

ArtReview



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Shaping art history since 1949

17 June, 1972

Peter Fuller

Women painted by men

Peter Fuller (1947–90), was a prominent and controversial critic who contributed frequently to *Arts Review* and many other British art magazines during the 1970s. Initially on the left and influenced by the Marxist critic John Berger, he became fiercely opposed to what he saw as the decadence of much of contemporary art. He founded the magazine *Modern Painters* in 1988. He was killed in a car crash in 1990

Ever since the Renaissance, art has been produced predominantly by men, and, since long before the Renaissance, men have oppressed women, politically, economically, socially and physically. Inevitably this oppression has been vividly reflected in art – particularly in painting where woman has so frequently been chosen as the subject matter. The male prerogative over creativity has meant that almost every painting of the female nude, produced within the European Tradition, has been male chauvinist in its orientation.

This became accentuated at the time of the Renaissance, when religion ran down as the motor for art, and the demands of monied, male, mercantile patrons became the controlling factor in the market. The Medicis, and their fellow city princes, wanted their women passive, sensuous, available, silent and unquestioning. So, painting reflected those male demands. The women lay on their couches, naked, waiting, watching and vulnerable, displayed by the artist for a third party, a voyeur intruder, who was the purchaser, and is now the viewer.

The European Tradition succumbed to this male ethos; historically, such a development was inevitable, as women have only recently become organised to protest over their treatment at the hands of men. But what is disturbing is the complicity of contemporary critics with that chauvinism, and the unchallenged continuance of it by modern artists who claim to be radical.

An art which fails to respond to socio-political developments is quite worthless. One of the most significant political developments of our time has been the struggle of women towards their own liberation, the articulation, for the first time, of the beginnings of a theory of their oppression and the start of organised, remedial, revolutionary activity.

John Berger has been, to my knowledge, the only person writing and talking about art to perceive this, and to argue its significance in our evaluation of the European Tradition. [...] Berger maintains that 'artistic nudity', far from being an elevated condition, was a way in which men furthered the process of the objectification of women, and forced them into a stereotype of submission. [...]

But we can take Berger's historical arguments further, and apply them to those artists and critics who persist in reifying women in our own day. Most of them

are engaged in magazine, or advertising, production. The male periodicals, *Playboy*, *Men Only* and *Penthouse* offer the consumer, today, what the Titian and Veronese once offered to their patrons in the past: silent, available, unresisting women on tap. The pin-up, one of the most sophisticated and oppressive of post-war art forms, clearly has its origins right in the heart of the European Tradition.

But within the confines of that practice still defined as 'Fine Art', a similar portrayal of women is continued, and has gained ground in the last four years with the wholesale revival of modern 'Eroticism'.

It is the duty of progressive criticism to combat this development at an ideological level. We are not dealing, here, with a moral issue: such considerations are wholly irrelevant to serious evaluation. What is at stake is political: an image of a woman painted by an artist from a male chauvinist standpoint, collaborates with, and reinforces the oppression of, women. It should have no place in progressive expression, nor summon any praise from forward-looking critics.

[...] From the rippling courtesans of Titian, the simpering, big-bellied females of Cranach, the undulating odalisques of Ingres, the rosy-tinted sirens of Renoir, to the fetishised club girls of Allen Jones, women have always been painted by men, from the man's point of view, and new theoretical developments, actively being put into practice by women, have shown that that point of view has been humiliating and oppressive. It can no longer be tolerated.

There is a difference between that which is sexist, and that which is erotic. The latter kind of image need oppress no one, but in our own culture no examples of dynamic, progressive eroticism have yet emerged (except perhaps in the work of Penelope Slinger, who is, significantly, a woman). The reason for this may well be that male chauvinism is culturally so endemic that it has wholly hegemonised visual portrayal of the unclothed human body.

March 2019

right Penny Slinger, *Hermaphrodite Tree* (from *Scrolls* series), 1976, 26 x 102 cm, Xerox body monoprint with collage on paper. Courtesy the artist

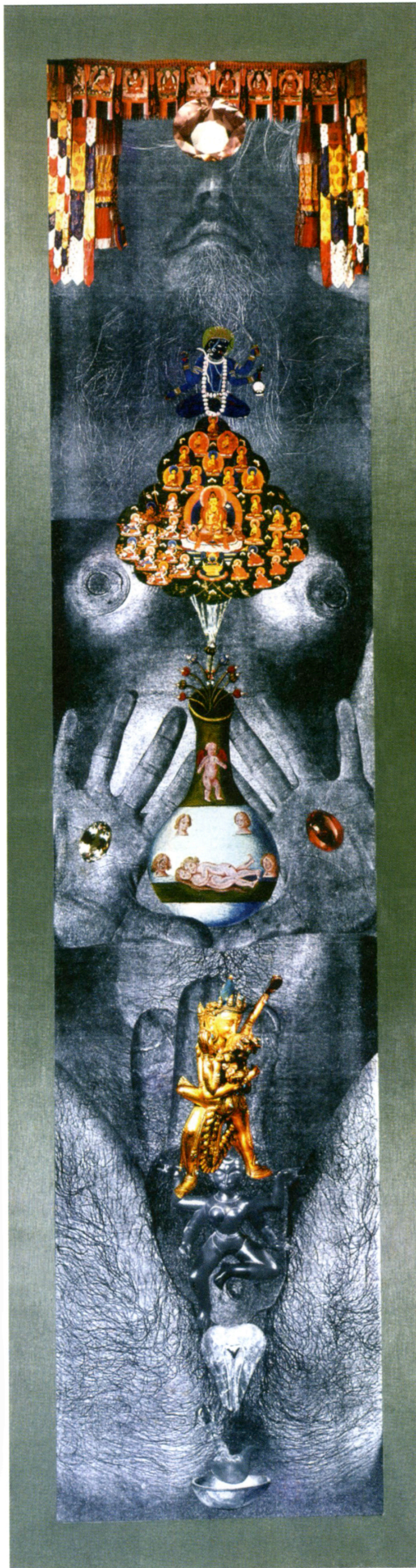
Penny Slinger is an artist who began exhibiting in the early 1970s. Her photocollages, sculptures and performances took on emerging feminist concerns about power, sexuality and womanhood. She was a member of Jane Arden's radical *Holocaust Theatre* group. She moved to America in the late 1970s and now lives in California

30 September, 1977

Penny Slinger at the The Mirandy Gallery, London, reviewed by Nadia Woloshyn

An aggressive celebration of female sexuality

Penny Slinger's 'Inner Space' show is as Roland Penrose puts it, an 'Aladdin's treasure and the feast of Belshazzar', exotic, ebullient, colourful and erotic. To the visitor, the exploration of Inner Space or the psyche is apparent in only a few of Miss Slinger's collages; and the exploration seems directed almost uniquely towards awareness. A rose implanted in the sole of a foot in one collage corresponds to a 'third eye' implanted in the sole of a foot in another, suggesting that there are areas of the body which can receive sense impressions other than those we normally pay heed to. A Group of collages display a woman's body, decorated with brightly coloured roses. The titles of *Lotus Woman*, *Hermaphrodite Tree* and *Gateway*, suggest that physical and sexual awareness is the path towards mystic experience and more intense spiritual awareness. The *Hermaphrodite* for instance, in Socrates' view, had achieved an enviable state of happiness by recombining the male and female halves of man which had been unfortunately sundered in pre-Historic times. It is this search for spiritual awareness that we must bear in mind when we turn to the rest of the exhibition,



the bulk of which might accurately have been entitled 'The Triumphant Clitoris'. For it is a bold, almost aggressive celebration of female sexuality. In several collages, a life-size clitoris becomes the focal point of the composition, replacing in some cases a woman's features, (in other words, her mind and personality) and in others, holding sway at the centre of the Universe. Miss Slinger's talent for the exotic and the decorative emerges most charmingly in four doll's houses which she has decorated with costly materials, and curiosities, like a 50 cent piece within a tiny bottle which must have been constructed around it, or models of creatures which have the characteristics of both bird and woman. This is an extremely provocative exhibition.

1 September, 1978

Hayward Annual 1978, reviewed by Frances Spalding

Some men included

If it were possible to divorce this show from the political issue it arouses – the role of women artists in Britain today – it would still rate as one of the most exciting exhibitions of modern art for some time. It not only reflects subtle and penetrating ideas, wit and social commitment, but it is also (dare one say it?) visually alive. It must be all too easy for an official annual exhibition to grow leaden and dead with the weight of reputations and all-too-familiar art (as was the tendency last year). The astonishing achievement of this year's show is its combination of an element of freshness – new names and new directions – with a high standard of professionalism and presentation.

Except in very small numbers, women artists have been systematically excluded from major exhibitions in recent years; last year's annual included only one. To rectify this imbalance (after protest) the Arts Council agreed that this show should be selected by Rita Donagh, Tess Jaray, Liliane Lijn, Kim Lim and Gillian Wise Ciobotaru. Some men have been included, but the selectors have deliberately sought out women artists whose work has been under-valued and little seen.

Surprisingly, only three artists are overtly feminist – Hiller, Kelly and Hunter. Mary Kelly challenges the notion that women cannot play the maternal role and be an artist by making the subject of her project *Post Partum Document* the relationship between mother and child, which she sees as 'the basic structure upon which adult socialisation is founded'. Carefully planned and executed, Kelly's *Document* conveys a great deal of her absorption in her subject. Alexis Hunter will be found more approachable to those not familiar with Kristeva and other of the theorists that have fired a small intelligentsia in the women's movement. Hunter's colour 'narrative' photographs have an immediacy that heightens their suggestiveness. Her idea was simply to investigate certain forms of repression and violence. A shiny, high-heeled shoe is discovered to be not a source of beauty but of pain, and is, after fetishistic investigation, set on fire. In most of the series the hands of the protagonist are positioned in such a way as to allow the spectator to identify with them if she