



Penny Slinger, Penny as Red Dakini. Photography Mayotte Magnus, 1977© The Artist; Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London

How artist Penny Slinger used erotica & pleasure to reclaim the female body

[ART & PHOTOGRAPHYFEATURE](#)

The London-born, LA-based artist has spent decades creating provocative works to explore spirituality, surrealism, and the female psyche

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Text [Ally Faughnan](#)

Penny Slinger: Tantric Transformations¹⁰





Self-proclaimed feminist, surrealist, and artist [Penelope Slinger](#) – better known as Penny – is not afraid to get up, close, and personal in her work. Spanning photography, film, collage, and sculpture, the London-born artist's six-decade-long career is anchored in mysticism, femininity, and sexuality.

Her interest in the feminine psyche was sparked while studying [surrealism](#) at university which soon developed into a fascination with Tantric art – a genre based on Buddhist and

Hinduist traditions – to explore [spirituality](#) and its connections to the body and self. Slinger looked up to pioneering surrealist artists such as Max Ernst, who she later met in Paris – undoubtedly a major moment for the artist who had based her thesis on the German painter.

Beginning with early body prints and collages made during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Slinger has since developed an extensive multimedia portfolio of work. This includes photo collages created on board and paper, as seen in “[Tantric Reunions](#)” (1976) and “[Offerings at Twilight](#)” (1976), as well as photo collages made using Xerox body prints, such as “[The Cosmic Couple](#)” (1976) and “[Bouquet](#)” (1976). A couple of years ago, the artist also collaborated with London-based designer [Tessa Edwards](#) on a [fashion film](#), and Slinger’s more recent work takes her recognisable collage-style into the digital realm, with a digital photo collage of her body as the female Buddha Dakini in “[Penny Red Dakini](#)” (2019).

Throughout her six-decade-long career, the LA-based artist’s work has been admired and showcased at many exhibitions. Now, at the Richard Saltoun Gallery in London, Slinger returns to the UK to present her provocative work in a solo show titled *Tantric Transformations*. In this exhibition, Slinger mixes her old and new work, placing her early collages alongside new photographs taken specifically for the show.

In anticipation of *Tantric Transformation* opening at the end of June 2019, we look back at the artist’s life and work, to see how she used erotica and pleasure to reclaim the female body.

“Having discovered the magic of surrealism, I wanted to employ its tools and methods to create a language for the feminine psyche to express itself” – Penny Slinger

STUDYING SURREALISM IGNITED HER INTEREST IN THE FEMININE PSYCHE

Slinger was born in London in 1947 and started paving her own path from an early age – one of her school reports from age ten stated: “There are 36 children in this class; 35 going one way and Miss Slinger going the other.” Slinger’s family were always supportive and the artist [appreciated](#) that her mother and father always tried to make her feel special, even if they didn’t understand her at the time.

Slinger later graduated from the Chelsea School of Art in 1969, taking a particular interest in surrealism during her studies and writing her final thesis on the work by German painter Max Ernst. Her association with Ernst went from being a studious admirer to an acquaintance when she was later introduced by English artist Sir Roland Penrose – one of the founders of the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and a great supporter of Slinger’s work for years to come.

Despite being a pioneering feminist artist, the majority of role models that Slinger had in the early stages of her career were male. In an [interview](#), she spotlighted [Egon Schiele](#) and Alberto Giacometti as two artists in particular who inspired her intimate works. However, Slinger’s interest in the nude female body was not purely sexual and she opposed the objectification of women often done by male artists. Instead, Slinger was interested in exploring what is below the skin, delving into ideas of femininity and the female subconscious.

It was also the mystical nature of surrealist work that inspired Slinger’s own creations, as she explained: “Having discovered the magic of surrealism, I wanted to employ its tools and methods to create a language for the feminine psyche to express itself.” After turning down a postgraduate course in Film at the Royal College of Art, Slinger set off travelling and later moved to Los Angeles to continue her investigation into the feminine psyche.



"Coming Up Roses/Petals Fall-2", 1974 Xerox self mono print

SHE IS A SELF-PROCLAIMED 'FEMINIST SURREALIST'

The term 'surrealism' was defined by French artist André Breton in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* as: "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought." However, Slinger wanted to explore these concepts beyond her studies in European surrealism and was particularly interested in the psychic automatism and the functioning of thought in relation to women.

Developing her own visual language to talk about her work, the artist adopted the term 'feminist surrealism'. With her feminist approach, what distinguishes Slinger's work from traditional surrealist artists is her interest in reclaiming the female body. This is seen through the dark sexuality that runs through many of her works, showing Slinger's fascination with the erotic and her interest in portraying women through a female lens.

Slinger also explored this eroticisation of the female body in her [Bride's Cake Series](#) (1973), where the artist made herself into a wedding cake with the front slice cut out to expose herself. Parodying the ceremonial wedding ritual of cutting the cake, Slinger aimed to recreate this tradition from a women's point of view and went on to make several provocative collages from these images.



"Penny as Shakti", 1976 Photo by Nik Douglas

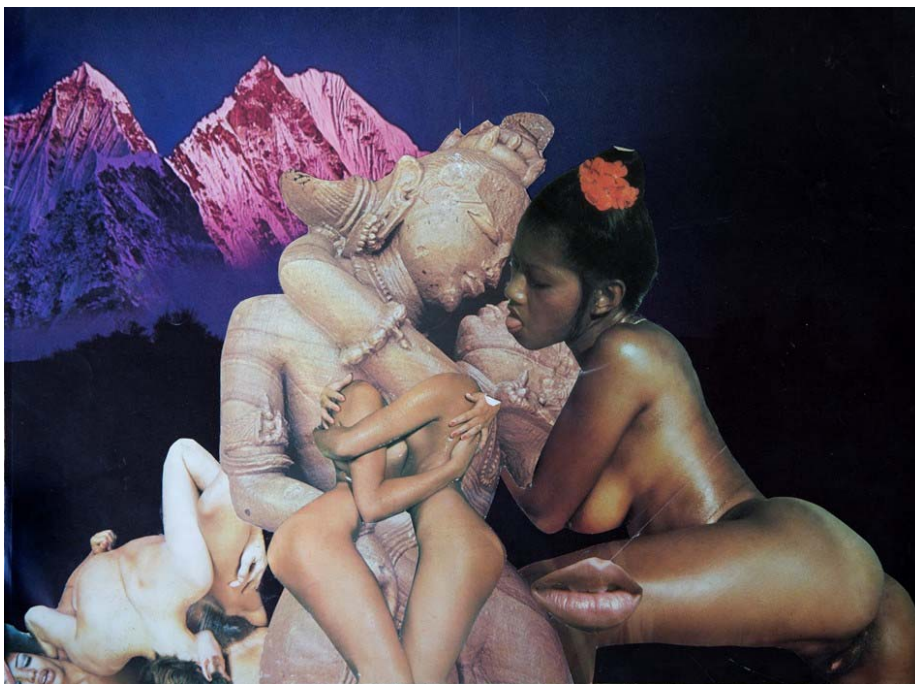
HER SPIRITUAL WORKS ARE INFLUENCED BY TANTRIC ART

Tantra means to weave or to expand, exploring the intersection of the spiritual, physical, and emotional. Rooted in Buddhist and Hinduist traditions, Tantric art also draws on this spirituality. However, Tantric art was not prominent within western society before the 1970s, and after coming across Tantra while travelling after university, Slinger decided she wanted to change this.

As Slinger discovered more about ancient mythologies and eastern philosophies, the young artist recognised the similarities between Tantric iconography and the evolution of surrealism. Adopting qualities from both, Slinger started to explore mysticism and sacred sensuality in her work. Many of her earlier performances also touched on these mystical ideas, including "[A New Communion of Freaks, Prophets and Witches](#)" (1971), which Slinger performed in as part of England's first all-women theatre group called Holocaust.

A few years later, while walking around the exhibition *Tantra, the Indian Cult of Ecstasy* at the Hayward Gallery in 1971, Slinger cemented her interest in Tantra. Nearing her mid-twenties, the artist was enamoured with the visual language of the exhibition, which was filled with animal-headed beings and mystic figures. On visiting the show, Slinger claimed: "I saw a Yantra (mystic diagram) dedicated to the Goddess Karli and understood abstraction for the first time."

Her interests and exploration into Tantric art finally came together in 1979 when she co-authored the book *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy* with her partner Nik Douglas. Slinger also illustrated the study, aiming to bring the spirituality of Tantra and sacred sexuality to modern audiences.



collage on paper

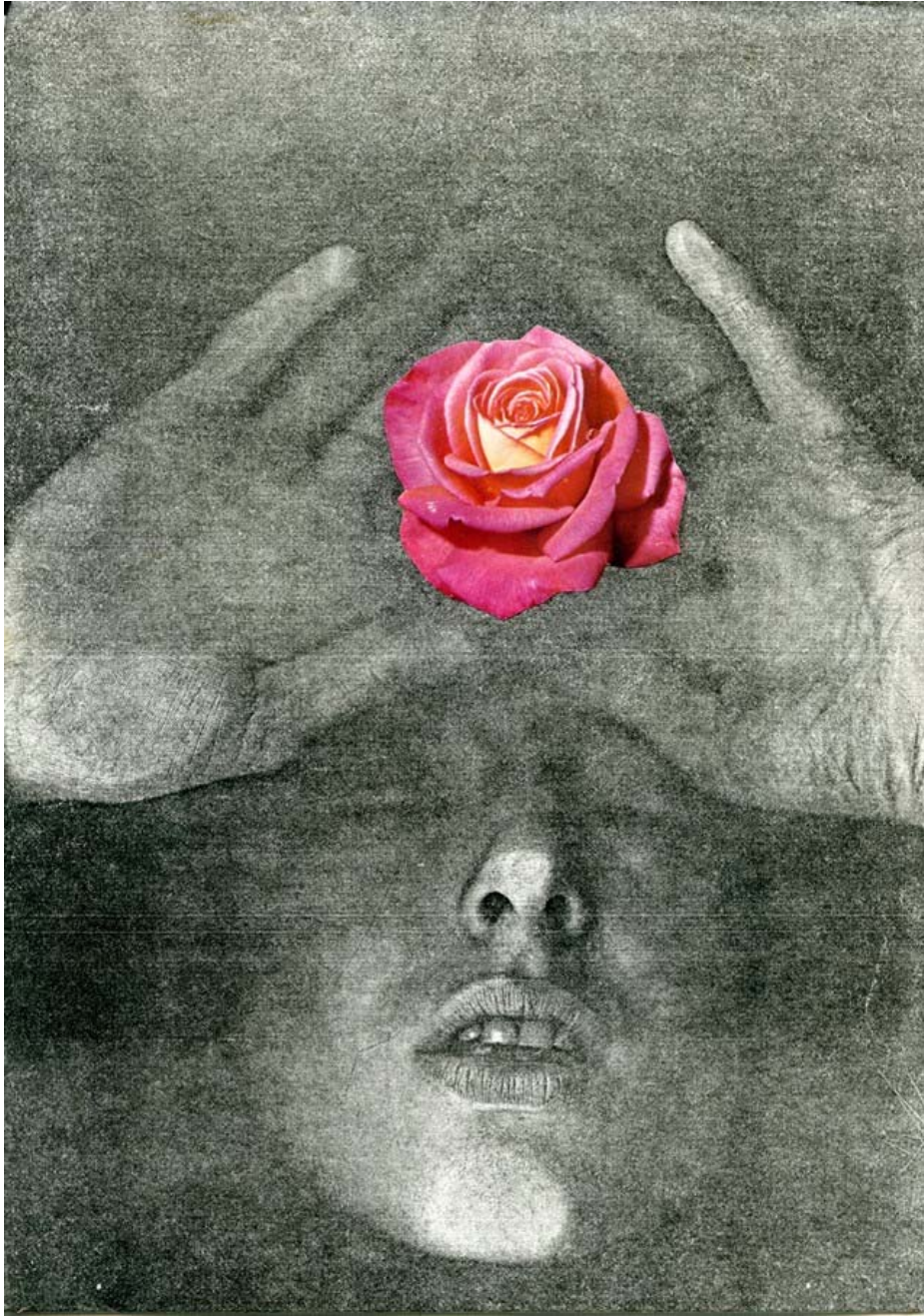
"Tantric Reunions", 1976 Photo

HER BODY BECAME A TOOL FOR EXPLORATION

Imagine coming across Slinger, pressed up against a copy machine on her lunch break from teaching at the Portsmouth College of Art in the 1970s... this is how she initially captured images of her own body to use in her collages. Using the copy printer, Slinger created 'copy art', which distorted and elongated monoprints of her face. This resulted in a series she titled [*Spirit Impressions*](#) (1974) after the prints' ghost-like appearance.

Slinger also created a series of scrolls titled [*Chakra Man and Woman*](#) (1976), which were inspired by Tantric chakras and ancient Indian paintings. Working with her partner Nik Douglas, she used a Xerox machine to create monoprints of their naked bodies. As well as employing Tantric symbolism throughout these scrolls, Slinger collaged fruits and flowers onto the images to celebrate the sensuality and sexuality of the images.

In true Slinger-style, many of her sculptures were modelled on her own body. This includes the piece "Mummy Case" (1969), created for her Diploma exhibit at the end of her university studies, where Slinger cast her own face and breasts into a case that she filled with several objects and mummified body parts. Across her 'copy art', scrolls, and sculptures, the naked body became Slinger's tool for exploration, allowing her to express her interests in erotica, sexual desires, and female liberation.



"La Vie en Rose", 1976 Xerox

self body print with collage

SHE IS HER OWN MUSE

Within an art world still fighting the ongoing battle for gender equality, it is no surprise that the feminist artist wanted to tackle the lack of female representation through her work. This comes across in her first book *50% The Visible Woman*, published in 1971, which displayed

a series of collages that explored how women were objectified in society, media, and the art world.

Refusing the idea that women are only useful as muses for their more successful male counterparts, Slinger used her own body as her inspiration in an attempt to shift this paradigm. Going back to her beliefs in Tantra, Slinger embraced her erotic nature and took ownership of the sexualisation of the female figure. However, the artist has [defined](#) the difference between erotic and pornographic: “Eroticism is embracing, whereas pornography tends to want to cut out anything besides what will just get you off.” Embracing her own sexuality in her work, Slinger’s work goes against the exploitation of women’s bodies and shows the beauty behind eroticism.

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HER WORK IS SO RADICAL THAT IT WAS BURNT BY BRITISH CUSTOMS

Slinger once [described](#) herself in three words: as a woman, an artist, and a visionary. All of these are integral to her creative practice, however, her artistic vision was not always received positively by audiences. In the 1970s, when Slinger’s work was en route from the printers in the Netherlands, thousands of copies were held at British Customs and burnt for being too radical.

Since Slinger started creating work during the political upheaval of the 1960s, she wasn’t afraid to be provocative and her work was inherently experimental and rebellious. Slinger’s early work was also created at a time when radical feminism was gaining force in the 1970s, yet her work cannot be seen simply as feminist propaganda. Instead, she believed in creating more long-term social change and emphasised the need for society to reconsider the ways that issues on women, sexuality, and the female body are approached.



"Offerings at Twilight", 1976 Photo collage on board

HER MULTIMEDIA COLLAGES QUESTION ARCHETYPES ABOUT FEMALE SEXUALITY

Slinger has created several collage series throughout her lifetime, working across multimedia formats. These collages moved away from the use of her own body and focused on images often found in pornography and erotica. This was liberating for the artist, as she could focus on the symbolism of female sexuality and how this is portrayed through imagery, rather than her own sexualisation.

Using images often cut out from magazines, the artist created collages that portray surrealist landscapes filled with female bodies, flowers, and other objects. Works such as "Offerings at Twilight" (1976) and "Tantric Reunions" (1976) show Slinger's technique of layering images to create busy and energetic scenes.

Since the early 2000s, Slinger's work has embraced the digital age. In 2010, the artist created *64 Dakini Oracle*, a series of digital collages which portray the different archetypes of the 'Divine Feminine'. More recently, a portrait taken of the artist in 1977 by the French photographer Mayotte Magnus has been digitally reprinted in "Penny Red Dakini" (2019). This striking red version of Slinger resembles the female Buddha Dakini – otherwise known as Vajrayogini – with several arms expanding out from behind the figure. Presenting Slinger as the female Buddha is a powerful symbol, embracing her connections with Tantra and portraying the artist's fascination with the spiritual and sensual.

*[Penny Slinger: Tantric Transformations](#) runs from 29 June to 24 August 2019 at Richard Saltoun Gallery, London as part of Mayfair Art Weekend. Alongside the exhibition, Slinger's documentary *Out of the Shadows* will make its UK debut on 29 June 2019 at the ICA, book tickets [here](#)*

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