

The Secret Life of Puppets

March 14 – May 3, 2025

There are a lot of people, but even more faces, because everyone has several.

–Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*

The procedure seems simple: the scalpel cuts a part out of one image and inserts it into another in such a way that it fits perfectly into the composition. For decades, John Stezaker has been deconstructing the mass media-generated glamour of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood film stars in his photo collages, merging disparate elements and assembling image layers into surreal hybrids that alienate the seemingly familiar. Sections are changed, rotated, layers penetrate each other, images are positioned above and next to each other.

A collage's actual meaning, however, arises in-between a particular cut, when identities merge into new characters without negating their difference. Male and female film stars become one, landscape postcards cover faces like masks, or the eyes of a mannequin replace the human gaze preserved in the photo. The disruptive intervention in the photography, often by cutting right through the head, creates a paradoxical unity of opposites, an irritatingly precise synthesis beyond calculatedly applied dissonance.

The focus of these surreal transformations is predominantly on the eyes, that is, the gaze, and thus the active relationship between the person in the picture and those who are looking at them, between seeing and wanting to be seen. Through the collision of contrasting elements John Stezaker tries to restore the liveliness of the frozen-in-time photographic portrait, which – not only in its Hollywood version – reduces the expressive diversity of the human face to a stoic mask. The viewer's desire for eye contact with the image's other becomes the works' thematic core.

In his new series entitled *Comics*, the radical redefinition of the portrait leads to the superimposition of photos of comedians looking into the camera with tragic seriousness by images of painted Gothic sculptures, angels and saints. It is a fusion through space and time that resembles a role reversal as the sculptures, whose faces cut through the photographs in a jagged, crystalline manner, seem more alive than those who professionally want to make us laugh.

The statuesque heads look as if animated, while the photographed actors and comedians seem to have withdrawn themselves to their own lifeless shells. The gender-fluid, flamboyant angels penetrate the actors, who themselves have fallen out of time, and breathe new life into them. The static nature of the image is activated through interlocking perspectives with the process of this merger intensified by seemingly ill-fitting proportion and scale.

This irritatingly convincing synthesis of sculpture and human refers to a general ambiguity of film stars, who are typically merely a projected (moving) image defined through the sum of their acting parts rather than a genuine person. Because the photographic image derives ontologically from the loss of the moment—it is the present, separated from duration—the camera essentially converts the momentary presence of the object it is focused at, projecting into the future, into an everlasting permanent present. The film star as a mediated being is therefore in a sense a double of him/herself: a pure configuration of an optical world. This phantom-like quality places him/her in a zone outside of time, beyond past and future. This is also the space in which the angels and saints live, who look down on our world with an all-seeing gaze, even if only as polychrome wooden sculptures.

The images' layered fusion is anything but merely formal. John Stezaker's manually created photo collages reveal something that is often overlooked in the computer age: the ruptures in the photographic image are actually seams between different worlds, categories and levels of meaning, and the transitions between them are more fluid than the respective image claims.

Vanessa Joan Müller

The exhibition is organised in collaboration with The Approach.

LIST OF WORKS

Downstairs (left to right)

Untitled, 2024, collage, 25.1 x 20.7 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 25.6 x 21.7 cm

Comic, 2024, collage, 25.9 x 25 cm

Comic, 2024, collage, 23.9 x 25.4 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 25.6 x 22.4 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 22.9 x 20.9 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 27.2 x 24 cm

Comic, 2024, collage, 23.5 x 21.7 cm

Upstairs front room (left to right)

Untitled, 2024, collage, 26 x 22.7 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 25.9 x 22.2 cm

Upstairs back room (left to right)

Comic, 2024, collage, 25.1 x 25.3 cm

Comic, 2024, collage, 25.9 x 27.1 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 25.5 x 25.7 cm

Untitled, 2024, collage, 25.6 x 20.9 cm

Comic, 2024, collage, 25.9 x 21.4 cm

EXILE TV (<https://exilegallery.org/tv/>)

She, 2025, digital video, 10:14min