

John Stezaker, 'Care and Control', Salama Caro Gallery.

John Stezaker's latest collages are largely based on depictions of the human head, found images of magazine portraits, but with a part or the whole of the head cut away to reveal pasted beneath details of other illustrations, themselves usually clichés of style and substance. The portions that are cut away make silhouettes of other figures, usually half length and sometimes of a recognizably different character from the head depicted.

In this process ideal figures, stars or models, are doubled or tripled and can be read either as many figures or as facets of the same one. Oppositions are often set up between the collage elements (the head, for instance, may be male and the figure female) but the identities are always shifting. In one piece a representation of a woman embraces a silhouette containing floral samples, yet even here we cannot separate the figures for a frond in the silhouette has to be read as the woman's hand on the figure's back, so the merging of identities is maintained.

Much of the effect is produced by reading one image into another. In *Thinker* (1990), Rodin's famous piece appears in silhouette made up of an illustration of toucans in a forest seen sideways on. The birds' bodies and beaks can be read as the legs of the thinker and there is a strong temptation to reconstruct other features out of the tangled foliage. The feathers of the birds and their stubby tails transform the figure's legs into animal shanks and hooves, making of it a kind of satyr.

Stezaker actively signals the found nature of these images, sometimes showing us the gap where a reproduction ran over the gutter of the page. The archaism of the reproductions, which appear to be borrowed from the pages of old children's books or popular magazines, serves to make them emotionally opaque. The medium is so apparent that the subjects appear barely human. Sometimes this archaism is evident in the subject matter, as in *Vase II* (1990) where a woman in folk costume cheerfully lifts a pitcher over her shoulder.

While the style is that of bland illustration of the kind seen in a Ladybird book, the subject seen in this context refers to the many depictions of *La Source*. In other cases the archaic quality is presented more subtly, being hinted at in the quality of reproduction, read in the fragment of a face or the silhouette of a hair style. Stezaker plays with creating monsters but the blandness and familiarity of the material mitigates any feeling of disquiet. These figures are at once familiar and alien.

Inside the silhouettes dwell many childish fantasies: model railways, sublime mountain scenes, musket wielding soldiers, the heroism of revolution, myriad plants and animals, the immensities of outer space, the nudist camp. Images are sometimes seen with the silhouettes upside down or sideways on. They have been worked on in the head. It is easy to read collage devices in terms of Freudian dream work such as condensation, transference and the proliferation of identities. We can certainly read these collages as comments on the construction of the personality by reproductions, how heads are (literally) filled with childish representations, advertising fantasies and the underlying detritus of childhood. Since views through this material, opening up new spaces, give only onto more of the same, and since there is no escape from representation to reality, these images relate in a rather facile way to Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality.

In the collaging of found images, Stezaker often plays with contrasts between monochrome and colour, reproduced art work and reproduced photograph. There is relatively little work where photographic prints appear. One example is *Shadow* (1990) where the silhouette (containing an illustration of the typical fauna of some environment) casts a shadow on a real brick wall behind it. The cutting of the images often seem to give views onto another world, another spatial dimension and occasionally, as here, onto another form of representation. More often though a banal image of adult fantasy is cut away to reveal a banal image of childish fantasy.

In some pieces, toys and models make up environments lending a further level of representation and fabrication to these images. References are not to the real urban environment of the documentary photographer but to toy-town. The innocence of childhood, of the nudist, of the movie cults of the fifties, even of the early advert, are related to the innocence of the culture to reproduction and representation. The figures of the fifties, clean cut, unknowing, innocently sexualised live unaware in a world where (in the rhetoric of these images) the seeds of post-modernity are being sown.

While the subject matter is accessible and banal, there are other indications for the knowing viewer. There are obvious references to Surrealism, in the iconography of birds and dead fishes, in the whole idea of the cut through which another world is glimpsed. The archaism of the source material and the undermining of its ideology is related to Ernst's collage novels; Magritte is clearly quoted in *Father Sky* (1990) where a silhouette seen against a bright blue sky with clouds contains a night sky full of comets and shooting stars; reading one thing in terms of another is of course a device much found in Dalí.

The borrowed material of these assemblages are resistant to most kinds of aesthetic reading. Subject matter and material are one. We may admire the composition and the ingenuity, the care and control, with which they are put together, but the lack of lighting, surface and handling allows Stezaker no expression. This is of course just as it should be given the logic of the work: a reading of Stezaker in terms of his images can only lead us to further layers of simulation and reproduction. It is certainly easy to read these images in terms of modern theory: the Lacanian construction of the personality, the deconstructionist implication of a dominant concept seen (through a cut) in its opposite, although it is only a reading in terms of hyper-reality that will take account of the found and reproduced nature of the images. The contrast at the heart of these works is not between represented and real, but between the unknowing primitives of popular culture, and the conscious, ironic artist and viewer of post-modern images.

John Stezaker's exhibition 'Care and Control' was on show at the Salama Caro Gallery, London in February.