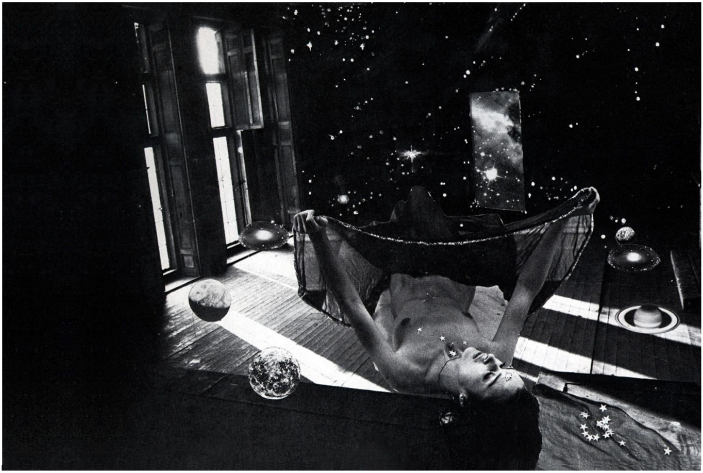
NARAtive Interview

Penny Slinger



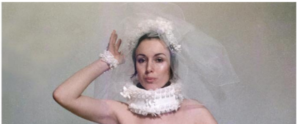
Three words that describe you?

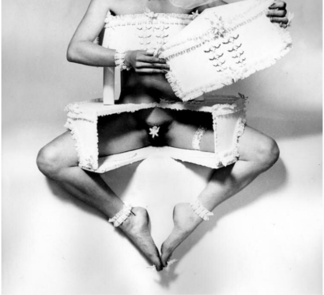
Woman - artist - visionary

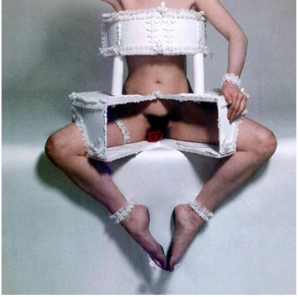
What's your first artistic memory?

When I was four, I did what my parents considered to be my first really accomplished drawing. And it was of them, my mother and father, but they were both stark naked. That memory was a bit indicative of how my career went from then. Since I was small, I was always someone who went somewhat beyond the grain, I didn't come out of a mold. And luckily my dad made me feel that my differentness was specialness. I know a lot of people don't have that kind of support and their differences are seen as something to be ashamed of. So I was fortunate to have had that support and I think it has helped me.

Someone who did a reading for me once said that I have the ability to turn a disability into an asset. And I think that is an important skill set for all of us - so I do own that as being a truth.





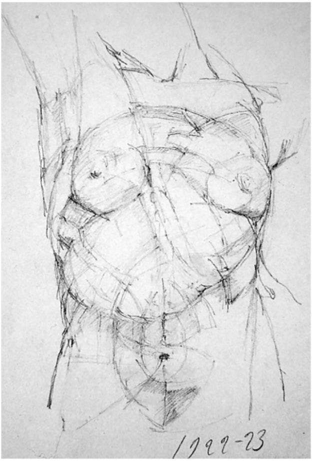


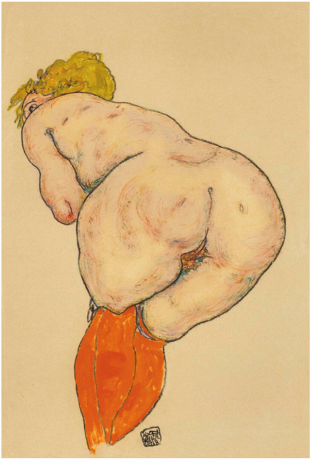
Were your parents artists as well?

No, not at all. I was this complete surprise in myself. Well I know when I was born my father came and I looked so strange and I was completely bald. And he couldn't see if I was a boy or girl and said "what is it?" [laughing]

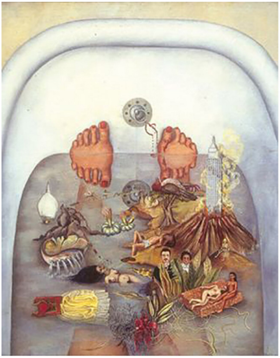
What was your biggest influence (artistic or other) growing up? You've mentioned Max Ernst as an early inspiration. Were there any female artists that inspired your early work?

Well you know I wasn't too familiar with female artists at that time and so the role models were still men. I mean I remember when I was studying drawing the people that really impressed me were Egon Schiele and [Alberto] Giacometti and they are quite different in their approach. But there is a certain intensity that they have in common – a way of looking that is circumvented by the nature of the connection and what they feel – so the way they make their lines has to do with that representation. Of course that's true of tons of art, but learning about the art of drawing, those approaches by those two artists were ones that were particularly compelling for me.





I didn't really know Frida Kahlo, for instance, but of course one can't help but feel attracted to who she is and her nature of self-reflection. I saw the other day in my sketchbooks from Chelsea Art Schools that I had a picture of one of Frida Kahlo's pieces. It wasn't attributed, but it's the one where she's in the bath looking at her feet and there's all these people, these beings. So I did pieces in the bath as I found the bath to be a place of meditation and self reflection and I had her as a reference work but without knowing who she was then.



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We recently read that in the 60s and 70s, LACMA exhibited about 4% of female artists, so...

Exactly. That was something that inspired me very much. I did have big ideas for myself, not yet realizing that immensity but I am still alive so who knows. I thought I was going to be the lady Picasso. I am going to be the one who breaks through what I saw as being an old tradition in art where women had this really key position – as the objectified muse – but not as the actual manifestor. And so I said: "I don't think much of this, I want to be in both places at once!" So that's when I decided early on that I am going to be my own muse and I'm going to make a point of this because we really need to shift this paradigm.

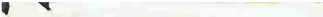
So that lack of female representation was a motivator then?

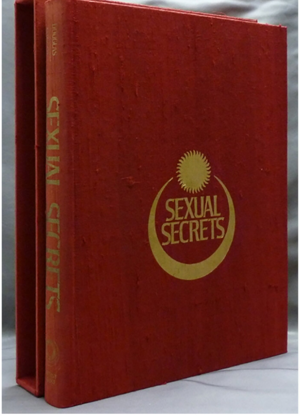
Yes absolutely. But also inspiring. I don't want to do more of the same. I am only interested in really doing something new. There was space for something that wasn't there when I discovered tantra and sacred sexuality in the 70s. Up until then, it was missing in Western society and any spiritual approach to sex, there just wasn't any context for it at all. So when I found – as I've always been interested in the mystical as well as the sensual – a spiritual path that embraced both rather than denying the sensual then I was like "Yes this! This is the right stuff and people need to know about that." So I co wrote and illustrated *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy* and that was the first book that really brought out Tantra to the modern world in an accessible kind of way.

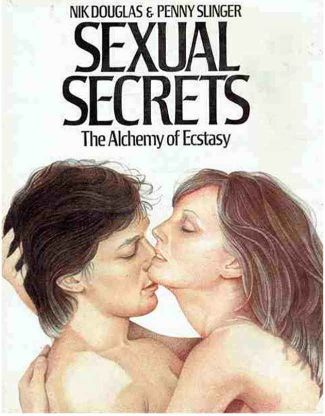
And your partner that you worked with on this, Nik Douglas, did he already have a background in Tantra? How did you two meet?

He did. I went to this exhibition of Tantra, it was the first one in England back in the early 70s at the Hayward Gallery and when I walked in - it took a few years to actually percolate - but when I walked in, it was one of these "ah ha" moments when I thought I recognized the language that this was written in. And I would say too it was the first time I understood abstraction. Because there was a yantra to Kali and it was these inverted triangles with a dot in the middle. I saw how it was all distilled down to this one glyph: it wasn't this empty geometric form, it was something that had all this information encoded in it. And I thought, "I want to know about this." So I started to go to lectures, trying to find out someone who didn't just have book knowledge but who really knew about it. And that is what led me to Nik Douglas.

The person who introduced us was Jane Arden. She ran the women's theatre group *Holocaust*, which was the first women's theatre group in England. I became involved with in '71. Nik had been living in India, studying Sanskrit and Tibetan and he was really knowledgeable in all the art forms, from that whole range of Asia. So, yes, I called that in because I wanted to know more. That was what inspired me, the art, and from then I got to connect with the body of wisdom from which that came from. As I started to learn more I got all these fabulous revelations about things, from my own experiences, these crazy intuitive things that you have and don't have any frame of reference for... but as I started to share them with Nik, he began to share frames of reference for them in Tantra. That was so exciting for me, and I thought, "Aha I want to share this with other people. This is going to help people so much." And Nik said, "No we can't do that, it's secret. It's only for the initiated, people would misuse it." And I said: "No, no, if we surround it with love and good energy it could only be good." Anyway so we did do it.

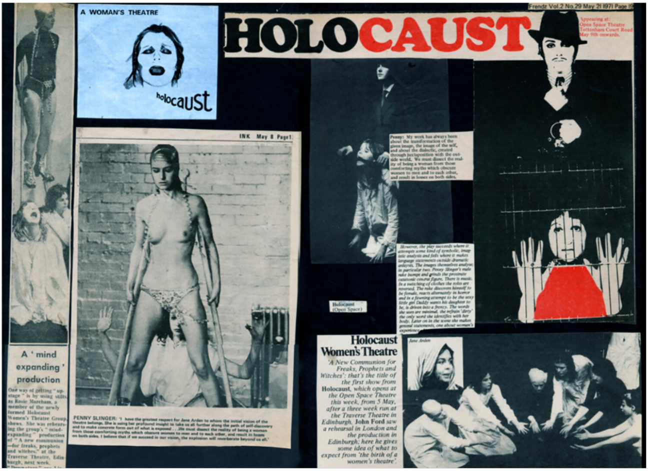





NIK DOUGLAS & PENNY SLINGER

SEXUAL SECRETS

The Alchemy of Ecstasy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A WOMAN'S THEATRE

holocaust

HOLOCAUST

Appearing at:
Open Space Theatre
Tottenham Court Road
May 9th onwards.

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Penny: My work has always been about the transformation of the given image, the image of the self, and about the dialectic, created through juxtaposition with the outside world. We must dissect the reality of being a woman from those comforting myths which obscure women to men and to each other, and result in losses on both sides.

However, the play succeeds where it attempts some kind of symbolic, imagistic analysis and fails where it makes language statements outside dramatic analysis. The images themselves analyse; in particular two. Penny Slinger's male rake bumps and grinds the prostrate catatonic central figure. There is music. In a switching of clothes the roles are reversed. The rake discovers himself to be female, reacts alternately in horror and in a fawning attempt to be the sexy little girl Daddy wants his daughter to be, is driven into a frenzy. The words she uses are minimal, the refrain 'dirty' the only word she identifies with her body. Later on in the scene she makes general statements, one about woman's experience

Holocaust
(Open Space)

A 'mind expanding' production

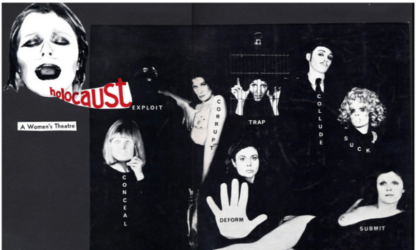
One way of getting "up-stage" is by using stilts, as Rosie Marcham, a member of the newly formed Holocaust Women's Theatre Group, shows. She was rehearsing the group's "mind-expanding" production of "A new communion —for freaks, prophets and witches," at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, next week.

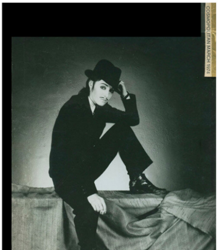
PENNY SLINGER: 'I have the greatest respect for Jane Arden to whom the initial vision of the theatre belongs. She is using her profound insight to take us all further along the path of self-discovery and to make concrete form out of what is exposed . . .We must dissect the reality of being a woman from those comforting myths which obscure women to men and to each other, and result in losses on both sides. I believe that if we succeed in our vision, the explosion will reverberate beyond us all.'

Holocaust Women's Theatre

'A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches': that's the title of the first show from **Holocaust**, *which opens at the Open Space Theatre this week, from 5 May, after a three week run at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh.* **John Ford** *saw a rehearsal in London and the production in Edinburgh; here he gives some idea of what to expect from 'the birth of a women's theatre'.*

Jane Arden





The Holocaust girls: A new women's theatre group which says it is 'the real end of a nightmare' and is dedicated to, amongst other things, "the Ghost of my scrabbling mother.' Makes its London debut with 'A New Communion—for Freaks, Prophets and Witches,' directed by Jane Arden, with Sheila Allen as a geriatric. Open Space, Tottenham Court Road, W1 (580 4664), from 5 May for two and a half weeks.

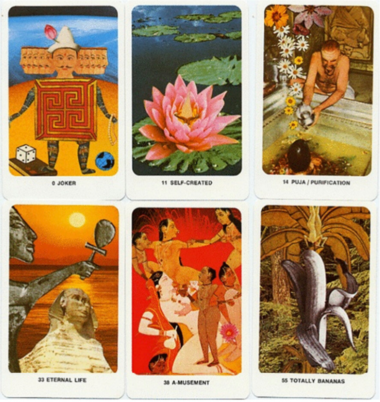
How do you define *Tantra*?

You know it's such a challenging thing. I definitely own that I helped bring this to the modern world but at the same time we did this work and it was rooted in the sexual nature of things because I thought we needed to. If you have blocks from the primal energy, since it's all the same energy, if it gets blocked at the sexual center then you're not going to have this energy available to really work with in deeper and higher ways. So start there. The word Tantra itself means "to weave or to expand." And so it's like a way of weaving all the spirits that you have, your physical, your spiritual, your emotional spirit – all these pieces together into one warp and weft of your own fabric of existence. And to create with that fabric, something that is not just time-limited, that goes beyond the physical body, to build a subtle body, a body of light. You're weaving between the worlds and then you're expanding into your multidimensional self.

I believe we tend to live very limited lives compared to our potential. A lot of what I've been working with is always how to stimulate that potential, because we have the potential to be many beings and to live many lives. I've been doing my best shot at it with the different lives I have lived along the way. That to me is the richness of Tantra.

You can make every act in your physical life a part of your spiritual practice. There's no separation, *that* to me is the essence of this whole coming of the divine feminine movement and the embodied spirituality. Not all this stuff that the church tends to do where they say, "God is up here and all the rest of it, blame, sin" and all these crazy things. No it's about all of it. That's why to me, Tantra is the supreme path. Now I say I'm a bit dubious because everyone now claims Tantra and so many people practice but have stayed with the sexual side, so now people tend to think of Tantra as a religion of sex, which is such a limited view of it. It does include sex but it includes *everything*. It's such a powerful tool and it's the opposite of all the dogma and all the separation and hatred, because it embraces all things in. It weaves who you are and who you allow yourself to be.

THE SECRET DAKINI ORACLE
NIK DOUGLAS
&
PENNY SLINGER



You've described your work as the "claiming of one's own sexual being and one's own sense of self and self-image." How would you suggest one does this for themselves and what was your journey to reclaiming your own sexual energy?

Well all of that came very much from seeing that lack. When I was growing up it was another world really. In Post War Britain, I know the feeling in general was that women didn't even really enjoy sex. It was something you sacrificed and did for the man. So I thought, this doesn't feel right. And then if you looked at the world of erotica, there was pornography and that was only for men. There was nothing for women. So there was a denial that this energy really even existed. There was definitely a gap that needed to be filled for something real. So that's why I wanted to do that. When I discovered Tantra, it gave me many more tools because I had a frame of reference outside of my own personal experience. I started with my own personal experience and using that as a yardstick and a touchstone, and thought "If I am feeling these things it's not just me." They have been put to sleep and so there's an awakening that needs to happen. In India, they refer to Shakti, which is a feminine force. It's not a passive thing, it's a very active energy and it runs through everything. It runs through men and women. The Kundalini, the goddess that is in us all. So the reclaiming of Shakti I think is really key to it. We have this active energy and it's such a powerful energy which can do so many wonderful things in the world and we really don't want to have it suppressed, as it has been. It was really a motivation.

In terms of reclaiming one's own sexual energy – on the positive side of Tantra being seen for the sexual side of it, it also means there is a lot available out there now for people to understand how to take away the layers of guilt, shame, and be in an atmosphere and ambience there to help you heal and grow. I think there's tons of things now available that there weren't before. So that's good.

Starting to just be honest with yourself and looking at things. Look at your trauma. We close down when trauma hits but everyone has trauma. There's no one that's trauma- free. So it's how we handle it and how we develop the tools that don't allow us to stay locked and trapped in this trauma, but rather own it and know it is part of our experience. To not deny it but be able to move on because you're bigger than that.

I've always found I've got a kind of hotline to divine juice and it's helped me a lot to steady myself in that and to know myself in an unshakable core. It goes beyond these experiences which we all have which aren't all sweet, you know?

That's the thing: how to let these things go and have an open heart but not really to have an open solar plexus. I didn't even think of saying it like that before... I know for me for instance if I get some sort of psychic attack, I feel it like a punch in my solar plexus. So we almost need to develop our own shields, our reflective armor that lets things that come to us bounce back to who delivered them rather than absorbing them. But while keeping our hearts wide open, because our hearts, they can't really be broken or damaged. The universe is inside them.

How would you define the difference between *erotic* vs *pornographic*?

Well you know pornography actually got its name from Aphrodite. *Aphrodite porn* was the goddess' name in her erotic aspect. So already, we've had a bastardization of that term. I mean, if you think of pornography, I tend to think of certain acts of violence and things being portrayed in the derogatory sense of the word. Erotic to me has to do with a certain kind of beauty. It can be a dark beauty; it's not all just flowers and fluff. But erotism is beautiful, it's gorgeous. You don't necessarily think of pornography as beautiful though. Often that aesthetic isn't present so it's a bit more down and dirty, bottom line, kind of knee jerk stimulation. Whereas erotism is about bringing you into a zone, of erotic flavors and sensations with is delicious and delightful – that's the term. It's more of a mood and flavor I guess. Eroticism is embracing, whereas pornography tends to want to cut out anything besides what will just get you off. It blunts the senses, because from what I see people tend to get addicted to pornography. The more they see, the more they want it to get weirder, tougher and nastier in a sense to still get a turn on, like drug addiction you need more of it. Whereas with erotism it's not like that at all. It can be a smell, the feel of sand, water, it's all super erotic. It's an all-embracing kind of feeling, so we're talking about something that's more like male - female.

How do you differentiate between art that subjectifies versus objectifies women?

I thought I would easily get over that by being in both places at once. So I would make myself my own subject. And when I work with other women, I knew how to be on both sides of the camera. When I had my own studio in Northern California, the work I did at first was just filming myself in the studio. Setting up the camera, and then being in front of it. So I think, that is where it becomes interesting because the subject - object dynamic has an interesting area it can go into. Yes, a woman as a doll, that is a object, but it's also kind of cool and interesting to play with that. That's the game of the multidimensional nature of the self: that we don't get limited into one box or another. So if you can both be the subject and the object and it doesn't take away from the fact that I'm the one who is pulling those puppet strings. So that situation I think is very allowing.

I always felt, when the women's movement happened, because one didn't want to be a sexual object or any of these things, women atrophied that part of themselves and were kind of desexualizing instead of hyper-sexualizing. I really think that by hyper-sexualizing yourself, you remove eroticism from just having to do with genitals and rather becomes one's own whole engagement with life – with the things you eat, the people, the air, and the textures, the whole experience. It's all super charged and super erotic. And that to me is what living a Tantric life is really about. If you can play in those realms, I don't think anything shouldn't be allowed.

What's the first step in your creative process?

Vision. The only problem for me is the lack of time, team of people, money, abundance to support and manifest the things I feel I receive in my mind's eye. I have always seen things and been inspired by things, but as it's gone on it's only gotten richer. I feel like I'm just scraping the tip of the iceberg in what I do, manifest, and manage to produce out of all that I see and have been gifted to see.

When I have a specific thing I'm working on, I run it in my consciousness and meditate on it. And when I'm really working on it, it's like I'm breathing it, because not matter what else I'm doing I'm always running it in my consciousness and things are shaping it. There's that dynamic between what you're manifesting and what you're seeing – there's a loop. But it comes out of what you see within.

Is that vision clear or does it just give you a little detail?

Oh you know, it varies. One time, I had a vision of being in outer space and being one with Shakti. And she was all potential, with the ability to manifest anything in any direction. There was a sense that anything could ripple off and manifest into all these amazing universes. So that is kind of a bigger vision of it. But as you come into the smaller vision, I usually can sketch things out. But as they manifest, things shift and change according to how they want to happen: that's the other magical thing that occurs when you're actually doing it.

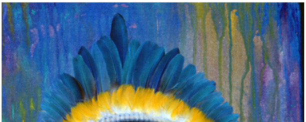
Can you tell us about the artworks with the cameras and lenses, hanging on your wall?

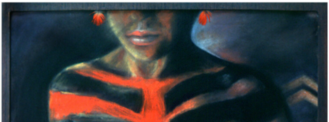
When I was leaving my other place, I was[studying all the things that I collected and this brought up meditation for a while on what we value and what has value in this very disposable society. What does it mean this accumulation of stuff and one's `connection to their things, this whole energetic signature mean? So I ended up making a series called 'An Alchemy of Stuff' that I haven't shown yet.

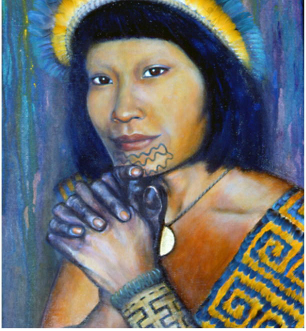
This is on my camera collection. So now instead of being tools you can use they are actually part of an artwork. They are no longer usable but have, to me, a greater value in what has happened to them now than there would be in trying to release them in any other way. They have been a part of my life in a very meaningful, connected way. They have a better shot for immortality like this. There is also a whole series from my costume collection, which are eight by four foot piece.

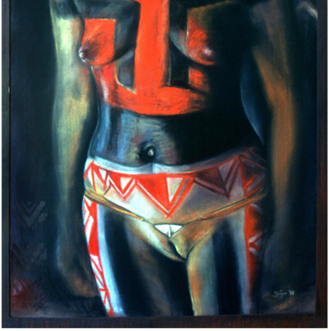
Since you're exploring your relationship with your belongings, is there an artwork that you'll never let go of, that you feel really attached to?

Let me think. I did a series of the Arawak Indians, which was hanging in the last home. There's a piece called *Anacaona* and she has a very strong spirit. I jokingly called her my *Arawak Mona Lisa*, because she has this kind of enigmatic wisdom and smile about her. I feel that it would be hard for me to let her go. When I had a gallery in Anguilla, which is in the Caribbean where I was living, she was hanging there for a while. And the woman who worked there told me that "I don't know how to say this, but your painting has been talking to me." So anyway, it's that kind of painting.



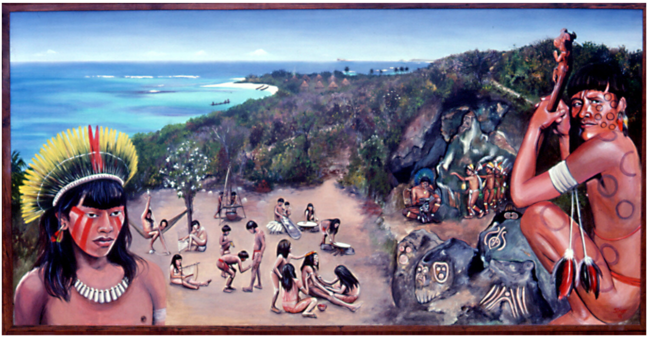


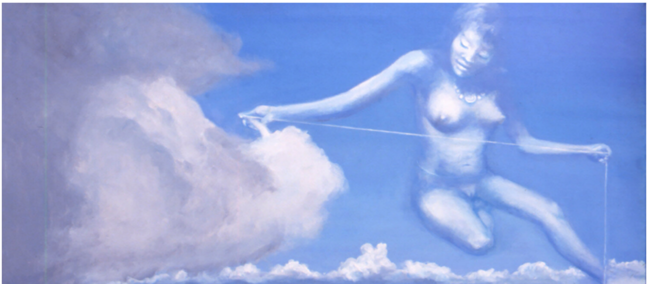




How did you first get introduced or interested in studying that culture?

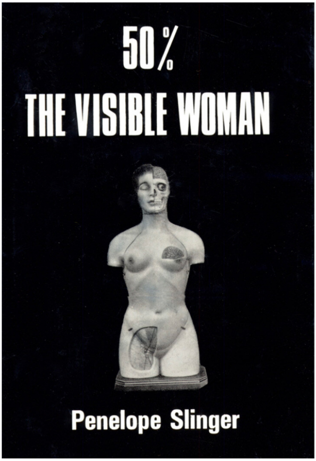
After Nik and I finished working on Sexual Secrets, we had to decide whether or not to stay in America. Nik had been brought up on an island, on Cypress, and he liked island life. So he said, let's check out the Caribbean. And that's what we did. And when I was there, I thought what do I do here? Do I do more of the work I've been doing and send it back to NY or London since I couldn't show the work here as it's not culturally relevant. I decided to try something that was more attuned with the culture where I was. I did a lot of writing for the local papers, encouraging local artists. Then I got asked to do these murals at the airport on the history of the island and one of them was called The Golden Age of Arawaks. I found, at that time, that people on the island didn't even know that there had been people there before. But we were doing a lot of archaeology and we'd go around and walk to these sites and find all these pieces and it was very vital. As we were finding these shards, I started to see the people who were behind this art, because it was so connected with the land. And so as I asked "What am I meant to be doing here?" And this is what came through to me. So I did this whole series – over one hundred paintings and pastels. I had been working with collage prior, but the multimedia thing didn't seem relevant there and I wanted to create a language that was accessible for the people there, not just for the fine art community. So it was like a mini career within my career and I had a different criteria. I see it as my noble savage period, studying the indigenous cultures and the value that they have. I believe that it's a whole part of the reclaiming of the feminine, this reclaiming of the indigenous model and if we're going to survive that's the main place we need to look. That was my time honoring them.

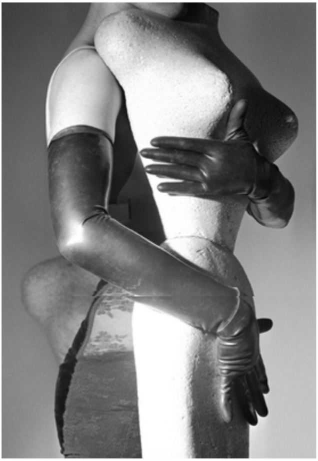




Do you have any fantasized collaborations, dead or alive?

You know when I think about that, I think of Frida Kahlo but she's a very intimate artist. I meant to do a collaboration with Linder Sterling. She was inspired first of all, by my book *50 percent Visible Woman*, which galvanized her. So we've talked about doing something, hopefully we will.





And then, I'd like to make something with the surrealists' 'Exquisite Corpse', but then again I would be a woman in a man's world still. I am also looking to do more collaborations with Bil Brown, the photographer who brought us into this building. He does a lot of shoots for fashion magazines and we are in the process of making a music video for a young recording artist together as a collaboration, with Dhiren Dasu and myself so we'll see how that goes because we like each other a lot and respect our skill sets.

Do you enjoy and do you often collaborate with other artists?

I do enjoy it and it depends you know. Sometimes it goes horribly wrong and I say I'm never going to collaborate with someone else again. Because people often are very fickle, especially when you're dealing with intense kind of energies. It may seem like a good idea now but then all of sudden they have a new boyfriend and they said "Oh you shouldn't show your breasts because you're with me now." So these things can happen.

I would love to work more in film and that is basically a collaborative medium. I've done my own personal films but would like to do something on a larger scale, if the opportunity comes up. I always say I'm just getting on with it myself and as things open up I'm very open to moving into those realms, expanding on what we can do.

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Richard, the filmmaker, is in the process of getting distribution in England. We are having a showing in New York in last week of January 2019 at The Anthology Film Archives - that with some of my other films, Jane' Arden's film and Niki de Saint Phalle and Peter Whitehead's film, so that will be exciting. Then we'll see. Blum & Poe also talked about doing a screening too so I'll let you know.

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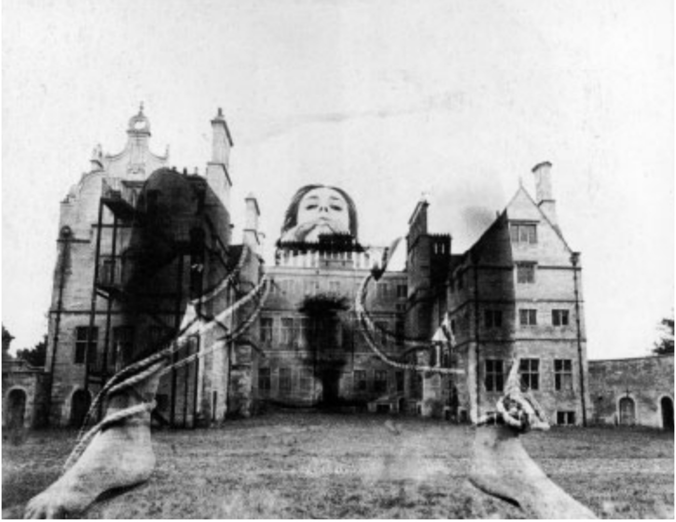
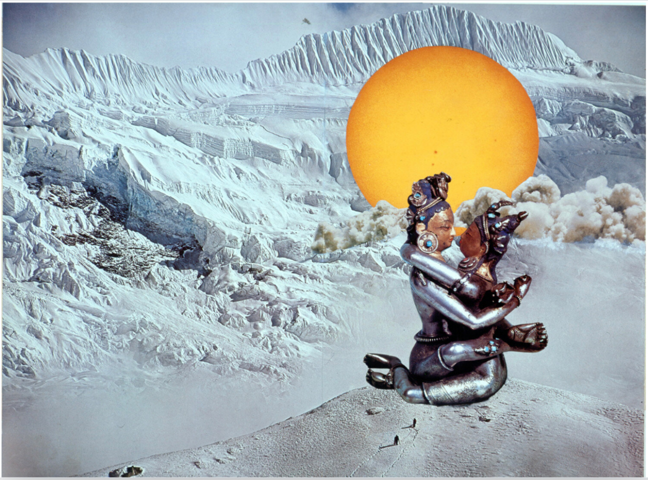
What would you imagine your last words to be?

"Oh how wonderful!"

Penny Slinger is an artist based in Los Angeles.

For more info visit pennyslinger.com