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Art in Review

Penny Slinger

'An Exorcism Revisited, 1977-2012'

Broadway 1602
1181 Broadway, at 28th Street
Through Nov. 30

Born in England, Penny Slinger emerged from art school in 1969, a time when lots of liberations were under way, including the nascent women's movement. The earliest works in this show, her first New York solo, are six short films from that year. They're student pieces, and rough, but pretty out there for the time, as Ms. Slinger plays with varieties of female experience by changing her own image with mirrors, masks and makeup.

Ms. Slinger has always pointed to European Surrealism as an influence, and you can see that. As a young artist, she met and became friends with Max Ernst and made a filmed homage to his collage-novel "Une Semaine de Bonté." She began combining her own photographic collages with writing and produced — again in 1969, that annus mirabilis — a book of self-described feminist surrealism called "50% — The Visible Woman." In 1977 she composed a second, still unpublished book with the same formal mix. It's titled "An Exorcism" and is the main focus of the show.

The book, presented in the gallery as a sequence of photo-collages accompanied by a printed and spoken narrative, comes across as a blend of "Rebecca" and "The Story of O." It's the tale of a young woman — played by Ms. Slinger — brought as a bride to a crumbling country estate, where she undergoes a grueling battle with a repressive patriarchy and her own fears. It's both a sendup of romantic-novel neurosis and a near-mystical erotic fantasy of feminine triumph. And in the context of our Goth- and vampire-addled present, it has found a magic moment to reappear.

Ms. Slinger, who now lives in California, has worked in many mediums over the years, including sculpture and stage design, represented here by a dollhouse furnished with toy-size versions of many of the elements that fill her collages. The show itself, a thing of disparate parts yet very much of a piece, is a reminder of the extraordinary adventure that feminist art in the 1960s and '70s was, and of how profound a debt present-day superstars — Cindy Sherman comes to mind — owe to venturesome spirits who came before.

HOLLAND COTTER



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BROADWAY 1602, NEW YORK

"The End of the Line (An Exorcism)" (1977), a collage by Penny Slinger, at Broadway 1602.