

Documentary films

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

★★★★☆

The artist's life is essential viewing for anyone with an interest in British art, second-wave feminism or experimental cinema



▲ Model, subject and canvas ... Penny Slinger.

Director Richard Kovitch's documentary is essential viewing for anyone with a passing interest in either British art, second-wave feminism or experimental cinema from the mid-20th century. That's because the film's subject, the London-born artist Penny Slinger, slinked through all those realms, creating startling work in collage, film and theatre that was both quintessentially of its time and ahead of times to come, prefiguring themes that would crop up again in the shock imagery of YBAs in the 1990s and beyond.

This fascinating career re-examination drifts serenely back and forth between archive footage, clips from the films Slinger co-created and performed in (The Other Side of the Underneath, Vibration) and long closeups on Slinger's 2D work. Interview clips with Slinger herself weave in and out, as well as talking-head snippets from her former partners (in every sense) and collaborators such as Peter Whitehead and Susanka Fraey, as well as assorted explicators such as the writer Michael Bracewell, artists Jane and Louise Wilson, and Antony Penrose, son of the artist Lee Miller and ICA co-founder Roland Penrose, who was a significant patron of Slinger's back in the day.

What's revealed is work informed by the surrealism of the 1920s and 30s, especially Max Ernst, about whom Slinger wrote her graduate thesis - that highly sexualised and erotic but still provocative and not easily classifiable artist. An art world "It Girl" of her day, the strikingly beautiful Slinger was her own model, subject and canvas, and appears throughout, frequently naked and unafraid. It's not hard to see how she ended up getting into tantric stuff later in life and more doctrinaire types may feel uncomfortable about how her work cropped up, seemingly with her consent, in straightforwardly pornographic contexts such as Knave magazine, just as easily as it did in Spare Rib, the feminist bible back in the day. Her interest in magic, the occult, and Jungian psychology (there's a lot of chatter about archetypes) really embeds Slinger in a sinister side of the 1960s, while the predominantly monochrome look of the work and scratchy cinematography, even in the original interviews, makes the whole documentary feel like something dredged up from the archives rather than a work completed two years ago.



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

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