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IV

Encounters

Penelope Slinger

By Katya Tylevich
Photography by Alexei Tylevich

DOWN BY THE HOUSE





Following a meteoric rise in the London art scene of the seventies, Penelope Slinger left the so-called art world to explore various 'new worlds' (geographical, cultural and spiritual). But nearly 40 years on, the work she did in that decade has lost none of its haunting and evocative power.

The drive from San Francisco to the Santa Cruz Mountains of Boulder Creek, where Penelope Slinger has her artists' compound, takes just shy of two hours, the last stretch winding upwards on to unpaved road, through thick wood, and over a thin wooden bridge. Slinger's 1,200 sq m home was created as a laboratory of sorts by her late husband, Christopher Hills, the spiritual philosopher and scientist. As Slinger walks us through the space, which includes a detached sound and video studio and several guest bedrooms, she nonchalantly introduces me to a number of artists, musicians and performers who happen to be there — working, eating, what have you. It feels like an episode of *MTV Cribs* — a seventies feminist surrealist special edition, perhaps.

Of course, that's only one facet of Slinger's extraordinarily varied and adventurous life as an artist: her decade of high provocation in London, beginning just after her graduation from Chelsea College of Art in 1969. Slinger's erotic, at times unsettling and highly symbolic surrealist collages, as much as her experimental work in the theatre, established her as an unmistakable presence, as likely to cause a riot as an arty stir. Slinger tells me she was born rebellious. Dissatisfied with the art scene, she left London in 1978, moving first to New York, then to the Caribbean, where she lived for 15 years, had a gallery and produced an extensive body of paintings focused on the indigenous Arawak peoples. Talking to me now, Slinger prefaces the word 'art' with 'tantric' and 'visionary' to describe her current multimedia projects, including videos and digital col-

lages, the latest of which is called *64 Dakini Oracle*. Among her previous projects are two collections of surrealist collages called *Fifty Per Cent The Visible Woman* (1971) and *An Exorcism* (1977), along with *The Secret Dakini Oracle* (1978), illustrations for *Sexual Secrets: the Alchemy of Ecstasy* (1979 & 2000), *The Secret Dakini Oracle* (1979) and *The Path of the Mystic Lover* (1993).

The first thing I ask Slinger is whether she ever Googles her own name. I can tell the question surprises her. What I mean is, has she noticed how her works — particularly those early surrealist collages — have developed an increasing online presence, on personal sites, with effusive comments below them? Slinger's return to the gallery world happened just recently, with two group shows in 2009 — 'Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism' at Manchester Art Gallery and 'The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art' at Tate St Ives. Last September, she opened her first solo show in three decades, 'A Photo-Romance', at Riflemaker Gallery in London. This September, another solo show, 'Hear What I Say', opens at the gallery, with a third to follow next year. Another solo show opens this September in New York, at Gallery Broadway 1602 — Slinger's first solo exhibit in New York since 1982. I think, in Slinger's place, I would quote LL Cool J, and tell the art critics: 'Don't call it a comeback. I've been here for years.' Instead, Slinger, charming and insightful, articulates her unusual path as an artist as if she hasn't lived it, but has rather watched it unfold from the sidelines.



I took the mansion to be the symbol of my self. But what is the self and who owns this place?

— *Do you feel as though your seventies surrealist work is having a resurgence?*

If it is, it's odd, because the last contact I had with the art world, as such, was in 1979. But I am always ready and open to whatever comes. After I moved to New York, I started working on books. Later, I lived in the Caribbean, where the work I had been doing prior to that point simply wasn't a cultural fit. Cutting-edge, erotic art did not mix well with a very Christian culture, and I wondered whether I could really use art to bridge the difference. That's how I decided to make portraits of local people, trying to incorporate who they were into my work. Through the archaeological work we were doing there, I especially started to see and feel the spirit of the Arawak Indians, the previous inhabitants of the islands. Arawaks are virtually extinct in the region, and I was working to try and recreate them by piecing together impressions from their art as discovered through archaeology, and from photos of Arawakan tribes still living in the Orinoco and Amazon regions.

Of course, there's that 'classic' point in many artists' lives when they take the journey to encounter 'the noble savage', as it used to be called. In my case, I will call it 'a

true calling of the soul': a realization that the indigenous people have a lot to offer us, if we want to understand how to live in harmony with the planet. But the truth is, I love the female form. I knew I couldn't show my cutting-edge contemporary work in the Caribbean, but I could use a *National Geographic* approach, which included the naked form. This gave me a way to pursue my passion legitimately.

— *At that point, did you feel yourself separating from your work as a surrealist artist?*

No, I've always been on a trajectory, it's just had different phases within it. I've always lived and breathed for art, and that never changed. Later in my life, I opened up to what I call the tantric perspective, and I see that as a natural progression along the trajectory as well. After all, the surrealists were dealing with bringing the subconscious and the unconscious into the light of day, and the language of tantra has a lot in common with that symbology: both are about the creation of a 'sur-reality'. For me, going from the subconscious to the super-conscious seems like a natural evolution.

But my being an artist is a bit like my being a rebel. I don't think you're a rebel by choice. It chooses you. You just don't fit in. You can't help it. I got a report card once, at the age of ten, that said: 'There are 36 children in this class; 35 going one way and Miss Slinger going the other.' To me, the true authentic artistic spirit is one that can't accept the way people normally view the world. Art is a way of pulling up the veils.

— *'A Photo-Romance' was your first solo exhibition in 32 years. The works in that show seem to address that 'refusal to accept' head-on.*

Those works are from my book, *An Exorcism*, which needs a bit of personal background. I had just finished Chelsea College of Art and gained admittance to the Royal College film school, but I met the filmmaker Peter Whitehead during the summer holidays and went off to make films with him instead. Eventually, Peter took up falconry and buried himself in his writing, and I needed to find something to connect with. The more political women's groups didn't do it for me. Instead, I helped form an all-woman theatre group called Holocaust. We went on to make a movie called *The Other Side of the Underneath*, which was re-released quite recently by the British Film Institute. Back then, the whole thing was a very intense experience for all involved, and resulted in the break-up of my relationship with Peter. It was a heart-wrenching experience, and the raw material for what became *An Exorcism*.



I Hear What You Say, 1973, photographic collage, 35 x 47 cm, Penrose Collection



Revering, 1977, 49 x 37 cm, ©Riflemaker







Sigh Of The Rose, 1977, photographic collage on card, 50 x 35 cm, ©Riflemaker

Specifically, the collage work shows the unravelling of my psyche against the backdrop of a derelict mansion. I took the mansion to be the symbol of my self. But what is the self and who owns this place? Is this my father's mansion? And why is there a brick wall behind the door, which opens to all the wonders of the inner world? *An Exorcism* is all about figures inhabiting a space, a mise-en-scène, a set. It's a detective story, determined to remove the 'bricks' one by one, unleash the skeletons in the cupboards, and reveal why it is that there's a man holding the key. I needed to reconcile those parts of myself that had been polarized between my work with the women of Holocaust and my journey with a man. It is the heroine's journey told in a 'photo roman' style, a death and rebirth of the psyche. I inherited the mood and mode from the surrealists, in particular the collage books of Max Ernst, but my collages were each very specific in the state of being they portrayed. I wanted to delve deeply enough so that I could disentwine those spaces and fantasies that were my own from the projections of others. I wanted to free myself from cultural stigma and the weight of shame, at the same time revealing collective trauma and showing a way through for 'everywoman'.

— *Returning to these works three decades later, you must be of a different mind-frame.*

I must say, I was a little bit rebellious coming out of England; I thought 'the art world here sucks', and I caused it some ripples. The Angela Flowers Gallery was representing me at the time, and in 1973 I wanted to do a big event around my last exhibition there, called 'Opening'. A number of those pieces will be showing at Riflemaker. The series of 'mouth' works, for example, both sculptures and photo collages, were a commentary on the fact that the feminine needs a mouthpiece. But how does she communicate? Her language is not one of logic and words, but of symbols and images, of analogies and paradoxes, of strange and disturbing yet somehow familiar juxtapositions. It is through the mouth that we receive nourishment, but it is also how we nourish with what we communicate. Judy Chicago did all that years later and it became notorious, but I remember, at the time of my exhibition, Victor Lownes, who was running the Playboy Club in England, came to my opening and said: 'I like my pornography straight.' Maybe it was just a little before its time.

I really wanted 'Opening' to be an erotic feast. I worked with a lot of life casts and created a series of assemblages, which saw the female body as the table spread. I made a me-sized wedding cake that I could sit in as people cut slices. This was all supposed to take place in front of the gallery, but as the day came near, Angela [Flowers] decided that we would cause problems with the neighbours and told me I couldn't do it. I felt so disappointed I decided to burn everything at the end of the exhibition as a protest against the sterile face of art. Having Dada and surrealist roots, this seemed to me like the supreme act. I meditated on it, which was very intense. Then, the morning I was going to do it, I woke up to headlines reading, 'Molten Plastic Falls on Children's Heads'. There had been a fire at an amusement arcade. And since my own objects were made of resin, I just couldn't go there, I didn't go through with it. But in myself, I had already let go.

— *What is it you let go of? Surely, as an artist, there's an element of control you still hold on to.*

I actually think the most joy in creation comes when you lose control. But as much as I surrender, there's also the act of principle. There was a time when I was very specifically trying to shock and get people's reactions, and that was within my so-called control. Could I really be surprised if I got strong reactions, when I was trying to get them? But that desire to shock mellowed as I grew older and had to focus on different ways of delivering my message. Certainly, as a young surrealist, I wanted to shake people to get them to open their eyes. Now I've found different ways of doing that. Pure beauty can also take your breath away; it can be just as shocking.

Hear What I Say (1971–1977) is at Riflemaker gallery, London, from the 10th of September to the 3rd of October

www.riflemaker.org
www.pennyslinger.com