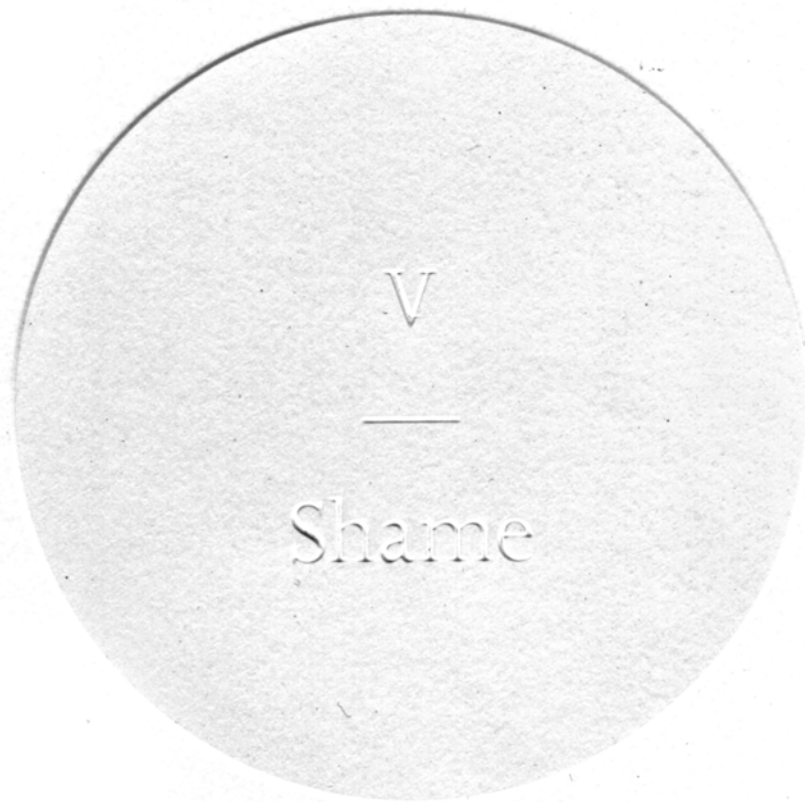


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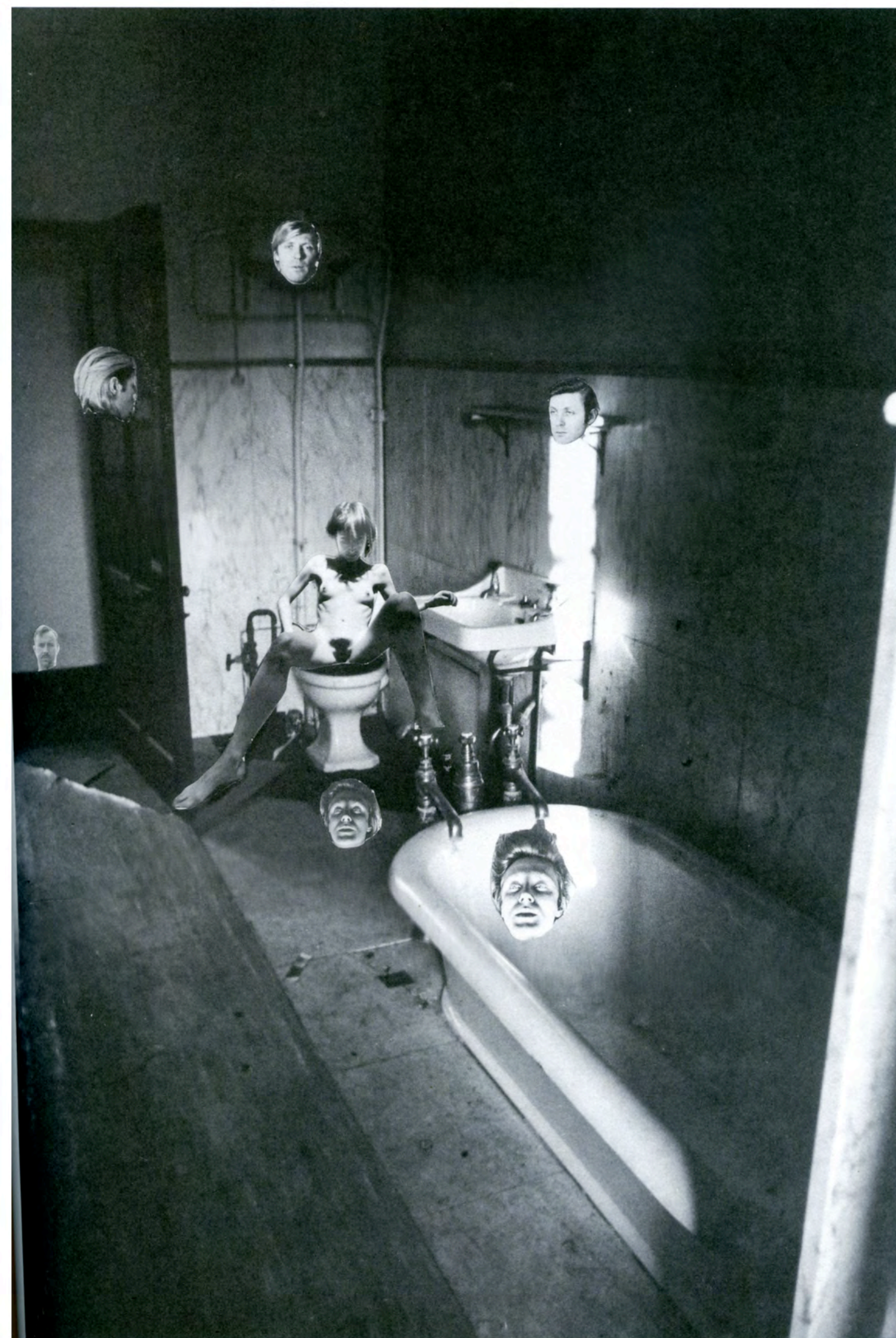
A Visit to the Countryside



British-born Penelope Slinger is a surrealist artist who currently lives and works in Boulder Creek, California. Situated among its breathtaking wilderness is the compound she presides over, which she originally built and shared with her late husband Christopher Hills, a distinguished spiritual philosopher and scientist. In 1969, when young Slinger was fresh out of Chelsea College of Art, a few of her pieces appeared in the highly esteemed group exhibition "Young and Fantastic" at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Over the following decade, her influential work with Surrealist appropriations and iconic collages continued to gain traction within the burgeoning London art scene. Yet, growing unsatisfied with the opportunities presented to her there,

Slinger decided to leave the U.K. She moved to New York and then to the Caribbean, before finally settling down in California during the mid-'90s. In the case of Slinger, it's not surprising that her geographical journey is as varied and exciting as her artistic one.

In an interview with Katya Tylevich, Slinger returns to a haunting work from 1977, *An Exorcism*, a collage series that remains significant decades after its creation.



PENELOPE SLINGER

An *Exorcism* is a series of photo collages and montages, all set in the rooms and grounds of a large, derelict, stately home in the English countryside. The central protagonists are myself, my ex-boyfriend at the time—filmmaker Peter Whitehead—and my girlfriend, Susanka Fraey. The rooms represent the different aspects of my psyche that I am exploring as I take the viewer on my journey of self-discovery. The work was undertaken when my relationship with Peter fell apart due to my involvement with the all-woman theater troupe, Holocaust.

I felt compelled to analyze the situation that had caused such a fracture between my male and female elements. This was a work I needed to do for my own evolution, my own sanity.

By extension, I felt it was the kind of inner-work everyone should do, in some form or another in the hopes of finding out for themselves who they are outside the social conventions that shape them.

But *An Exorcism* would not merit its title if I did not manage to actually exorcise those demons that wanted to stultify growth. Having done that work of self-discovery in such a deep and penetrating way, I moved on to the next phases of the adventure of my life.

KATYA TYLEVICH

When we spoke earlier, you explained that *An Exorcism* was a way for you to free yourself of the “weight of shame.” What did you mean by that?

PENELOPE SLINGER

At the time, there were a lot of things one was made to feel shameful about in society, mostly due to their commonly held traditional beliefs. To me, it seemed one shouldn't feel shameful about those things. That's one aspect. There's also the personal guilt and shame I felt in the break-up of my relationship with my “significant other.” He felt I had betrayed him, and I felt the full burden of shame. I had just done what I felt I've been compelled to do for my own journey in life. I did not want to hurt my partner, but on the other hand, I couldn't deny what I felt, and what I needed to do for my own self-growth in order to keep the peace.

It is, of course, the big issue women have had to face time and time again:

Whether or not to squash their desires for their own fulfillment, in order to serve their role as wife, mother, and partner.

Thinking about it now, this theme has such a key significance as we emerge into this era of the feminine. Back in the '70s, such talk would have been but a whisper in the wind. Now we hear it everywhere, loud and clear. As women step up to claim their voices, express their true natures, less fettered by the confines of convention that held them paralyzed for all this time, it is crucial that they're able to reclaim their true selves, beyond the projections of what they are meant to be.

In different images of *An Exorcism*, I am examining and embodying some of the glyphs of shame. I wanted to be as authentic as possible and this is why I used myself, not a third party, to portray these experiences and states of mind.

In “Curse,” I wanted to sum up all the feelings of shame that accompanied menstruation. The very fact that this term has been used to describe the monthly release of blood from the womb says a lot. I think it has gone out of fashion now, but it was still quite common when I was coming of age.

I remember how ashamed I felt when I had my first menstruation. I asked my mother not to tell my father about it. So, here, I tried to encompass all of those emotions, putting myself in an empty cell, as if being punished just for being a woman, and with no way to hide my shame.

In “Big Brother,” I took this theme of “nowhere to hide” even further. I had anxiety dreams when I was younger about wanting to use the bathroom and not being able to find a place of privacy to do so—being watched. This was very disturbing. Now I wonder how much of this was authentic and deeply-seated instinct—for example, animals are very vulnerable when defecating, wanting to make sure they are somewhere alone and predator free—and how much was more cultural, having to do with our taboos about bodily functions and those deeply instilled ideas of us being dirty

and shameful? This image conveys a deep loss of personal freedom.

Visitation appears in the chapter of *An Exorcism* entitled “The Crucifixion,” the which I wove together felt responsibility I cause for the pain I had lived with the man in my the with the glyph of idea that crucifixion and the our sin that Christ “died for “originals.” The concept of shameful sin” is a layer of our soe that has permeated that society. And, of course, the feminine was involved in the fall from grace.

In this collage I show myself curled up in a fetal position to represent a retreat into an infantile state, because the weight of guilt is too heavy to bear.

KATYA TYLEVICH

Does *An Exorcism* continue to mean the same things today, or does present-day context reshape the project?

PENELOPE SLINGER

Though our perspective on the role of the feminine has shifted over the years, what I was dredging from the depths of the deep subconscious is, I believe, pretty archetypal.

Therefore, *An Exorcism* retains its significance to the psyche above and beyond shifts in social mores.

Back then when I conceptualized this series, I believed that if I penetrated my own psyche deeply and ruthlessly enough, I would unearth findings of universal significance

that other people could apply to their own journeys and situations. I also gave the work a historical context by using an old mansion as the setting. I was evoking ghosts of ages past and including them in the exorcism. It takes history to get us to the place that we are, and all of that needed to be referenced in the work: both the weight of ages past, and how to lift the pall.

Women are also a lot more liberated now than when I first created this series, though there is still a ways to go. But I am actually not so interested in Women's Liberation as such; I am involved in liberation in general. That includes the integration of flesh and spirit, as much as the balancing of male and female.

But like any children one may have—and my artworks are my children—the work will have its own life, no matter what I desire for it. The haunting images from *An Exorcism* live, no doubt, in the special places of the consciousness reserved for such things, where they have their own resonance and associations, according to the unique experiences of each individual.

