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## **A Fine Romance**

## **The Must-See Show in London**



John Stezaker, *Untitled* (2010) © John Stezaker. Courtesy The Approach, London. Photo credit: FXP Photography

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Many artists use collage, but few do so as effectively as John Stezaker. For more than 40 years this English artist has been slicing, splicing and overlaying found photographic images to create strange new visions. In his hands, black and white portraits of forgotten actors, old movie stills and vintage postcards of scenic spots assume eerie, dreamlike qualities and begin to conjure stories very different than the originals.

Stezaker's current exhibition ("[Love](#)", until 25 March) at The Approach gallery shows his early and rarely seen "Photoroman" collages dating from the 1970s, which are displayed alongside a more recent body of work combining old landscape postcards with black-and-white film stills. In both series, Stezaker prowls around notions of obsession, desire, suspicion and betrayal through the various embracing couples that line the walls.



John Stezaker, *Kiss IV (Photoroman)* (1978) © John Stezaker. Courtesy The Approach, London. Photo credit: Damian Griffiths

Stezaker was making theoretical, text-based work when, on a trip to Italy in 1973, he first discovered the romantic photo-novels that would inspire him to start working with images. It is fascinating to see that many of his strategies of disruption and interrogation were in place from the start.

In *Kiss V (Photoroman)* and *Kiss IX (Photoroman)* (both 1977), the lovers embracing against a backdrop of geometric 1970s wallpaper have lost their speech bubbles and are instead subjected to rippings, realignments and superimpositions of new imagery. Stezaker complicates their storylines, destabilizing straightforward readings of their clinches.



John Stezaker, *Enter...(Exit)... the Third Person III (Photoroman)*(1977) © John Stezaker. Courtesy The Approach, London. Photo credit: FXP Photography

In other “Photoroman” works, such as *Enter...(Exit) ... the Third Person III (Photoroman)* (1977), which presents an embrace from a maelstrom of different perspectives, pasting in an image of a male observer, Stezaker mixes up the sequence of events and brings together different images into one story frame. Multiple elements and viewpoints mess with what were originally linear narratives: relationships become ambiguous, tensions flare and doubt sets in.

In more recent film-still works, Stezaker hides the lovers’ faces beneath picture postcards of scenic views, to disquieting effect. In *Double Mask II (Film Portrait Collage)* (2017), the artist superimposes a color postcard of bulging rocky cliffs over the faces of a movie couple. All we can see are her bare upper body and glittering necklace, the side of his head and his hands clutching her shoulders.



John Stezaker, *Double Mask II (Film Portrait Collage)*(2017) © John Stezaker. Courtesy The Approach, London. Photo credit: Damian Griffiths

In *High Rocks X* (2015), a still of a clinching couple is partially covered by a postcard of a tree-topped chasm that is linked on both sides by a bridge, upon which a tiny pair of figures stands. Are they miniature alter egos of the main players?

These later collages flip between the uncanny and the absurd, as the contours of the landscapes suggestively echo and play with the outlines of faces and bodies beneath. It seems such a simple act, to overlay one image with another. Yet, in his acute fusion of images Stezaker carries out an act of smothering and concealment while also opening up a dramatic alternative world. His art nods at the psyches of lovers, tipping a cap to Freud and the Surrealists along the way.