an artists' anatomy book in which figures are posed in similar ways with identical props. It is a doubling strategy in which the delineations of masculine and feminine bodies intertwine ambiguously. These androgynous figures occupy an austere landscape of Platonic forms (plinths suggesting sculptures) which, in their association with gender mutations, take on an otherworldly significance.

Stezaker's *Mask* series is an ongoing body of work in which the faces of 1950s publicity portraits are obscured by found vintage postcards. These incompatible images come together to create an ambiguous presence, part face part mask. The contours of a jawline becomes a cliff's edge; a foaming waterfall becomes the flowing coiffure of the 50s movie star. It is a play on *pareidolia*, the human predisposition to see faces and figures in amorphous and otherwise non-human configurations. These ambiguous images act as meeting points of receptive (optical) vision and projected (imaginary) vision. Stezaker's images resist the cultural domination of the former, ultimately restoring the viewers' participation in images. By removing images from mass circulation, Stezaker cultivates a poetic strangeness from the generic and the everyday.

John Stezaker (b. 1949, Worcester) lives and works in London and St. Leonards-on-Sea. Recent solo exhibitions include: *John Stezaker*, Fondazione Morra Greco, Naples, Italy (2021); *At the Edge of Pictures: John Stezaker, Works 1975–1990*, Luxembourg & Co, London, UK (2020); *John Stezaker*, National Portrait Gallery, London (2019); *Lost World*, City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand (touring show) (2017-2018); *John Stezaker*, Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, UK; *Aftermath*, York Art Gallery, UK (2017); *Film Works*, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, UK; *Collages*, Fotomuseum Nederlands, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2015); *John Stezaker*, Centre de la Photographie Genève, Switzerland; *John Stezaker: Working from the Collection*, Les Rencontres Arles Photographie, Arles, France; *John Stezaker: One on One*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel (2013); *Marriage*, Haggerty Museum of Art, Milwaukee, USA; *John Stezaker*, The Whitechapel Gallery, London, touring to MUDAM, Luxembourg and Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, USA (2011-2012); *Lost Images*, Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany (2010).

Stezaker was awarded the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize in 2012. His work has been the focus of a number of publications, including *John Stezaker: At the Edge of Pictures*, Yuval Etgar, Koenig Books, London (2020); *John Stezaker: Love*, London: Ridinghouse, published on the occasion of *Love at The Approach*, London (2019); *John Stezaker: Lost World*, London: Ridinghouse, published on the occasion of *Lost World*, touring exhibition in various Australia and New Zealand locations (2018) and *John Stezaker*, London: Ridinghouse, in association with Whitechapel Gallery, Mudam Luxembourg, and Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum (2010).

Stezaker's work is in collections worldwide, including: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; Arts Council England, UK; Birmingham Museums Trust, UK; British Council Collection, UK; Ellipse Foundation Contemporary Art Collection, Cascais, Portugal; FRAC Ilede-France/ Le Plateau, Paris, France; Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA; MoMA, New York, USA; MUDAM Collection, Luxembourg; RISD Museum of Art, Providence, USA; The Rubell Family Collection, Miami, USA; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna, Austria; Seattle Art Museum, Washington, USA; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Tate Collection, London, UK; The University of Warwick Art Collection, Coventry, UK; The York Museum Trust, York, UK; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK.