

PENNY SLINGER

Interviewed by [Eduardo Gión](#)
Portrait courtesy of [Dhiren Dasu](#)



Penny Singer’s career as an artist began with surrealist pieces inspired by the work of artist Max Ernst. But over the years, via different creative avenues such as collage, photography and sculpture, her oeuvre has become more focused on a feminist exploration of the surreal artistic playing field. Over the length of our conversation we discussed everything from Kenneth Anger and the women’s liberation movement to her fascination with the female form. Her life has been formed through the kaleidoscope reality of collages and, just like her medium, Slinger has become more than just the sum of her parts.

“Damn it, I just really wanna be fucked, you know? just really fucked!” Charlotte York, Sex and the City

“I realized I had a primary interest in the portrayal of the human form, especially the female form, but in a symbolic, mythic way”

You did a thesis about the German artist Max Ernst, pioneer of the Dada and Surrealist movement.

Yes. When I was getting ready to do my thesis, I surveyed the whole history of art to see where my real interests laid. I realized I had a primary interest in the portrayal of the human form, especially the female form, but in a symbolic, mythic way, not as just representational.

I found examples of what I loved in ancient culture, particularly Asian cultures, but I wanted to choose a subject closer to contemporary times. I started looking at the Surrealists, and then I came across the collage books of Max Ernst - *Une Semaine De Bonté* and *La Femme 100 Têtes*. I was spellbound. Up to that point, I had not realized that one could make collages where it was not evident where the different pieces were stuck together. I had not realized up to then that collage techniques could be used to create seamless and integrated new realities. Max Ernst used old engravings in these books, but repurposed them into fantasy scenarios, full of strange, anthropomorphic beings and elemental encounters. I was spellbound.

How do you start in the world of photo collage?

As a child, I would play with cutting up magazines and sticking the pieces together in new relationships. I still have a collage from my early teens where I have torn up many pieces of paper and reassembled them according to color to create a landscape.

It was not until I discovered the collage work of Max Ernst that I was galvanized into using collage as an expressive medium. His work turned on that light bulb for me and my thesis presentation consisted of my written thesis, a film I made on Ernst’s collage books and my first book of photographic collage.

I made the book as homage to Ernst, but it sowed the seeds for much of my work that has continued as a fertile stream throughout my life, taking on different techniques and complexions, but all fed from the same source.

I have an extremely rich and fertile imagination. Always have. I get frustrated with the length of time it takes for manifestation, and so collage, especially photographic collage, provided an excellent means to realize visions and ideas more quickly. It is also a wonderful tool to open up the intuitive sense of composition. When one brings collage elements together, they have the freedom to dance and form various relationships. The ski-

lled eye of the collage artist will develop the ability to spot those moments that gel, where the glyphs become archetypal and time seems to stand still. Collage presents an opportunity to create your own reality, unpinned by the normal restraints of sense and sensibility, of what is ‘allowed.’ It is very freeing for the artist, and for the soul.

What are your sources of inspiration?

I have so many - truly most anything can inspire me. But my first and primary inspiration is myself, self-examination, both inside and out. How I relate to myself and how I relate to others, the world around me and also to spiritual dimensions. All the mysteries of the Universe are contained within us if we know how to look deep enough. So, I really like to delve (coincidentally my middle name).

I have taken different approaches with the engagement, this practice, in the course of my life, employing many different media in the process. The core remains, “Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?” I am the only person whose image I can feel free to be as ruthless with as I need to be to uncover the diamond nature in the coal pit of the material plane.

Out of this self-study my key themes have arisen. One is my desire to empower the feminine, to be my own muse and own all parts of my being. Another is to claim our right to see the sacredness of everything, sexuality in particular, so that we do not short change ourselves and live our lives at less than our true potential.

My latest series is concerned with giving pride of place to the elders of society, particularly the “Wise Woman” instead of discarding them as cultural cast offs. But it is an embodied form, art speaking what it is for itself, instead of anything ‘preachy.’ Art “with a message” often finds it hard to be great art. Art that speaks beyond the soapbox is what I am aiming for. Art that rings like a bell in consciousness and works at a cellular level of deep recognition.

Break with the stereotype of the image of the woman through the male gaze. True?

Absolutely! I saw in my research that woman, more often than not unclothed, was a key and central subject in the world of art. But nearly all these images came from the mind and hand of a male artist. I decided I wanted to do something about that unbalanced state of affairs. So, I embarked on using myself, deliberately, as my own muse. I thought a lot of advantage could be found

in being in two places at once - the viewer and the viewed. It appeared to hold the potential for a much more comprehensive perspective - inside and out at the same time.

In much of my work, from college days on, I made images commenting on the objectification of women in the presiding social structures. And many images on how to shake up this paradigm, this status quo, and reinvent it from a woman’s perspective.

I also wanted to use the great tools provided by Surrealism, the ones that accessed the subconscious realms, to probe and expose the psyche of woman. And I used my own self as the guinea pig. It was time for women to own their own bodies, their own minds, I thought.

Investigating the female human form through history of art and its cultures. What did you discover after that investigation?

I was a detective looking for clues and I found the ones I needed to get the job done. But this is a vast subject with much nuance and depth. Certainly my personal proclivities drew me to feminine expression that was the least inhibited, the most unrepressed and fully expressed.

From that standpoint, the naked form, only adorned with symbolic decoration, would always be much more magnetic than the clothed representations which took into account cultural mores, bourgeois values and tied the motif to a time and place. I am more interested in the timeless, the transcendental.

Within all this, pure representation of what is, the world of appearances, is much less interesting to me than the unseen, the magical, mythic and the imminent, when we seek to give that form...

In the realm of modern art, I found the Surrealists were the ones who seemed to enter this realm the most.

You made a film about Ernst’s work, how was that work?

It was a collage film I made to honor a collage artist. I took images from his 2 collage books and made my cinematic montage juxtaposing these with footage I shot of animals, the elements, inner organs, empty train carriages - all associated material that complimented his themes and echoed the atmosphere of his pieces. I also included reference material from other books and artworks to make the connection with the mythic themes he employed and gave context of other artists exploring similar realities. I shot it all on a 16mm camera I borrowed from the Technical

College across the road from Chelsea College of Art, along with some other art movies I made at the time.

In *An Exorcism*, he says that this wonderful work was channeled through the pain he felt at that moment.

An Exorcism was a process that continued over a period of 7 years. It grew out of the pain I was experiencing when an important relationship in my life fell apart. The break up was with filmmaker Peter Whitehead and was prompted by my involvement with the All-Women Theatre Troupe, *Holocaust*.

My sense of self was shattered. I was lost, wondering who I was and how I could make myself feel whole again. So the journey of *An Exorcism* is that journey from disintegration to re integration. A long 'dark night of the soul' where I did not want to leave any stone unturned because I did not ever want to find myself back in the same place again. I took the large derelict mansion house, Lilford Hall, as the symbol of the self and used it's rooms and grounds as the setting to explore all the different aspects of myself, all the things that were haunting me, troubling me, possessing me. I felt that if I could give form to these specters, face my fears, then I would be able to exorcise them from my psyche, hence the title.

It was a profound process and I dredged up all the fragments of pain from the depth of my being and exposed them to the light of day. I wanted to look at all these shadows, things that erode you from beneath the surface but escape confrontation and analysis because you are afraid to look them in the eye. So, they lurk just beyond reach, just beyond perception. I wanted to pull them out from under the bed, kicking and screaming, and reveal them for what they were.

In many of the collages of *An Exorcism*, I intended to describe a state of mind, a condition of the psyche, in the image I created. I am not aware of many other art works having exactly this intention. I felt if I could be brave enough to really articulate my pain, I would release its hold on me, and, by extension, give lifelines for others to follow in their own process of self-discovery/ self-healing.

In this work, you play a lot with the shadows, the dark clear, the pain and the red dot that try to enter the portrait without getting it, as trapped, as color nullification.

Light and dark are within us all and play throughout the duality system of the world around us, and probably through all time and space. Each support and define the other, as night follows day and day follows night. The overlaying of evil on the natural condition of darkness is just another human deviation, probably brought into being through fear of the unknown, of what we cannot see.

However, in this context let us consider the dark as representing the 'shadow work,' the darkness that obscures the light and renders us less capable of being all we can be.

The ways of the 'dark side' traffic in bondage, whereas coming into light suggests the freedom of the illuminated and radiant being.

A documentary about my early life and work has just been completed, entitled, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*. The title reflects the intention to bring my 'lost' work into the spotlight, but also suggests something forged in the darkness. Every alchemical process starts in the darkness, the blackness, the nigredo. Without those foundations in the heart of matter, there would be no compost to break down into the energy needed for the transformation process, for the forging of pure gold.

So, I am not one who chooses the dark side. I am a warrior of light who chooses integration over denial, the holistic over some convenient and clinical bypass of all those murky areas. I want to own it all, the dark and the light, for it is all part and parcel of me and I'm part and parcel of it. Only by walking on the wild side, can one hear the call of the beasts and own them as part of your

“Light and dark
are within us
all and play
throughout the
duality system
of the world
around us”

heart. For if you deny them, they will always hunt you and you will forever live in fear.

Think of a work of art. If there was no shadow, no darkness, no play of light and shade, there would be nothing to see and the light would just blind the viewer.

I work with it all and sometimes, like the poet Dante, I have taken a trip into hell, on a trip of discovery, to see what I can bring back and display to hopefully shed some light and ease some suffering.

What is the use of collage for you?

I discussed this above, but I can sum up by saying that collage allows me a kind of freedom in artistic exploration that I have not found in any other medium. Collage is probably one of the most widely used art forms these days after the advent of digital compositing programs such as Photoshop - advertising, movies, social media all currently employ its techniques extensively.

For me, it provides a great tool not only to reshape the world, along the lines of one's imagination, it is also the most powerful tool for self-examination and expression. Anyone can employ its techniques meaningfully for their own personal psychoanalysis, to living out their own myth. It is also a great tool for processing experience. You can bring elements together from the natural world into new relationships, much as dreams do.

How is your work process, your day to day? Analog and manual or digital collage?

These days I have been working more in the digital realm when it comes to photographic collage. When I discovered Photoshop, it was like the Holy Grail for a collage artist. It allowed me to manipulate all the parameters that I was feeling limited by in traditional cut and paste collage. And so much more efficient than going into the darkroom and printing up photos, combining negatives for montage effects - the digital tools offered were so exciting and irresistible.

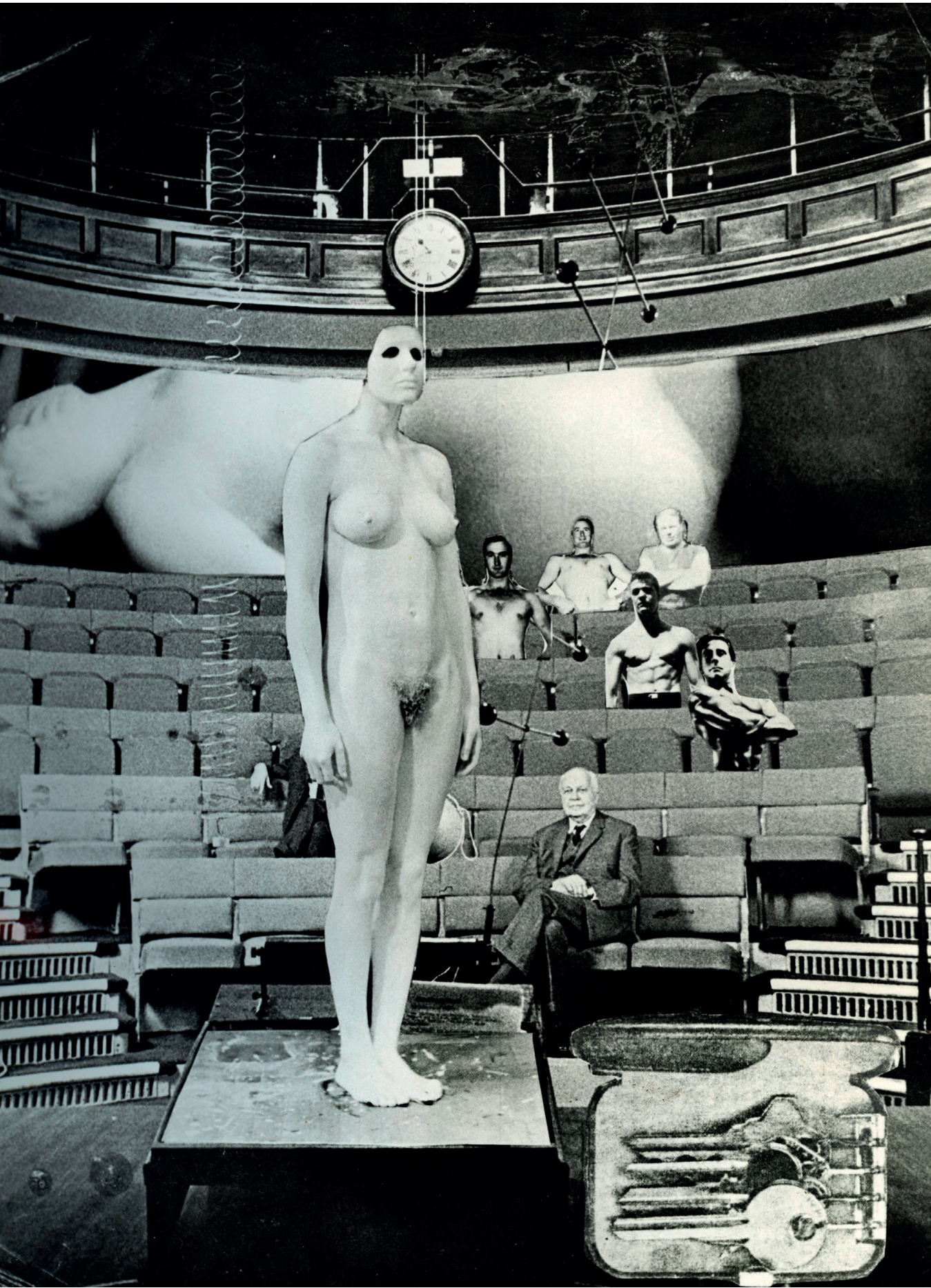
So, I work mainly on the computer for this aspect of my work these days. However, I am working on a new series of big pieces and they are physical three-dimensional collages, incorporating life casts, which I see as the 3D analogue of a photograph, and real objects.

Also theatre with the *Holocaust* company, how was that experience?

Oh, that experience was a total grab bag, full of highs and lows, breakthroughs and disappointments, community and it's collapse... We came together under the umbrella of Jane Arden's proposal to create a theatre piece which focused on how women have been repressed and the resultant complexes, fashioned into powerful vignettes. I was eager to make a contribution to the liberation of women in the form of a collaborative creative art statement, rather than in the political arena as such. The whole process was fascinating to me - how to work together and how to hold space for each other to dive deeply into their psyches and retrieve the jewels. How to address the wounds and let them speak their truth. I loved the participation and co-creation. I was looking for something to lift me above the ego intoxication of the art world. So, that aspect fed me. However, we went on to make a film evolved from the theatrical production and there was a lot of fall out from what transpired that many participants never recovered from. But that is a story too long to go into here. Suffice it to say, we were on the cutting edge of the liberation of the feminine, which felt more like the bleeding edge!

Tell us about your work *50% The Visible Woman*. What is the basis of this work?

As I described above, *50% The Visible Woman* was my tribute to the inspiration provided by the collage books of Max Ernst. Think the most powerful homage one can offer is to take the seeds that another artist's work has sown in you and let them grow into their own unique expression. The seeding from Ernst germinated in my psyche immediately and produced this book. '50%' was prompted by my profound engagement with Ernst's work, but this baby was its own being with its own unique personality. I wanted to ex-



Self Examination. Photographic collage from *50% The Visible Woman*, 1969 ©Penny Slinger



Celestial Tabernacle. Photographic collage from *An Exorcism*, 1970-1977 ©Penny Slinger. Courtesy of Penrose Collection, UK.

press what it felt like being a young female artist coming out in a male dominated art world. I wanted to be visceral, ironic, dada, enigmatic and brazen.

I incorporated a number of photos of myself in the book along with freely helping myself to any image I found anywhere that I felt could support what I wanted to communicate when I put it in new relationship. This series employed what I refer to as 'full frontal' collage techniques, meaning that elements were brought together to be provocative and create shock waves by their association. It is a full exposé that is not only skin deep. Also that I was not too concerned with setting objects in space here, but in bringing them together on a single plane. '50%' was running with Breton's adoption of Lautreamont's phrase as the definition of Surrealism being a sewing machine and umbrella coming together on an operating table to make love.

I also had the idea of overlaying the images with transparent sheets on which my poetry was displayed strategically, in relation to the image.

Your works are full of magic and occultism, like Kenneth Anger's films. What do these concepts bring to your art?

A life without magic would be a pretty flat line experience. I have always had a deep connection with an interest in the mystical aspects of being. As a young woman, I studied many esoteric tra-

ditions, especially the Gnostic and Alchemical. I felt very drawn to Egyptian art and cosmology, and later to the rich spiritual traditions of India and Tibet.

When I discovered Tantra, it was the great resolver as it embraces all paths within its all-encompassing philosophy. Tantra is way beyond being 'the religion of sex' - a view which the Neo tantric movement has encouraged. It is a system that weaves together the spiritual and the material, rejecting nothing, so that one can live a life of full spiritual integrity, while embodied in a human form.

My art is imbued with my spirit. I see the art objects one manifests as the trail of crumbs scattered through the labyrinth of life, leading one back to the center. So magic and mysticism are not conceptual for me, they are integral to all I do. Creating a work of art is an act of magic, and it happens to be my favorite form of magical manifestation.

Some of his works remind me a lot of Bergman films, with these fragile but strong women or Dreyer's cinema. Is cinema a reference for you? What will be the next one we'll see of you?

Yes I have always loved cinema, especially in the realm of those works, which are timeless and seek not just to entertain but also to illuminate. The atmosphere that can be evoked is key, which is what enables the viewer to participate in the expe-

rience, the feeling of resonance and the familiarity of a dream.

I watched a lot of *avant-garde* cinema when I was a young artist, especially the European, particularly appreciating filmmakers such as Cocteau, Duchamp, Buñuel and Dalí, then on to Tarkovsky and Jodorowsky.

Cinema allows the artist to add another color to his or her palette and paint not only with the spectrum, but with time itself. It also is an art form that, when used at full potential, can integrate all other art forms within its creation, including the audio arts as well as the visual.

Because it is such a popular medium, it is rarely worked with at the level it could be, and filmmaking is most often used for narrative purposes with crowd-pleasing formulas. But it is a very exciting art form. I have worked with film and video on and off throughout my career, I hope to do more.

My most recent work is a return to the creation of three-dimensional collages/constructions. This new series features life casts of my body, at age 69, in dynamic relationship with the elements of the material world that I interact with.

As for film, I have a number of ideas I would like to manifest. I will have to see what opportunities arise to bring these into being...



In the Depths of the Nigredo. Photographic collage from *50% The Visible Woman*, 1969 ©Penny Slinger