

a picture speaks a thousand words

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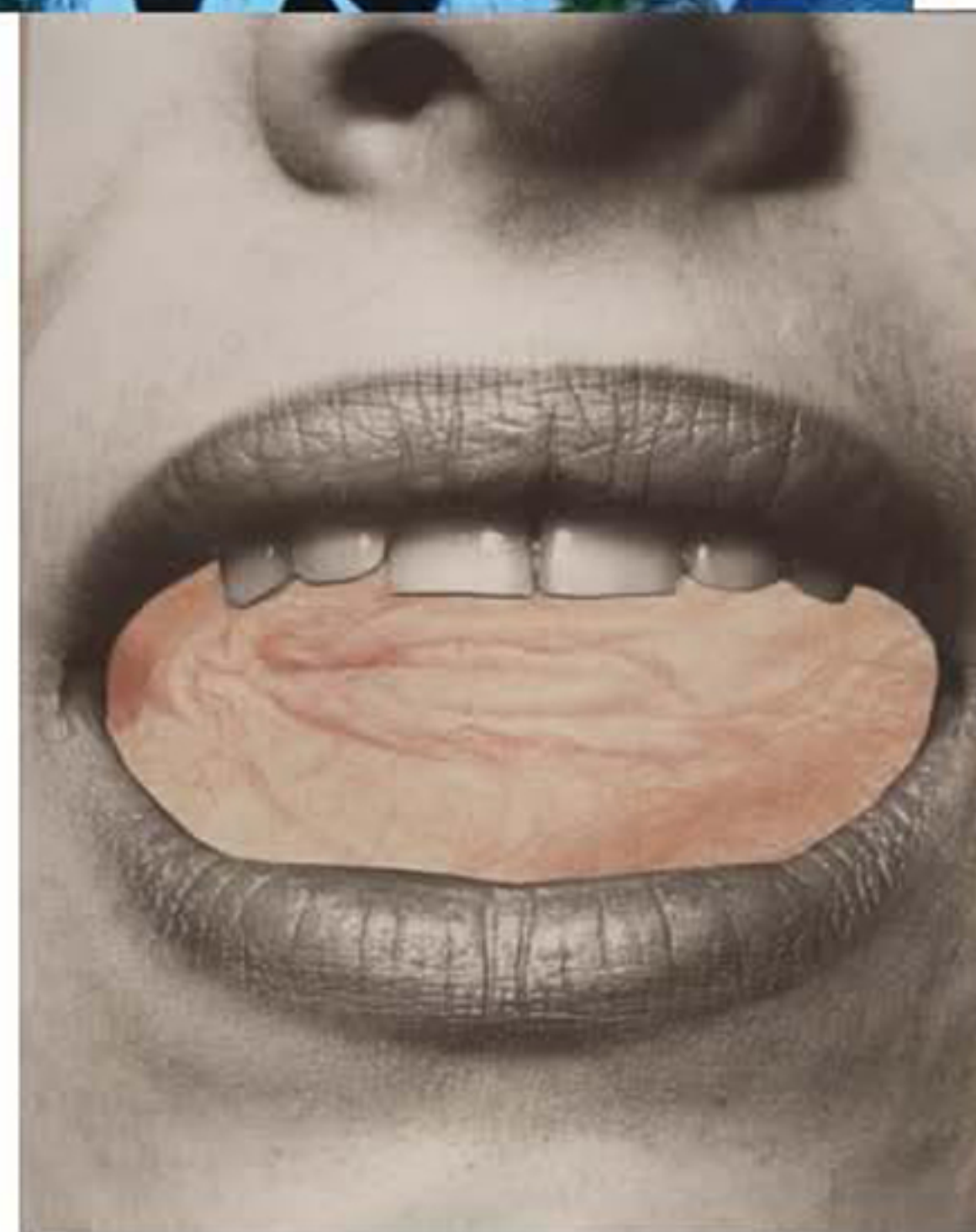


Young writer Isabella Burley and fashion designer Tessa Edwards take a trip to the California home of 70s surrealist **PENNY SLINGER** in search of fun and enlightenment.

"When I first started making work, it was unthinkable for a woman to show herself unclothed, unless she was in a men's magazine," explains erotic artist Penny Slinger. Since the late 60s she has created her own seamless reality, placing herself in provocative scenes that manifest themselves as surreal photo collages of vaginas, flowers and country houses. Her world is hypnotic and consumed by a compelling mysticism. It is not often that I spend the night with a stranger, but when invited to spend an evening with her at home, I surrendered to the idea of a magical and ritualistic sleepover.

Accompanied by womenswear designer Tessa Edwards—who will be collaborating with Penny for her next autumn/winter 13 collection—we arrived at Penny's home in the small town of Boulder Creek, removed from reality and surrounded by a hazy forest. There was a large blue stage in her driveway, which was covered with a strange rock

formation. Something she later told me was the remnants of a spontaneous midnight ritual performance that involved several naked and beautiful women. Over the years, her home has been a place for these happenings, particularly in the elaborate healing pool she has in her garden. Her studio is a more intimate and private space. Filled with crystals and unusual costumes that she uses as transportation and masking devices. A lot of what Penny does is make maps of her own life, and that cartography is both psychological and sexual. Eroticism dominated her work during the 70s, when she used her body as a platform for rebellion. "I deliberately put some articles in men's magazines but I was there with my art, speaking my audacious words, claiming a place to say, 'I am not your object.' I felt it was really important to do that," she explains over dinner. "Now we have all this glut of pornography and erotica, but not an awful lot of it has really claimed that similar kind of space. We have a lot of space for movement there. That has always been my struggle, to be a sexual person, a sensual person, a thinking person and a creative person. To be a mistress



Read My Lips

of my own destiny." After speaking about love, crystal healing and men until the early hours of the morning, Tessa and I set off to San Francisco airport. A month later I found myself with Penny in London. I was due to meet her for coffee on a Sunday morning and walked into her apartment to find the artist Linder Sterling on her floor doing her make-up. Together they make the most fascinating duo, despite only having met a few years ago. Linder was introduced to her work as a teenager in Wigan, when a friend of hers stole Penny's book *50% The Visible Women* from Birmingham library. "At the time I was horrified about the theft, but I wanted the book so much," she laughs, as she pulls that same stolen book out of her bag. Although the two have never worked together, their practices are inextricably linked by the same feminist agenda and devotion to exploring the self, all within the simple format of collage. "I think society has pitched women against each other," says Penny, "I think that is why we have been divided, because it is so perpetually powerful. If the women get their heads and hearts together, we could come into a new kind of resonance and understanding." pennyslinger.com

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