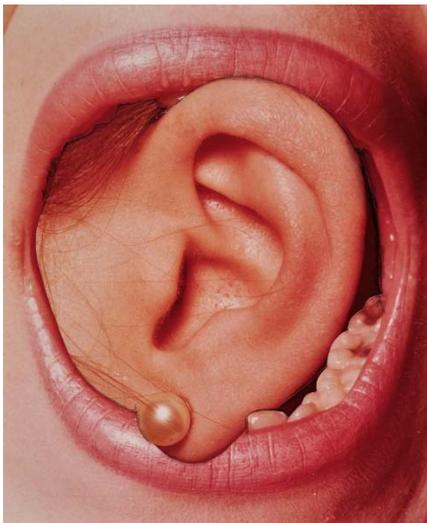




Penny Slinger | Collage is a naughty medium

In 2019, the world's first survey exhibition of collage took place at the National Galleries of Scotland. During the exhibition, we caught up with featured artist Penny Slinger to discuss her process, inspiration, and what it is that makes collage such a popular medium.

Hi Penny, we're standing in our Cut and Paste | 400 Years of Collage exhibition, looking at three of your works, *I Hear What You Say*, *I See What You Mean* and *Read My Lips*, from 1973. Can you tell us about them and how they fit in with your practice?



Penny Slinger, *I Hear What You Say*, 1973. © The Roland Penrose Collection.

"These works were part of an exhibition I had called Opening. Opening focussed on themes of food and eroticism, and a big section of that was called 'Mouthpieces'. There were mouthpieces in two and three dimensions at the exhibition. The two-dimensional mouth pieces here were photographs of my own mouth and as you can see, there are different transformations happening.

"There was a likeness, a punning that I had through the whole series but at the same time it was about asking how are we heard? As a woman I felt that I didn't really have a mouthpiece but I wanted to have a mouthpiece and so these were very much a confrontation of that idea of where is the woman's voice? And then in bringing together different objects in relation to it I wanted to shift the whole paradigm away from glamour shots and the way that women's mouths and eyes are generally seen to advertise lipstick or eyeliner. Here I was trying to say: 'let's disrupt the status quo somewhat,' and bring different objects in relation to them. It is my own ear and my own eye that are pictured. I wanted to use part of myself but put them together in a way only collage can allow."

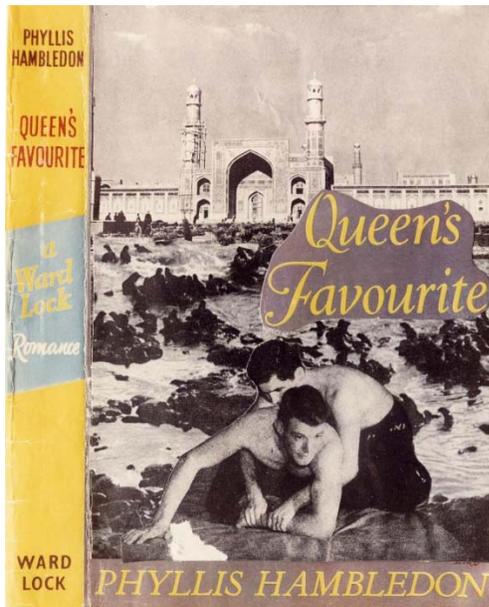
One thing that you are cocking a snoop at here is the male gaze. Usually we see lips as they are, but with the ear in this work, for example, you are challenging that idea of the sexualised female mouth, so could you tell us more about that and how collage helped you to do what you wanted to do?

"As an art student I felt I was coming up in a very male-centric world. I saw so many women throughout the history of art but generally as the muse, as the one depicted, rather than the one doing the depicting. So I took on, as a challenge and an object in my art, to try and reverse that paradigm, and said I want to be my own muse. I don't mind being the muse for other people but I actually want to claim the right to be my own muse. Therefore, being on both sides of the equation at the same time, I was able to describe how a woman looks and is from a women's point of view, rather than from somebody else's point of view.

"In using all the surfaces of lips, eyes, bodies, everything that I have used in my work of how a woman appears, I'm also trying to show something about how a woman is inside, and therefore not showing just a surface but showing these other elements in relation to it to jog us into the subconscious and the unconscious and the world of fantasies. And all the things that make up our whole being that are not just appearing on the surface but in the substance of who we are."

What is it about collage that allows you to achieve the results that you want to achieve?

"Even if I was using a different medium, I think I would always take a collage approach to everything. I can paint and I can draw. I am not an artist who uses collage because she can't do the other things. I am someone who has always used collage as a choice. I think that is because collage allows a unique opportunity to bring together elements of the real world but to put them together in a different relationship and therefore shake that very foundation of perception, so that things are as they appear and yet they are not."



Kenneth Halliwell and Joe Orton, book cover: Queen's Favourite, about 1960-1962. © Islington Library.

Looking at some of the other works in the exhibition, such as the library book covers doctored with collages by playwright Joe Orton and his lover Kenneth Halliwell, would you agree there is something a bit naughty about collage?

"Oh, yes it is definitely naughty! Collage is a naughty medium because it is doing what you shouldn't do with things and if you have the feeling that you have the right to take any kind of image from anywhere – an entitlement which I think any true collage artist kind of assumes - and you put them together in these new relationships, it really is cocking a snook to the status quo and to mundane reality.

"You are saying that things are not as they appear and look, here I can subvert what we have and put it together into something that you haven't seen before, which hopefully is always a little bit shocking and therefore naughty, too, and of course I have used naughty elements in my work as well.

"So I wanted to bring all those things together to create a new kind of reality with that sense of humour and sense of irony running through everything because you can't take any of this too seriously and that is the essence of Dada which of course has been one of my inspirations in my art."



Max Ernst *Untitled (Unpublished collage for 'Une Semaine de Bonté')* 1934 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2018

Are there any particular works in the show you've seen that have had a particular impression on you or that fit into your own views of collage?

"I am so thrilled and delighted because there is so much on display here that I haven't seen before. We are seeing the trail of collage going right back to Victorian scrapbooking and all those things which show that collage has had a vital life for a long time.

"For me what we have beautifully represented here from the Roland Penrose Collection are the collage books of Max Ernst. When I was at art school and trying

One of the themes running through the exhibition is the way that people perceive amateur artists and professional artists. One featured work, for example, is a bedroom door which was covered with stickers by a teenage boy.

Do you have any view on this sense of people being artists but not being aware that they are and having the confidence to regard themselves as artistic people?

"I believe that everybody is creative and we all have different ways that we can express that creativity.

"I like to encourage any kind of form of self-expression in anyone and one of the most exciting exhibitions I saw was of people who were using art as therapy in a mental health hospital. Their work was amazing and vibrant and so creative. How does one draw that definition?

"Collage has always been my medium of choice but I have also in my lifetime as an artist done drawing and sculpture and painting and pastels.

"I felt it was important for people to know that I could do all of those things and that I was very proficient at it and I wasn't choosing to do collage because I couldn't do those things, I was choosing collage because it had the qualities that I wanted to express myself as an artist.

"So, it is hard to draw a definition, except that when you see something that works as a work of art, it just does.

"It's that indefinable aesthetic, and that aesthetic is something that you can be trained with your eye to see and know where those harmonies are, or it can be something that just spontaneously is in the being.

"For me, those lines are a little bit blurred, but certainly to be an artist you have to have a kind of passion and commitment which makes you go further than just producing objects of art. It's about your commitment to what you are actually trying to communicate.

"So I guess those are where the lines can be drawn, in the aesthetic, and in the commitment. And that is what makes an artist an artist by vocation rather than someone who is doing something as a hobby but I would encourage artistic expression for every single human being."