# frieze

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# Demand the Impossible

Of the generation that came through art school during the upheavals of May 1968, John Stezaker has long been intrigued by the power of images. Michael Bracewell talks to him about fascination, education, politics and dreaming of bridges

**Michael Bracewell: Is there a defining statement of intent that covers your career as an artist?**

John Stezaker: I'm dedicated to fascination – to image fascination, a fascination for the point at which the image becomes self-enclosed and autonomous. It does so through a series of processes of disjunction. First, obsolescence – in finding the image – then various devices to estrange or 'abuse it', in order to bring out that sense of the autonomy of the image. It involves either an inversion – cutting – or a process that cuts it off from its disappearance into the everyday world. I'm very much a follower of Maurice Blanchot's ideas when it comes to image and fascination; he sees it as a necessary series of deaths that the image has to go through in order to become visible and disconnected from its ordinary referent. I don't know whether that's an ideal, but I suppose it could be a guiding principle.

**Do you feel when you're searching out the materials for your work, from charity shops or second-hand bookshops, that you are assuming a form of psychic responsibility?**

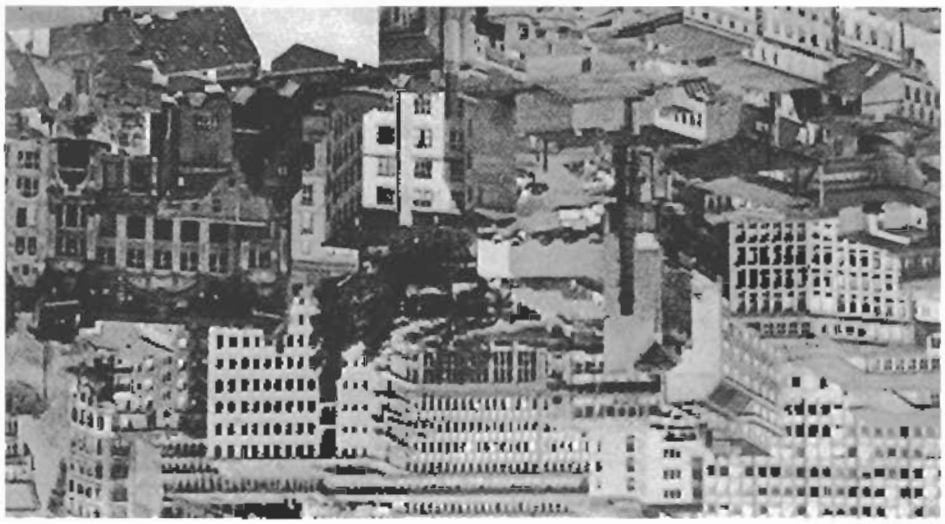
Yes, I do. I'm taking things very seriously that aren't usually taken seriously. And there is often an uncanny dimension to collecting images. You go out looking for one thing, and you find the image that you really should have been looking for and you realize that your ego's been in the way. Picasso said, 'I don't search, I find', and that's true. The 'found image' is a very important term – it's not an image that has resulted from a search; it's found, and that's much more spontaneous. It puts the image on equal terms with your own subjectivity; it has a power that overwhelms you. I'm looking for the sublime, in many ways. And I think that the uncanny is a miniature version of that.

**Your work is in the tradition of the *flâneur*, for whom there are going to be occurrences in the urban landscape that enable a moment of transcendence.**

Absolutely. You can go for months and years and not have those moments, and you've lost it. But it keeps you wandering, looking; 'allowing yourself to encounter' – there should be a word for that. It doesn't matter whether I've had the images around on my bookcase for 20 years when I start a series; it's finding an image in a bookshop that starts a new series of thoughts. In a way, what I want to do with a viewer is put them in that same dazzled state that I first encountered the image in. A good example, which started 'The Bridge' series, was from around 1985 or 1986. I had this dream in which I was floating under a bridge. And for some reason it was an incredibly important image. It disturbed me so much that I woke up. I don't often have very vivid dreams, so

Top: *Bridge VI* 1986–1999 Found image 11×16cm Bottom: *Icarus* 1999 Found image 32×44cm





Left: *City VI* 2006–04 Found image 6x8cm Right: *City VII* 2006–04 Found image 5x4cm

'Guy Debord's interest in collage made me aware of the subversive potential of Surrealism Situationism comes out of that tradition, as much as any tradition of political resistance.'

when they happen I tend to be attentive to them. A friend asked whether I had read R.D. Laing's *Voice of Experience* (1982). In this he describes the experiences of people who believe they can remember birth and of people who, after resuscitation, believe they can remember what happened to them when they were temporarily dead. It was based on a series of interviews carried out by an anaesthetist, and it turned out that there was a general conformity of these imagined happenings after death to the cultural and religious upbringing of the person. The exception was one image, which seemed to crop up all the time: they all spoke of traversing a bridge of some kind – some went under, or were sucked under, the bridge. This was similar to my dream, and so I started collecting images of bridges. I suddenly realized that by mistake I had turned one of them upside down – but then I knew that this was not a mistake but the correct placing of the image. When I turned it the others upside down, I realized that in all of them, unconsciously, I had been aware of this reflection and that all I had to do was turn them upside down. And the whole series fell into place.

**Have you noticed the viewer wanting to affirm in some way what they are actually looking at?**

I thought the opposite would be true, that people would see through the device so quickly that there wouldn't be enough time to entertain that intermediary mental space. But in reality it's been the opposite. That's why I've always said that those tiny pieces are actually site-specific pieces: because in a sense, if you put them in a magazine or a catalogue, you have the choice to turn them upside down and therefore destroy the illusion – whereas on the wall you can't do that.

**Some writers have said your work articulates the classic Modernist experience of the city. I think of Ezra Pound's line 'The age demanded an image of its accelerated grimace'.**

And Baudelaire's idea of the prose poem, I think, is important.

**What was your own art education?**

I went to the Slade for six years, undergraduate and postgraduate in painting, although I gave it up in the first year. I entered college in 1967, so my first academic year involved the sit-in that took place in 1968. The reason I gave up painting was partly political. I was interested in student politics at the time and was exposed to the Situationist International ideas from France. And that's where refuge came from, too. I couldn't read French very well, so much of the work of the Situationists was a tremendously visual experience for me. Seeing these re-captioned images gave me ideas – that this may be another way of thinking about being an artist. But it was a strangely schizophrenic course. On the one hand I was doing life drawing with Brian Eglow, on the other I was entertaining ideas from Guy Debord.

**What was the teaching like?**

Very academic. Based very much on life drawing, although 1968 changed everything, and so I only got a glimpse of the old establishment. I lived during what most people regarded as something of a vacuum in terms of the Slade's history, because we started off with the most amazing array of teachers – I studied with Richard Wollheim, Professor of Philosophy, a marvellous man. I became very involved with philosophy through him; my postgraduate dissertation was on post-Duchampian art – I was trying to make a relationship between Duchamp and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It was a very exciting time, but I also regret 1968 in a way. I feel that what we did was very damaging. We had Ernst Gombrich as our Art History professor, but he never came back after 1968.

**What was so damaging about 1968?**

We were dismantling the structure, but had nothing to replace it with. We had William Gregory for Visual Perception, for instance – and all these things vanished after 1968. There has been an amazing line-up of intellectuals involved in the Slade teaching at that time, and in other words there was this emptiness, and it never really recovered. But the one valuable thing I got out of it was coming to terms with some of the ideas of the Situationists.

Guy Debord, in particular. *La Société du Spectacle* was terribly important. I struggled with it in French at the time, and then it was published in English in 1969. But his interest in collage made me aware of the subversive potential of Surrealism. Situationism comes out of that tradition, as much as any tradition of political resistance.


*Stasi* 1979. Collage 45×61cm

art just be that? Just finding, and taking out of circulation?

**When you enlarge an image, how does this fit in with the processes of your work?**
The enlargement process is important to me, apart from the fact that I don't like the detachment from the original. That's my problem with any process: I am fascinated with the original. I like the idea that when people look at a piece of mine on the wall, they are looking at what they might flip through in a second in a bookshop, or find somewhere in the world, only something has happened to it – some minute thing, like turning it upside down – and their relationship to it has been changed. I like that immediacy. But there are also other things I want to explore: symmetries, for instance. You can't do without some form of manipulation.

**That tiny readjustment of the 'found' is quite Duchampian.**
Yes, I see them in Duchampian terms. He uses the word 'arrest' or 'stoppage' or, more possibly, 'delay'. I think he was the first to be aware of what it is to be an artist in an age of image flows. And that's where I pick up on that moment of interruption: I see the cut as a decisive interruption of the flow, whether it's the flow of cinema, and the film still or image turnover and circulation. How do you do something that's fixed, and has that quality of contoured-ness that art requires for an image to become an imaginary possibility? How do you inscribe that on the flowing away of the world around you? This, to me, is the central preoccupation of my work. Is it St Paul, building his church not on the rock but on the sands? How do you build a place of contemplation and of transcendence in this space of continuous movement?

**Where does that stand in relation to Conceptualism?**
It is the opposite: Conceptualism, for me, is an integration into that flow of instrumental communications. For me it's a disjunction from one's conceptual relationship with things that brings about that image possibility. Blanchot talks about the point at which the image becomes the master of the life that it reflects – he's actually talking about a corpse, the point at which you see a face in a dead person that you've never been aware of before. And he says that with André Breton's 'unusable objects' – they are obsolete, perverse, fragmented and outmoded. In that obsolescence they become visible. 'They disappear into their use' is, I think, the phrase that Blanchot uses.

**There seems to be a considerable intellectual underpinning to your work.**
There is, but most of it tends to be post-rationalization – intuitive leaps that can take me years to understand. And that's usually the way of terminating a series, and so humbly enough it has a negative effect. Or rather, it is positive, but it's a way of closing things rather than opening things up.
*Michael Bracewell's recent novel* Perfect Tense *is published by Vintage. With the assistance of Bryan Ferry and Brian Eno he is currently researching a biography of Roxy Music.*