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IN CONVERSATION WITH PENELOPE SLINGER

Interview by Amelia Stein

There's a page on Penelope Slinger's website, under the heading "Bio-Sphere TM," titled "My Life as Art." The page depicts Penelope's (a.k.a. Penny's) biography as a red circle surrounded by dozens of miniature hyperlinked images. At the top of the circle is a thermal color picture of Penny's parents in 1946 on their wedding day, titled "PreConception." Penny's timeline proceeds around the curve, with the most recent entries approaching the first. At the center of the circle is a picture of Penny wearing all red and a big smile. Her hands, set wide, appear to be holding an invisible square, indistinguishable from the black background of the page against which her portrait is set. Penny's square contains a reproduction of the entire page, complete with a mini Penny at its center. And this mini-Penny is holding her own mini invisible square, which contains a reproduction—smaller still—of the entire page. The pattern repeats ad infinitum, further than the eye can perceive, as if to suggest that the evolution of Penny's biography is contingent on the cycle of all that has come before it.

Website biographies do not usually articulate their subject's worldview so succinctly—but then, there is nothing usual about Penelope Slinger. When we speak, Penny is on the phone from The Garden of Forgiveness, her compound in Boulder Creek, California. The property was founded in 1989 by Christopher Hills: yogi, distinguished scientist (often nicknamed "The Father of Spirulina") and Penny's partner from 1994 until his death in 1997. Here, she runs Goddess International, dedicated to exploring the transformative powers of what Penny terms the "Awakened Feminine" and to facilitating creative projects onsite.

Penny's early work is perhaps her best known: In 1971, Penny published *50% The Visible Woman*, a book of collages that explore the sublimated feminine aspect of surrealism. Through the mid '70s, she made and exhibited sculptures and photographs in London and New York, including "Opening's" erotic wedding cake. *An Exorcism*, published in 1977, is a similarly surreal but perhaps more cosmic and romantic representation of the female psychic journey.

At the end of the '70s, Penny's trajectory as an artist in the commercial sense paused. She moved to the Caribbean with her partner at the time, Tantric practitioner, author, art dealer and archaeologist Nik Douglas. She stayed for 15 years, working extensively on art projects inspired by the previous inhabitants of the islands, the Arawak Indians, before moving back to California, meeting Christopher and settling in Boulder Creek.

Recently, Penny has been thinking a lot about the cyclical nature of life. At the end of last year, she revisited her collage work from the '70s for concurrent



ORGASAM, 1971. Photographic collage, 10 inches x 8 inches.
Artworks by **PENNY SLINGER** from **50% THE VISIBLE WOMAN**.

exhibitions at Riflemaker in London and Broadway 1602 in New York City—her first in over 35 years. As Penny describes below, she will soon return to *An Exorcism* based on a chance encounter with an old friend and collaborator, but with many more years of experience as a woman and an artist to inform her work. It seems that now, perhaps more than ever, Penny's evolution is in her hands.

Amelia Stein: What are you working on at the moment?

Penny Slinger: When I went back to England last year, I reconnected with the woman who is in *An Exorcism* with me and who was a very close friend, but who I completely lost touch with for 30 years, thought she was dead and didn't think I'd ever see again. Anyway, when I had my exhibition of this work in London, she showed up at my talk as a surprise and it was so wonderful to see her again. And now she's coming out here next month and we are going to go in the studio and create a whole lot of new work, both photographic with collage and video material. We'll do new versions with us at this time in our lives and see what kind of reflections and imaging can be evolved from what we did in *An Exorcism*. The working title is "Reflections on the Liberation of the Feminine."

Amelia: There seems to be a cyclical pattern to a lot of the work that you do.

Penny: You know, there have been different spaces and stages, and different ways in which I've applied myself and my aesthetics according to the context; but at the same time, I feel it's all one big trajectory, which is why when I made my biography on my website, my "Bio-sphere," as I called it, the name I gave it was "My Life As Art." I do believe that the whole nature of existence is cyclical, so one's life does work in that way. I see everything that I've been doing, one thing evolving into another, as a natural kind of evolution.

Amelia: The lifecycle of a connection is interesting. One can experience a connection with a place or a person, and then it can disappear—and if it happens to reignite, it's as though it had never fallen away at all.

Penny: And it's also very interesting how, when the timing isn't lined up, you can be somewhere but feel completely disconnected—as if you'd never been there at all. I remember going back to London and feeling as though I was in this sort of vacuum, as if I'd never had a life there; and it seemed to me so strange and inexplicable, really, to feel like that. And so it did feel good to be able to weave the threads back together again, because it is all one fabric, you know.

Amelia: That feeling of connection seems contingent on timing. Connection is so ephemeral. Do you find that in other aspects of your life, not just related to work?

Penny: I do. When you get those times in your life when everything does work by the magic of connection, the grid lights up and you see how everything really is connected. You suddenly see how that connected to that, to that, to that, which came to this. To me, those moments are what this life is all about. It is really a mystery to me when it doesn't work like that! But then all of life is really like an ebb and flow. I guess we wouldn't be so happy with the highs if we didn't have the lows to measure them by. That's what they say, anyway. (Laughs)



THE FETISH, 1971. Photographic collage, 10 inches x 8 inches.



THE LARVAL WORM, 1971. Photographic collage, 10 inches x 8 inches.

Amelia: A lot was written about the fact that you had not shown work in a gallery for about 30 years before these recent shows. Was this gap the result of a decision, or did it happen naturally?

Penny: One of the reasons was my deep disappointment back in '74, when I put on my exhibition of erotic tabletops called "Opening." This was a few years before Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party." I didn't know about her till years later. I wanted to do an opening that would be a totemic event, and I even had backing from the British Film Institute to film it. I wanted to create an erotic wedding banquet and for everyone to come as a bride and/or groom. My invitation was actually the image of me as the wedding cake.

We were going to do it in the mews outside the gallery, and at the last minute Angela Flowers—whose gallery it was—got cold feet and thought the neighbors were going to get upset and said, 'No, we'd just have to do a regular opening.' I was so disappointed and felt that it sterilized the nature of the work. I'd wanted my pieces to be totems of an experience. This is something I always talked about: I don't want to just show people my work; I want to give them an experience. The experience I had planned was thwarted, so I planned with a few people I knew in the press that I was going to make this dramatic event at the end of the exhibition: All the pieces remaining I was going to burn publicly and have it filmed as a protest against the sterility of the art world. In point of fact, I didn't actually do it. The morning I was

there were headlines in the paper saying, "Molten plastic falls on children's heads." The night before, there was an amusement arcade fire and a lot of children got hurt with the kind of materials that I was using in my show, so I didn't do it.

I tried once more in '77 to do a show with the Patrick Seale Gallery, but that was a complete fiasco and it closed after a few days. Then I just rented a space and opened it myself and did it there. In '82, I did a retrospective exhibition at a gallery in New York City. Having been in the Caribbean for a while, I thought 'Oh, great, New York. That's a sophisticated art market. They're going to get it.' But, again, I was very disappointed with the reaction. [The whole experience] made me go, 'Okay, these are the signs they're not ready for this work,' and [head] back off to the Islands.

Amelia: You once said that at the end of *An Exorcism* the heroine emerges more fully realized after undergoing these—I think you used the word "harrowing"—experiences. It's an interesting idea, the role of negative experience in self-transformation.

Penny: I sometimes find myself saying that, these days, I don't think there's any art worth its salt that isn't a form of healing art. We come in whole, yes, but we're all kind of wounded, too, and it's how you deal with those things. How do you recognize that you have these [wounds]? So, for me, my middle name is Delve. It's my grandmother's maiden name, but it means, obviously, to "delve" into things completely, and I've always liked to do that. Then my birth name being Penelope, I didn't like that at first because I didn't like the idea of patience. (Laughs) I wanted to be the explorer and not the one staying at home weaving. But as time has gone on, I like it, because one of the meanings of Tantra is "to weave." I like to talk about how to weave the tapestry of one's life, with all those threads connected. It's exciting.

Amelia: I've always loved your statement that *50% The Visible Woman* was about making the female side of surrealism visible. It's that same idea of delving into the unrealized and unrecognized, perhaps even more than it is a feminist idea.

Penny: I've never considered myself a feminist, as such, because I've much more been interested in the power of women being recognized than women having the same kind of power as men. (Laughs) There's a subtle distinction but a very important one, I think. Because, of course, all the political changes needed to happen—but at the same time, I felt that women who were really on the forefront of the feminist movement were often throwing the baby out with the bath water, in the sense of seeming that they didn't want to be considered sexual. They didn't want to be all these feminine things, because they wanted these equal rights. But I've always been striving for the qualities that are the right of the feminine, and for those to be able to be seen in a position of strength and equality. When we have that, then we have the opportunity for a new kind of sacred marriage between the male and female within, which reflects in a harmonious balance of those energies in the world at large.

Amelia: Tell me about the presence of nature in your work.

Penny: A lot of the surreal images, which blend the anthropomorphic/zoomorphic figures—heads of birds, of animals, or things that are growing, any of these things—I've always loved them and just been fascinated by the surrealness of them. But it is also very much a reflection of how connected I feel to the world of animals and birds, and insects and creatures, and trees and flowers, and water and air. It's much easier to relate to nature than to people in a way, because it's so direct and simple and just relies on energy and emotion. I do think that the natural state of being here on Earth is that we are all beings from all different forms of life: fur or chlorophyll or liquid or solidity. All of them are able to be in communication with each other. The land itself holds resonance. The trees will speak to you. They are all like antenna connecting to each other and receiving and transmitting energy and information, and they all relate to the—well, how do I say it—psycho-emotional frequency.

Amelia: You and Christopher Hills would obviously have shared so many of these ideas.

Penny: Oh, yes. It was such a blessing to meet him and to spend not many years together, but a really powerful and connected time with such a man who combined heft of his intellect with the vastness of his heart and the strength of his vision and ability to manifest. He was a real optimist: a mixture between a yogi and a druid. I had come late in his life to discover the Goddess, and he said, "I've written 32 books. I've had all these businesses, but right now it all means nothing. What we need is Goddess to press the heart button of the world, and then people will wonder why I did things in that old energy-inefficient way before."



THE SAFE PERIOD, 1971. Photographic collage, 10 inches x 8 inches.

It was actually quite funny: In the time just before he was dying, we were in the living room and he looked up at a painting I had done and he said, "I didn't want to tell you before, because I didn't want it to go to your head—but I just want to tell you what an incredible artist you are." Then he went on to describe for a good long time all the things he saw in the work that told him that. I would say he offered me the greatest gift I think one can have, which was to recognize and appreciate my highest self and, in that way, allow me to move into my full potential. Him offering me that gift is what made me want to try to keep offering it to others and to be able to recognize and appreciate the highest qualities in others.

Amelia: I like the idea of potential. It's an idea that fits well with art, because before you begin anything creative it exists in energetic terms as infinite potential.

Penny: With all my art, I feel I'm making such poor approximations of what I really see. You know, it's how to translate and bring that vision space, that mind's eye, down into some kind of tangible form. But the tools at our disposal are getting more and more wonderful. I know people have said to me, "Why are you working with digital collage instead of with cut-and-paste?" But how could I not? You can play with the transparency without having to go into a darkroom. You can paint to scale. Your colors are light, rather than pigment. It's a bigger pallet of frequency when it's light. It's so beautiful. To me, it's a natural evolution.

Amelia: Why do you think people are surprised that you are interested in using technology?

Penny: Because they have limits to what they see art to be. And because, well, let's face it: It's a kind of complex world we're in right now. Collage has been my favorite art form. Whether I'm doing three-dimensional or two-dimensional, I really like bringing different things together to create a new reality out of these parts of reality. But if you look at modern advertising and fashion and all these things, the predominant way of creating the art that they're showing is collage. In a way, it has become the most popular art form; and yet in that context, it's not really seen as an art form, per se. It's an applied art. We've got these fuzzy edges. It's all to do with association, and it is also a question of what defines the art from the not-art. It's in the intention, in what one is bringing to consciousness with the choice of images that one uses.

You know, there's this horrible archetype of the artist suffering and starving in a garret and having this terrible life in one way or another—[the idea that] only struggle produces great art. I didn't think this was a very satisfactory archetype at all. Everything in one's life is a form of art, and that's a much more inclusive archetype for everybody to find the art within. One of the roles of the artist is to help people to find that.

