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John Stezaker: Film Works review – an overwhelming onrush of images

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill on Sea, East Sussex

John Stezaker's films, made of eye-boggling torrents of discontinuous still images, captivate in a rare show

By LAURA CUMMING April 26, 2015



John Stezaker's *Horse* (2012), which uses near-identical pictures from many editions of a racehorse catalogue.

Photograph: courtesy of the artist and the Approach, London

In the darkened gallery, by the sea, is a still image that appears to be moving at top speed apparently without shifting or changing. It's a startling experience. It's a photograph of a racehorse, projected on a screen as big as a billboard, which shivers and shakes as if the horse – or perhaps the image itself – was desperate to run free, to break out of this static world.

It is only a split second before the viewer realises that this is not one image but hundreds, quite possibly thousands, of different horses projected one after the other in rapid succession like a cinematic flip book. And yet the spectacle remains bewildering. For though the sunny background keeps changing over time, and there is a sense of years passing in the changing hues of each image, the horse appears to remain the same – a handsome Arab buffed to gleaming perfection in some green Newbury paddock, living in an endless Groundhog Day.

Horse is one of several films by the veteran British collage artist John Stezaker (b1949), whose splicing of disparate photographs to make strange new visions has brought him just praise and fame since the 70s. These films are recent and rare and the De La Warr Pavilion has a small coup in bringing them together for the first time in a public institution. They are both alien and exhilarating.

Photographs have always been Stezaker's main source – used in the marrying of odd faces, the creation of bizarre androgynies, new landscapes, new cities, even whole new eras (he likes to put the times out of joint) – but here he puts these images to an extraordinary new use. Instead of working with two or three pictures, here the number proliferates in an apparently never-ending loop that rushes through time. These "still" films are anything but motionless.

Crowd is composed entirely of crowd scenes from movies (stills turned back into films, in a sense). The chorus line, the racecourse, the political rally, the bloodthirsty mob tearing after the villain and the team of synchronised swimmers in Cecil B de Mille formations: the images flash up so fast you can scarcely catch hold of them, at first. The eye is baffled, and so is the brain.

But the longer you look, the more you begin to pluck coherent scenes from the stream. Here is a millisecond of Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, what looks like Leni Riefenstahl's jackbooted stormtroopers, a momentary glimpse of Clark Gable's celebrated moustache. Pirates and princesses come and go; there is the goosestep and the can-can, the uproar and the funereal hush. It is a pullulating crowd of crowds.

And what is so remarkable is that you don't go mad or blind before this overwhelming onrush. We are supposed to be unable to see individual images appearing at this rate of 1/24th of a second – one of Stezaker's films is actually called *Blind* – unless they are continuously connected like a conventional film, and yet the opposite is apparently true. Maybe we don't see everything, and maybe we don't even see the same images the second time around (that was my experience at the pavilion), but that you can see anything at all feels like a triumph.



A still from *Crowd*, 2013: 'That you can see anything at all seems like a triumph.'
Photograph: courtesy of the artist and the Approach, London

Crowd gets more and more antic without ever changing pace or speed. It seems the very essence of a hubbub in itself. And as your eyes learn to read the horizon lines, the shapes of the landscape – beach, jungle, street – and the choreography of crowds, so the work becomes a reflection on cinema. On casting, for instance – the way crowd extras appear only en masse, disappearing as individuals – and on the essence of motion pictures: their incessant accumulations, their paradoxical combination of fixity and restlessness, how stock they are and yet how diverse.

Stezaker's films are made with different media. *Cathedral* is composed of postcards looking down the aisle of numerous cathedrals towards the altar and rose window above. The film seems to hurtle through darkness towards light, down that aisle over and over again (like the compulsive worshipper). And the drama is increased by the shadowiness of the original images, those damp black-and-grey postcards often sold for a few coins in these very cathedrals themselves.

Horse comes from successive issues of the same racehorse catalogue over the past 30 years, and effectively shows the ideal horse evolving through time, jittery and tense on its exquisite legs. The shivering proliferation of images apparently sends it running and even jumping a fence, although logic says this cannot possibly be true.

The nervous racehorse that cannot keep still, the crepuscular cathedral with its ritualised spaces, the teeming crowd verging on absolute wildness: how perfectly Stezaker matches the form to content. Every piece is minutely considered, and each is ultimately pensive.

For strangest of all, in the end, is the curious stillness to which these films revert. There may be a violent excitement to each one, and to the nearly eye-popping experience of seeing them all together, but they settle into a kind of continuous after-image. They are meant to spark thoughts and so they do, these objects of contemplation that hover in the air like humming birds moving at superhuman speed.