

Interview

Swinging 60s surrealist Penny Slinger: 'Collectors thought I came with the art'

[Richard Godwin](#)

[Art](#)

She made psychic dolls houses, erotic wedding cakes and full-frontal collages. But the world wasn't ready for her powerful personal visions. Is 'Lady Picasso' about to get her dues?

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Expelled from convent school ... Penelope Slinger, who is now the subject of a film and has a show in Britain. Photograph: Siegfried Modola/The Guardian

Penelope Slinger has never done anything by halves. She remembers drawing her first “really accomplished” picture in 1952, when she was four and a half. It was of her parents – completely naked. They were terribly proud but too embarrassed to show their friends. Then, when she was nine, she was expelled from her Surrey convent school for waving a sanitary towel out of a bus window. A child psychologist informed her parents that she wasn't mad, she was simply an artist, and they should do what they could to support her.

“I was completely out of left field,” says Slinger with a laugh. “Their embarrassment about how far I would push the boundaries – those seeds were planted when I was very young. I just continued on that trajectory.”

Slinger enrolled at Chelsea School of [Art](#) in the late 1960s, at the height of the counterculture, vowing to become the most famous female artist who had ever lived – a “Lady Picasso”. She went on to create some of the era’s most extraordinary works: psychic dolls’ houses, erotic wedding cakes, quasi-medical dissections that aimed to collapse the distinction between artist and muse. The painstakingly realised “full-frontal collages” that would form her 1977 masterpiece, *An Exorcism*, mark an intensely personal journey, even if the images of country houses, roses, judges, genitals and falcons feel drawn from some collective English subconscious.

Her themes – female desire, subjugation, rebirth – might feel very current, but Slinger proved too much for the art world back then. Between her solo show in New York in 1982 and her inclusion in the *Angels of Anarchy* show of female surrealists in Manchester in 2009, she completely disappeared. “When you’re trying to do something new,” she says, “it often doesn’t get accepted at the time. Probably most people weren’t ready for it.”



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Her masterpiece ... *Bird in the Hand*, a collage from *An Exorcism*. Photograph: Penny Slinger

It seems they are now. After years in exile, Slinger has resurfaced, ready to put body and psyche on the dissection table once again. In recent years, she has been seen as a “missing link” between classical surrealism and punk, anticipating later artists such as [Cindy Sherman](#), [Louise Bourgeois](#) and [Sarah Lucas](#), while also bearing comparison to Frida Kahlo in her use of herself as muse. Her extraordinary life is the subject of a new documentary, [Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows](#), directed by Richard Kovitch. It’s exactly the film any Slinger fan might have hoped for – a deep and intuitive exploration of her work featuring testimonies from critics, curators, contemporaries and Slinger herself. Female audiences have responded with tears of recognition – and anger at how she had been written out of art history.

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Slinger, now 72, proves wise and funny, an eloquent appraiser of her own work. She still has all the original negatives from her painstaking collages, as well as the scandalised press cuttings from the 1970s. And she retains the glorious, transgressive confidence so evident in her work: “My dream now would be to have the whole trajectory of my life and art recognised, to be able to show all the aspects of who I am. A nice museum show or something like that. I’d like to put a firm stake in the ground for my relevance and wisdom.”

Slinger’s erasure seems remarkable considering the impact she has made. At Chelsea, she earned the patronage of the collector Roland Penrose, who took her to Paris to meet her idol, the German surrealist [Max Ernst](#). His use of collage and treatment of the human body as a “symbolic domain” were a key influence. She also began a relationship with the film-maker Peter Whitehead, who had just made the quintessential swinging 60s movie [Tonight Let’s All Make Love in London](#), but was by then nurturing a sideline in falconry. For a spell, they kept a flat in a turret in London’s Soho, surrounded by birds of prey. “It was a fun time. We definitely had a lot of different experiences,” she laughs. “I really thought I was destined to be the most famous woman artist there had ever been. A lot of my energy was in that direction and a lot of the liberties that I took were in the name of my mission.”



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Rooted in the body ... The Larval Worm, a collage from The 50% The Visible Woman.

Photograph: Penny Slinger

She procured human body-parts from teaching hospitals to study for her sculptures. She took her art to men’s magazines, which tended to refer to her as an “erotic artist”. While she welcomed the label, it was more a means to an end. “I’m more interested in the nature of the psyche, of stripping not just to the naked body, but seeing what’s going on underneath.”

Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows review – fascinating career re-examination

4 out of 5 stars.

She came close to making the sort of impact she craved. “This book will become as important on your bookshelf as Sgt Pepper is on your record rack,” was how Rolling Stone magazine described her first book, [50%: The Visible Woman](#). Laura Mulvey, the feminist critic who coined the term “male gaze”, praised Slinger’s projections of “female phantasy” in Spare Rib. But Slinger never really related to political feminism. “It was more concerned with trying to get the same sort of power and rights as men. That’s definitely one side. But I always felt my contribution was more rooted in the body and the being, the qualities of the feminine that had been ignored and subjugated.”

As Whitehead devoted more time to falconry, Slinger joined Holocaust, a women’s theatre group led by the experimental film-maker Jane Arden. They performed a “cabaret of the inner feminine” to rave reviews in Edinburgh and London, but then in 1972, Arden took the group to her home town in Wales to make an experimental film [The Other Side of the Underneath](#). If you want to see the dark side of the 60s dream, you couldn’t find a more nightmarish example. “It’s rather heavy to say the least and it’s not really redemptive,” says Slinger. “Everybody gets left in the darkness floundering at the end of that film.”

It caused a terminal rift in Slinger and Whitehead’s relationship. Arden directed Slinger to have sex with another man in the film. Whitehead asked her not to, but Slinger did it anyway. The film had still darker consequences for Sally Minford, the cellist who provided its soundtrack. Her husband, Martin, objected so strongly to the whole project that he set himself on fire and died as a result of his injuries.



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The self as muse ... collage with country house. Photograph: film company handout
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“That was terrifying,” says Slinger. “They were a family. They had a little girl. They lived in a caravan. She thought there was too much darkness and manipulation in the film and he did that as a protest. It had a huge impact on me. It made me feel that I had to salvage my relationship with Peter as I felt this death was a direct result of my participation in this film. I didn’t want that

to happen to Peter, so I just tried to hang on to him after that. Unsuccessfully. He couldn't forgive me."

She and Whitehead travelled to Iran with the theatre director Peter Brook, then they went to stay with Mick and Bianca Jagger in the south of France, where another film failed to get off the ground. "Everything was falling apart," says Slinger. Eventually the two went their separate ways.

Slinger put all of this into her *An Exorcism* collages, which would appear in book form in 1977. She used Lilford Hall, a derelict estate in Northamptonshire, as a stage set for a psychodrama featuring herself, Whitehead and her fellow Holocaust member Susanka Fraey as models. It is clear from Whitehead's interviews in *Out of the Shadows* that Slinger had an enormous impact on him, yet when [he died earlier this month](#), none of the obituaries mentioned her.

The documentary did at least provide an opportunity for reconciliation. "We managed to connect up again over recent years and had some important times together, which was quite healing for both of us. The rift that occurred between us was quite devastating in both of our lives."



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'My path was a rich one' ... Slinger. Photograph: Siegfried Modola/The Guardian Advertisement

After *An Exorcism*, Slinger moved to New York, where she deepened an interest in tantric spirituality. In 1979, she provided the illustrations for the book *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy* with her partner, Nik Douglas. It sold more than 1m copies in 20 languages. After her 1982 New York show, three collectors showed a keen interest in buying her work. But there was a catch. "They all thought I went with the art," she says, "and that I would be available as my art was erotic." When they found out this was not the case, they pulled out, leaving her "bitterly disappointed". She abandoned the art world, despairing of its conservatism.

But she never stopped creating. For 15 years, Slinger lived on the Caribbean island of Anguilla, where she painted the native Arawak people. "If I'd had a more receptive audience for what I

was doing, I probably wouldn't have moved to a desert island. But that's what happened and I don't regret that path as it was a rich one."

Since the Angels of Anarchy show, curators have tended to focus on her surrealist phrase – but her forthcoming exhibition at the Richard Saltoun Gallery in London is the first to pay attention to her tantric work, which she sees as a logical progression from surrealism. Does she feel bitter at being neglected for so long? "I don't really believe in holding on to resentments – as you only hurt yourself. And I'm trying to do something about it now. Often artists can't get any recognition until they've died and that's a sorry state of affairs."

She recently moved to LA to work "full throttle" on her profile in the art world – and to bring things full circle. She has just completed a stop-motion animation based on the original Exorcism series, and she has returned to exploring her own body, once again using herself as her muse. "This body is a body of experience. It has value. It has depth and breadth and its beauty is substantial. It's not over."

- [Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows will be screened on 29 June at the ICA, London](#), followed by a Q&A with Slinger and Richard Kovitch; then on limited release. [Tantric Transformations is at the Richard Saltoun Gallery](#) from 29 June.