

# THE FEMININE UNLEASHED

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Polly Borland & Penny Slinger

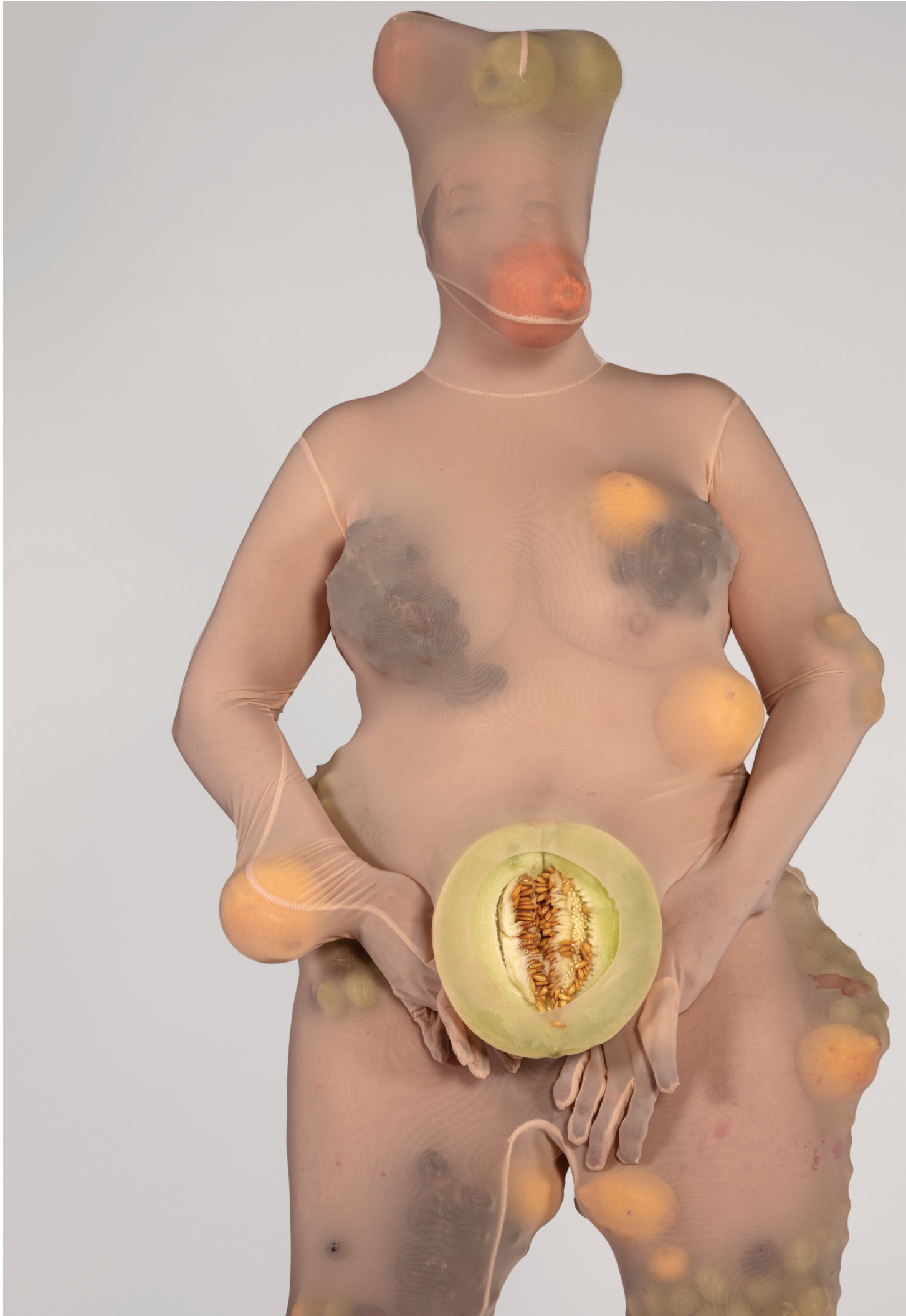
BY

Delaney Willet

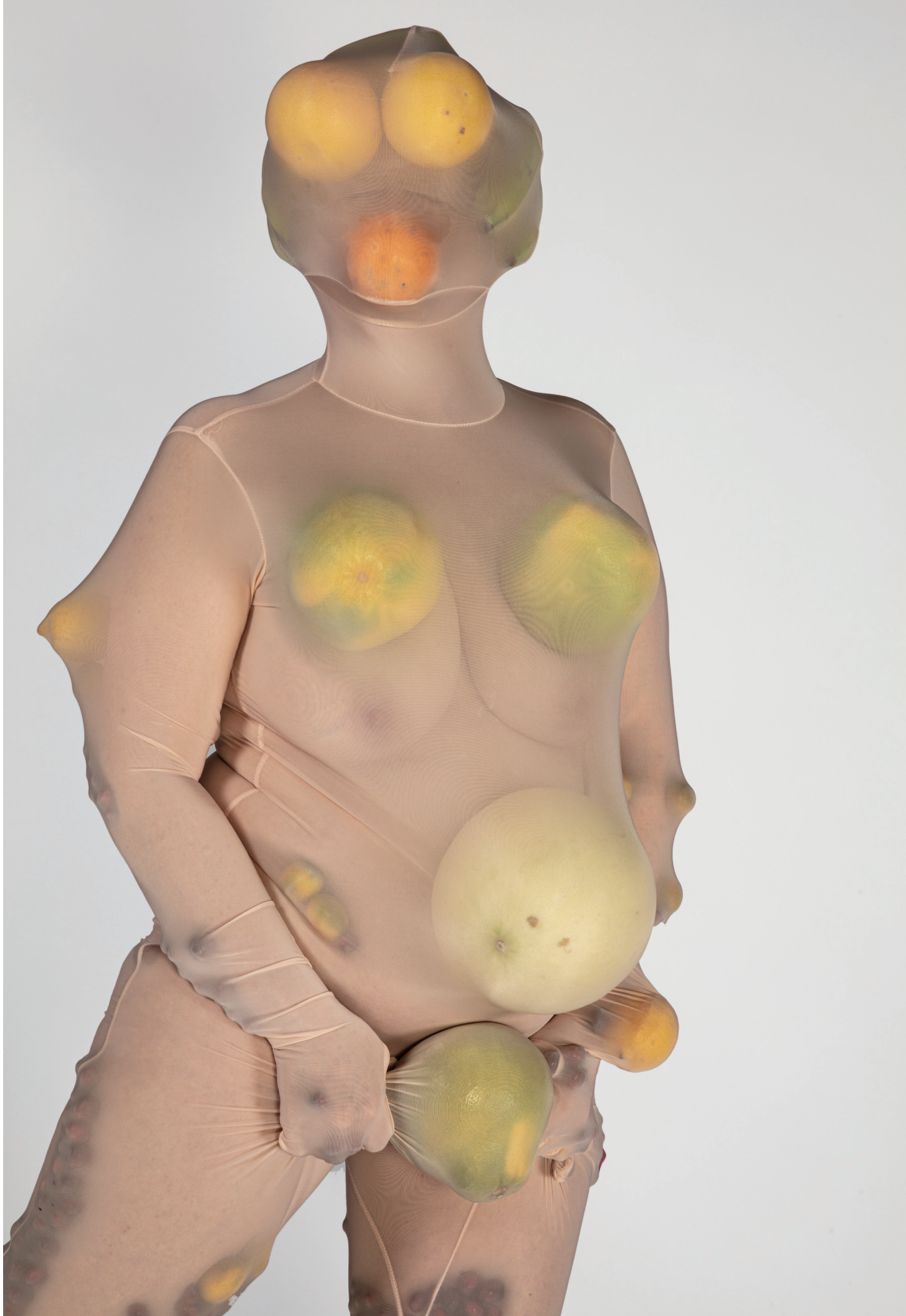
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Alien Fruit F.



Alien Fruit B.



Individually, Penny Slinger and Polly Borland are internationally renowned figures in the fine art space. Together, they form a collaborative powerhouse, infused with feminine vigor and playful abstraction. Each has worked widely in multimedia disciplines for decades, marrying their storied bodies of work and varied concentrations—which typically intersect at femininity, sexuality, and spirituality—in their newest project, Playpen. The photo book was launched at an acclaimed exhibition held at *Lyles & King* gallery in New York, chronicling the evolution of the female body beyond a heteronormative gaze to an audience of enraptured visitors. The raw and evocative images are only the latest iteration of both Borland and Slinger’s individual styles, which almost always feature the female form, and often capture their own bodies for the purpose of radical self-documentation and inescapably bare honesty about the realities of womanhood as it extends beyond masculine constructions. Above all else, it seems the contextualization of both of their works remains a top priority in the digestion of the art, lending itself to the projects’ multiple iterations (photographic gallery installation to book, sculpture to photo, sculpture in space). Their inherent understanding of the importance of bodies and objects in space, and the relationship each individual thing has to its context and those who imbibe it dictates the response one will have to Slinger’s and Borland’s art. An invoked reaction, to both, always represents a job well done. And there has yet to be a project from either that hasn’t riled global fervor. Though neither claims the radical ideologies of feminism, its theories and branches nonetheless heavily influence the work of each. In 2019, Slinger collaborated with Dior, specifically with the house’s creative director, Maria Grazia Chiuri, whose reign saw a heavy-handed feature of feminist doctrines emblazoned on runway garments. In 2008, Borland enlisted Gwendolyn Christie for her exhibition and subsequent book, *Bunny*, which subverted the idea of the hourglass, boxed-in *Playboy* bunny by posing Christie, an exceptionally tall woman, in various costumes and sculptural positions that speak to an alternate expression of femininity. Each piece, a feat worth a legacy in their own right, are simply one tally in the collective masterpiece that paints the decade-spanning careers of both of these one-in-a-century creators. Below, in privileged conversation between the two with *Reserved*, they discuss their influences, their upbringings, and the way in which the shifting landscape of our current culture motivates their creation.

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**Your work is strongly based in femininity and eroticism. How does feminism act as a muse in your work? What in your formative years influenced this genre of art?**

*Polly:* I think Penny is similar to this, I don’t really see myself as a feminist as such, other than I like femininity and I like the female— everything that is symbolic or embodies the feminine. But, having said that, when I was three years old and I had my best friend next door, who was a boy— he used to come over and play. One day I was tapping my foot to the music we were listening to and he said “Oh you’re not allowed to do that. Only boys are allowed to tap their foot to the music.” (Penny laughs) I remember thinking, not ‘fuck you’, because I wouldn’t have known the word fuck, but I remember thinking “No, no one is going to tell me what I can or can’t do”. As a person, or in this instance, specifically, because I was a girl. I think I’ve lived my life pretty much based on that idea ever since. I’m not going to be stopped from what I want to do just because I’m a girl. Having said that, in different cultures and even in our own culture, that can very well stop women from doing what they want to do or doing what they need to do, or being an equal person in the world. We could talk about abortion rights and going back to the Dark Ages in this country. My body, thank you very much.

I love the female form and I love a lot of the things associated with femininity or my idea of femininity. I don’t see myself boxed into a vernacular that is purely feminine. I don’t know how Penny would answer that question, probably differently than me, but....

*Penny:* Because you started at a young age, I’ll go back to my time at art school, where I always wanted to be judged on the level with the boys rather than the girls, because I saw the boys were taken more notice of. They didn’t really take so much notice of the girls. Even if the

girls had the talent, they were not really considered on the same level. When I started looking at the history of art, I saw, “Oh my goodness, the female form plays such a predominant part throughout the whole history of art. Especially the unclothed female form”. And yet, it’s pretty one hundred percent seen through the lens of the male artist. It’s not about how a woman sees herself. From an early time, working at art school, I started making works that were about how I as a woman saw myself, because I thought this was really important. Otherwise we just get trapped in the intoxication with surfaces. With how something looks, rather than how something is. I was always much more concerned about the is-ness. As I got into surrealism, I was very intrigued by that as a movement because it was to do with bringing the subconscious and unconscious realms to light. So, my first book, *50% The Visible Woman*, was about the fact that we only see fifty percent — well that’s rather an exaggeration — but we only see half of a person when we look at their outside, because there is all this other world that is going on inside. It was that psyche that I wanted to explore. I did get a little bit exposed to the feminist movement during that time, and I went to some meetings, but I didn’t really resonate because mainly it was a very political kind of stance they were taking. Looking for equal rights in the workplace, all very important. But for me, I felt it was more about what I’ve always been involved with, which is the liberation of the feminine. That’s not just the domain, either, of women. I believe all of us, females and males, are made up of male and female elements. This division that we’ve been given of boxes that we’re put in according to our gender has been very trapping. Of course, the feminine has been horribly suppressed, so I have made it a lifetime’s work to try and liberate that feminine energy, but not necessarily in alignment with how people in the movement were seeing it. At that time too, a lot

of feminists were a little bit pissed off with me because I was using my sexuality and I wanted to reclaim the right for women to be subject to their own sexuality. That was always super important for me. The more militant feminists thought that one shouldn’t be dealing in those areas, but I didn’t want to throw this baby out with the bath water. I wanted to claim that baby. They thought, too, when I was growing up, that women didn’t really have—this is in England, back in the 50s—that they didn’t really have pleasure in lovemaking. It was just something that they did for their husbands. I thought, “No, that doesn’t seem to match with how I feel.” That’s been a lot about what I wanted to reclaim. At this point in life, because I’m older now, there’s something I saw coming for a long time, which is I wanted to do something about this whole next box of ageism. How women, when they get to be no longer the hot, magnetic, young, sexual creature, are not really seen anymore. In *50% of The Visible Woman*, I’m not trying to claim that visibility for women of a certain age. And for all of us, no matter what we look like—what our racial identity is, any of these things—just to be able to claim that right of self-expression. Especially for the feminine energy, there are all these things like intuition that have been so repressed. I wanted that to have pride of place.

*Polly:* I’ll just add, in my *Bunny* series, which was photographing Gwendolyn Christie, that was us really trying to subvert the kind of cliches of depicting women and I think we did that very well in that series. Speaking to what Penny was saying about ageism, my last body of work before I started working with Penny, was I turned the camera on myself. I did a series of nudes that were very abstracted photographs of myself naked. I think for me there’s always been an eroticism in my work, but at the same time, it isn’t— as Penny said—it’s not a male gaze. It’s definitely my gaze. I’m not really into the cliched notions of how people depict femininity. I tried to turn it on its head in a way.

*Penny:* Definitely what we did with our series here. It’s all about turning that on its head. Where Polly and I met was on a panel down at NeueHouse, and the panel was called “*Reframing the Muse*.” Obviously we took that agenda very seriously (laughs). This whole book is about trying to reframe the muse.

**Both of you deal heavily within multimedia art. Is there a sense that the message you’re trying to convey cannot be contained by one medium? Expand on that.**

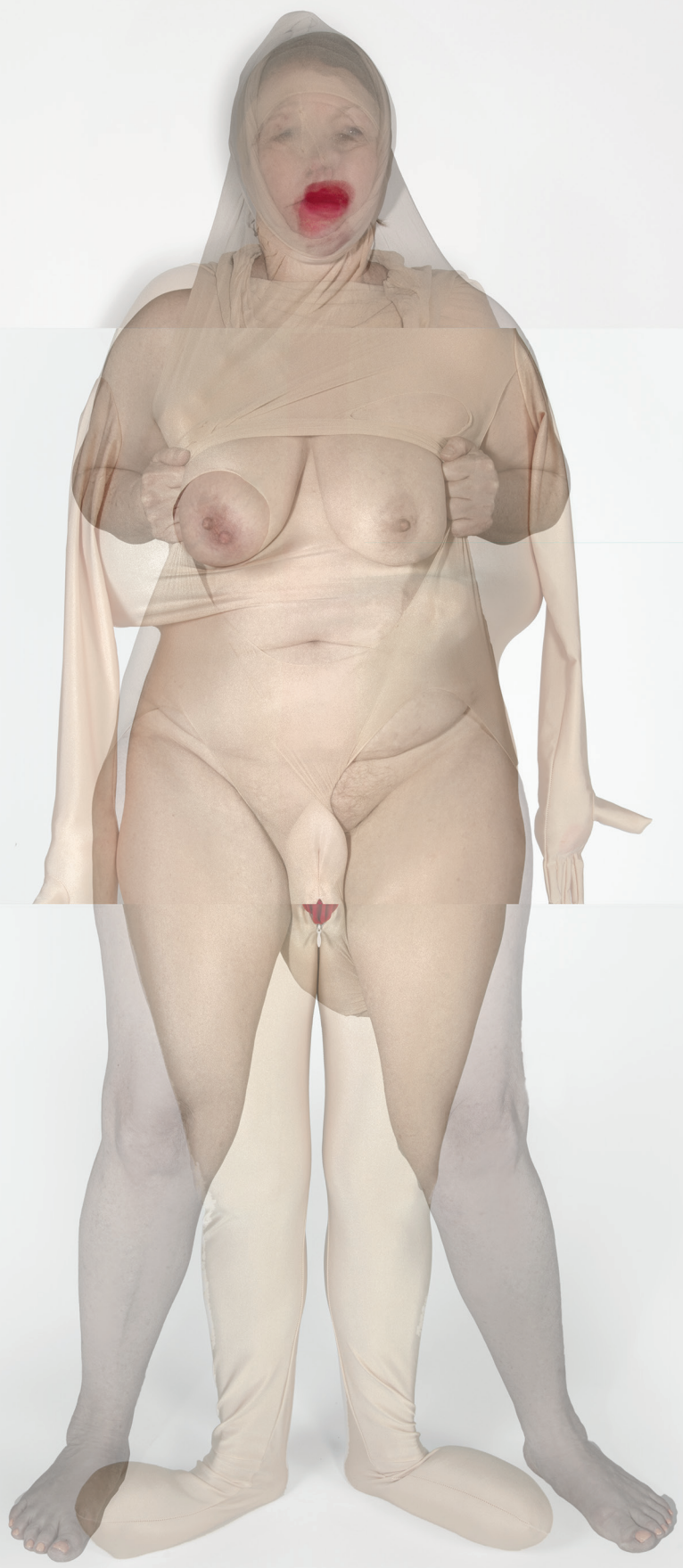
*Polly:* Basically, I was building soft sculpture and dressing people up since—well it came really after I did the adult baby work, because they’re all self-dressing up as babies. One thing led to another, then I photographed Gwen (Gwendolyn Christie). I would dress her up in subverted ideas of femininity. Things like animals, certain animals. We’re really playing around with the idea of the pinup photos of the sixties, then it led onto other things as we were going. From that, I went to Smudge. I was purely dressing people up in my own creations. I ended up with Morph, which was much more sculptural and abstracted. Of course, the nude work, which is my

own body, I was basically using my body as clay, kneading it and contorting it and, you know, stretching the flesh. There was lots of flesh to play with. I was making sculpture and photographing it anyway, so the next leap came when I took the sculpture out of the photos and put them into the real world as 3D objects that would last. All my sculpture was costumes on people, so the sculpture was always in the moment and could never be — other than frozen in time with the photographs, it could never exist as a thing in itself. So, I started creating sculpture. It’s very abstract, but figurative. It’s very morphic. For me, it was a natural progression. It feels like I’ve been doing sculpture for years. It comes very naturally to me, it’s something I love doing. It has really invigorated my practice. I’m just really at home with it. I love it. I feel like I’m at a point where the creative possibilities are infinite.

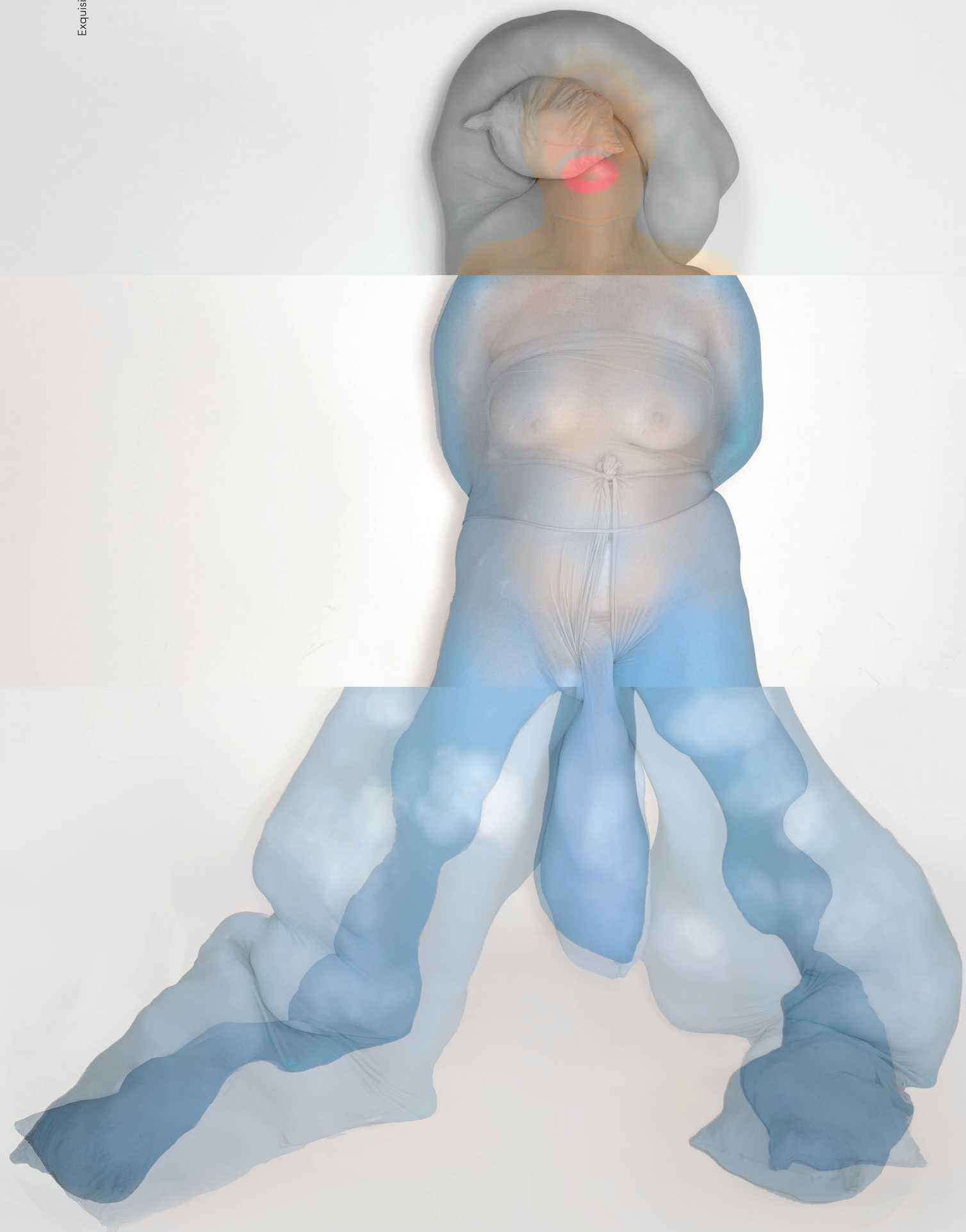
*Penny:* I took it upon myself to break boxes and interface the contents of different media right from when I was a student. The first art school I went to was a craft-orientated school. Because I knew that I wanted to be a fine artist rather than work in applied art or crafts, I used all the different media and the techniques I discovered in these crafts—whether it was pottery, or weaving, or book binding—to bring them together into fine art offerings. That proceeded my work as a student at Chelsea, where I was worked in photography, and sculpture, and printmaking, and painting—all the different departments. But, I wanted to blend them. At that time—although that’s very much a practice that’s happening more now—at that time, it wasn’t really the done thing, so I was somewhat of a nuisance. In fact, they put me in my own studio under the stairs, away from the other students (laughs), so I could do all my crazy mixing of these different mediums. I wanted to use photography not just as an end in itself, but part of something that would be put into another artwork combining 3D and flat imagery. It was a very definite and deliberate thing that I did right from then. I’ve continued that practice all my lifetime. I’ve also found that it’s very stimulating to have that ability to switch between different mediums. If you do that, if you’re getting stuck or doing something too long, you can switch to another form and you’re still expressing yourself. I always liked to express myself in words as much as in images, although visual form is probably my chief way, but I like the blending of those different things. As in my first book, I put the poetry over the imagery so I could bond them together and show that they are intricately involved with each other, not separate entities. My fluidity between different media has been very much parallel and akin to my gender fluidity, as well. I see them all as part of this same, big ol’ mixing pot, this witch’s cauldron. You take away the idea that you’re not allowed to blend these things and you start doing this new and heady mix. I do see that we have much more of the mixing of media absolutely penetrating and infiltrating all of our different arts these days.

**Explain your studies of the tantric practices, and how they relate to the interwoven topics of occult, goddess, spirituality, femininity? Penny, you published *The Alchemy of Ecstasy*. What inspired this collaborative book and its subsequent incarnations, which included a tarot deck?**





Exquisite Corpse D



Exquisite Corpse B





Exquisite Corpse A



Exquisite Corpse E



*Penny:* When I went to the exhibition called Tantra in the early 1970s, it was a revelation for me because I felt at home, I felt I recognized the language. Coming out of surrealism it felt like the evolution of surrealism. From looking at the imagery in the context of surrealism where it's trying to describe the landscape of the subconscious and the unconscious realms, now a similar kind of imagery was being used to describe the superconscious, and higher states of consciousness. I thought, "This is what I want to know about, because this is the next stage for me in my own self exploration. It's going to provide tools that I need to take me beyond psychology to the next level." Sure enough, as I dove deeply into it, and as I luckily got a teacher who could help me to really know the essence of tantric thinking—I know that it's now become associated with being the religion of sex, but it's so much more than that. Tantra actually means to weave and to expand, so it's weaving together all the threads of your physical life with your spiritual being. It's expanding into your multidimensional version of yourself, rather than being trapped and limited in a boxed-in version. I saw, too, that here was a spiritual path that included, rather than rejected, sexuality. Because of that, I thought it was so important for everybody to know that we had choices. If we were spiritual, we didn't have to be in this no pleasure zone. We were allowed to have pleasure, and we were allowed to feel good as well as do good! This revelation was absolutely key in my own sense of self, and I wanted to share that with others. That's why we put the book out and that's why I try in many of the works I do to show that sexuality is part of our birthright. We are here to enjoy through all the sexual apparatus that we have. That sensual and sexual pleasure, that ecstasis, ecstasy, standing outside of yourself is the way that you are able to reach and touch the hem of the skirts of the gods and goddesses who enjoy all that sacred union up there in the stars.

**Your art has been censored, going so far as being burned by British customs. What is your take on censorship in art, and how do you fight it?**

*Penny:* We've got a challenge here, because we want to be free to be able to express ourselves however we want. At the same time, we have a culture now which has opened the door wide open to all kinds of erotic material, but in the form of a more pornographic context. I don't even like to use that word, because Aphrodite Porn is actually the name of the goddess Aphrodite in her erotic aspect. So, the fact that they've taken pornography and made it into something rather degrading is an insult to the goddess. All of the eroticism should be in the realm of the sacred. That's another thing that I've been trying to confront and introduce with Sexual Secrets, which came out at the end of the seventies, which was really trying to let people know on a more worldwide level, on a cultural level, that sexuality and spirituality can be close bedfellows and they can exist in the same breath. It is a temple this body we have and it should be honored and acknowledged like that. Sex shouldn't be treated as something shameful and dirty, but as an honoring and a celebration of our spirit embodied in flesh. With social media now, there's a tendency for young women to put themselves out there in a way that is as provocative as possible. The more flesh you show, the more likes you get. That shouldn't be the standard! (laughs) We have a push me-pull me situation here where any kind of censorship really is an attack on the creative spirit, that wants to

be able to express itself in whatever way it wants to. But, at the same time, you don't want to encourage that it's just all lies in the exposure of flesh and organs (laughs). What do you think, Polly?

*Polly:* It's a hard one, censorship. I suppose with everything, I draw a line when it comes to children. That's really my line. Any exploitation of children in any way, for me, is wrong and troubling. With adults, consent is of the utmost importance. Regardless of the content, or context, consent is number one. The thing about social media is it does, as Penny said, encourage everyone. It's all about the likes. It's attention. It's attention economy. I feel like social media has ruined a lot. It's devalued music, it's devalued photography. We're looking now at how it's devaluing the movie industry. Suddenly, everyone has woken up. It happened in photography twenty years ago. The internet devalued that and also music. Musicians find it hard to make a living now. All creators, we are being used and sucked dry by social media and tech companies. We are being used and abused. To me, when Instagram bans the nipple, that pisses me off. I don't think young children should be out there in that way, but if I want to put my nipple on Instagram I should be allowed to. It's prudish and old-fashioned for women to have to hide their nipples when nipples are just part of our bodies.

*Penny:* That's basic. Nipples are the first thing children see most often! (laughs) All of that, I feel, is very natural. The thing is, I come from this school of thought which is using the body to express more than just what the body is. Using the self image, and now, at my age, I've been using my naked body again as my muse. But when you're at this phase of life, it's not really that same—as I say—magnetic and attractive kind of image that you're trying to put forth. I'm using my body as a harbinger of all my experience. Because I never really had that kind of self-reflection which adds shame or any of those things to the mix, then I don't see anything wrong with my naked body. That's how I came into the world, no doubt how I'll leave it. I feel housed in my body and proud of this temple in all its phases, in all its stages. Addiction to certain ways of seeing is something definitely that this production that Polly and I did together is trying to disrupt and get people to look again and to find that the body, when it's expressed with the consciousness that we're bringing to it, is our redefining of the muse. The muse is not to do with just a pretty and curvy, beautiful woman. It's to do with creativity, which we're bringing through in our presentations of our self-image and our being. This is very disruptive, because there's all kinds of associations. When you look through all the images in the book, it brings up a lot of things for people, there's a lot of associations there. But we're using that deliberately, to work in that area—that kind of gray area that's attraction/repulsion. What are the things that allow you to look at things in one way or look at them in another, and what are those dividing lines, and what is a muse? For me, a muse is someone who is going to stimulate, and inspire, and get you to question the ways that you've seen things before. That's what we're trying to do with our bodies.

We are using this as an insert into the world of how the feminine is seen to try to be disruptive and bring up things that are generally not really shown the light

of day. It's a study in morphology, in the language of form and how your body, once you take off restrictions, can be used to model different kinds of morphological explorations that Polly and I grazed in together. That's where the rubber hits the road. We're excited to see what kind of dialogue we can encourage and stimulate from the reactions these images create.

It was so much fun to work with Polly because we kind of see things in the same way in a lot of ways. We have that 'take the lid off and let the creativity out'. When we created this space, this playpen, that described the safe space we created and held between us. Then, that allowed us to play. There isn't enough play in this world, certainly for women trying to conform to be this way or that way. When you take off all this need to conform and just say "We're gonna play," and don't give a damn about anything, about 'How would this be seen?' or 'How would this be received?' Just do it. For the sheer hell of it, for the sheer transformational juice that you can get from that. I think that's the message that we wanted to encode in, so that it's a very liberating thing. Not just for us—and I do believe, and Polly can speak to this, that it was a liberating process that we went through here. That was the intention, to get rid of any other constrictions that were around how we display ourselves and how we create art. That can set out a blueprint and a template for other people to explore. When we showed the work in New York, we had a number of women come up to us and say, "Thank you so much, I can't wait to get with my girlfriends and make some images!" That's key too. Something that's truly liberating should not only liberate the people who are doing it, but pass on that signal to liberate others in its wake.

*Polly:* It was extremely liberating. I've never really taken my clothes off, you know. I'm self conscious with my body, even though I managed to photograph myself and show it to the world. That was probably a good stepping stone into what I did with Penny. For me, it was liberating and it was very much in the moment. We were very much engaged with the materials that we were using in conjunction with my body. The materials in a way dictated how I interacted with the materials. The freedom I had came with not feeling in any way constricted by Penny, or the camera. It was trancelike. In a way, transcendental, when we were in those moments. That does come through. I remember the night of our opening, Penny, a lot of my friends were really unsure about what they were looking at, the friends who hadn't necessarily been art goers for years on end. At the beginning of the night, they didn't quite know what to say to me, and by the end of the night they were like, "Oh my god. I totally get what you've done, it's totally made me feel free." It was a really incredible response we had.

I think Penny and I were really aligned. Even though we're slightly different in the times we were born, we definitely aligned in a lot of our creative processes or thinking. We want to be able to transcend any boxes that people inhabit or want to impose on other people. It was definitely a playpen. Almost a playpen without a pen.

*Penny:* Me, Penny! Penny Pen.

*Polly:* (laughs) Penny Pen, exactly.

*Penny:* I just want to say how important I think collaboration is and how grateful I am that we've been able to model this kind of collaboration. I think, especially between women, we've had so many centuries of divide and conquer, putting women in competition with each other to try and compete for the most powerful man.

We need to throw all that out the window now, and help and support each other to be the very best that we can be. This work is part of that ongoing thrust that I definitely want to be part of and Polly obviously wants to be part of, so we can show how women can support each other and really blossom. We can come to a whole next level of co-creation and collaboration, which is what our world needs now, in fact, if we're going to get out of the mess that we're in. It needs that feminine energy to support each other and support the planet.







Clown In a Body Suit A

Clown In a Body Suit E







Mylar D : Photo by **Bill Brown**



Mylar F : Photo by **Bill Brown**