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Pre Conception from the series *An Exorcism*, by Penny Slinger. 1970–77. Photo-collage on card, 50 by 64.5 cm. (© Penny Slinger and Artists Rights Society, New York; courtesy the artist and Richard Saltoun, London, Rome and New York).

Penny Slinger: An Exorcism

by Daniel Culpan

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The publication *An Exorcism: A Photo Romance* by Penny Slinger (b.1947) has been nearly half a century in the making. A first edition of the project, which traced one woman's psychic and spiritual death and rebirth, was published in 1977 with financial support from the Elephant Trust, a foundation set up by Lee Miller and Roland Penrose in 1975. The book included ninety-nine images and no text; Slinger hoped to realise a more complete version of the work a year later with the help of the Dutch publisher Dragon's Dream, presenting 'a more in-depth version of the journey' with 'text, immersive backgrounds' and even a script.¹ However, after another of her books, the Tantra-influenced *Mountain Ecstasy* (1978), was seized and destroyed by British

Customs when it entered the country from the printers, the expanded edition was shelved.² Now, *An Exorcism: A Photo Romance* has been published in a revised 192-page edition by Fulgur Press, Lopen, complete with an amended title and a new image sequence.

The project was born out of several weeks spent at Lilford Hall in 1969, a decaying stately home in rural Northamptonshire, with her partner at the time, the writer and film-maker Peter Whitehead (1937–2019). Although the film they made, with the actor Susanka Fraey, was left unfinished, the location appeared to have a marked, haunting effect on Slinger's mental wellbeing and creative imagination. As she later wrote, the project 'evolved into a psychodrama with ourselves as participants [...] the psychic atmosphere of *The House* seemed to lead us away from reality'.³

In the following years, Slinger undertook a series of extreme, gruelling projects, including working with Holocaust, Jane Arden's experimental feminist theatre group, and acting in Arden's *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972). The film is an unsparing examination of the connections between schizophrenia and female 'hysteria' as a pretext for mechanisms of social control. Slinger has since described the process as 'harrowing' – one that resulted in the breakdown of her relationship with Whitehead and her own creative burnout. She subsequently turned to the photo-collages of *An Exorcism* as a means of self-reassembly, its title moving from the symbolic to the literal: 'I felt myself emerging from a nightmare of others' projections. It made me realize how many people are never able to fulfill their own truly creative potential because of their entrapment by social conventions'.⁴

The book is divided into twenty-one chapters, with such titles as 'The Crucifixion' and 'The Masked Ball'. Within each, Slinger embodies a range of female archetypes encoded within various forms of Western culture: from ancient myth to pornography, Surrealism to horror movie imagery and the tropes of Freudian psychoanalysis. The final lines of the book's dedication – 'to the ways of the West' – are perhaps a wry nod to this ambivalent cultural inheritance. By turns nightmarish, rebarbative, erotic and unnerving, Slinger's photo-collages act as portals of uncanny energy – physical places become entrances into highly charged mental territories – as well as objects of fantasy, wherein society's repressive veneer is violently stripped away. Through alternating currents of attraction and repulsion, the viewer is pulled into Slinger's universe of longing and violation.

In the opening chapter, 'The Brick Wall Behind the Door', the reader meets the 'bridal pair! A hero and a dame': the parents of the 'narrator'. They are superimposed on a black-and-white photograph of Lilford Hall **FIG.1**. Whether Slinger is playing herself in this series, or a character – perhaps even multiple – based on herself is never made entirely clear. 'For how long have things been this way?' the accompanying text asks. 'I sense this scene is somehow the beginning of the end'. Throughout the publication, the short texts alongside each image provide a kind of script, lending a clear narrative to the often ambiguous works. The reader is being spun a tale: a fiction paradoxically designed to undermine other equally potent fictions about femininity. At times, the reproductions resemble stills from 1950s Hammer horror films, screened through the sensibility of second-wave feminism.

In this first chapter, the reader is subjected to irruptions of the strange: a bricked-up door for which 'a man in the shadows holds the only key' **FIG.2**; body parts dangling from railings; and a scene in which a crib is flanked by a foetus and a woman in the foetal position, alongside peeling brocade wallpaper that merges into a strip of sky. The scene is set: 'Here it is that the Exorcism must begin. Like a detective, I'll uncover the clues, follow the trail, to find myself as I really am'.

From the outset, *An Exorcism* navigates a curious tension: it tells a story that is both deeply personal and which the artist posits as axiomatic. As Slinger has remarked, 'this is not a work that exists within a time capsule – it's a subject that is timeless and universal'.⁵ Yet if the work achieves a kind of universality, it is more akin to that of a fairy tale. It lays bare a repertoire of unconscious fears that have been transformed into haunting cultural images. The pages are replete with 'living' porcelain dolls **FIG.3**, virginal women made into objects of prey and female sexuality physicalised in the form of a haunted house.

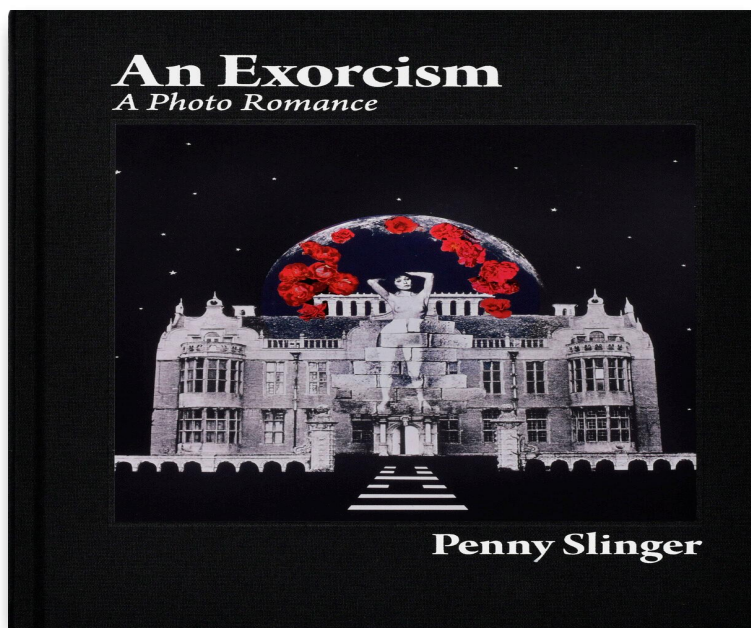
In the chapter 'The Fatherland', the reader is thrown back to the matrix of origins. In *Daddy's Girl* **FIG.4**, the father's shadow lurks in the background, the blueprint for patriarchy omnipresent in his castle. There is also the primal scene – referencing the 'Daddy' of the modern mind, Sigmund Freud – in which a toddler is collaged next to veil-like white sheets, while a couple have sex on the floor on the other side of them. It is here that the text operates almost like a session on the psychoanalyst's couch – a form of talk that frames the incipient terror of the images into a kind of rational coherence. For example, the text alongside *Daddy's Girl* reads 'Oh, how she wrapped herself in Daddy, safe within his rule [...] Beneath his ominous shadow, she lives her life as if he is her all'.

Throughout, misogynistic dichotomies – virgin/whore, goddess/temptress – are undermined through juxtaposition. The child's nursery, which symbolises a world of pre-sexuality, becomes a warped dolls' house. As an adolescent, the protagonist is sent to a cloister where she learns 'to see the body as a source of sin', policed by nuns, who are depicted masturbating behind closed doors **FIG.5**. Perhaps the risk in this kind of arresting imagery, in its lack of subtlety and insistence on blunt force, is that of diminishing returns. The initial shock gradually wears off, and one finds that depictions of unabashed female sexuality do not necessarily have the same impact that they did in the 1970s.

Furthermore, in tracing the gap between the original images and their reproduction, one must ask if something else is sacrificed. Coinciding with the publication of the book, the exhibition *Exorcism: Inside Out* was staged at Richard Saltoun, London (3rd July–7th September 2024) **FIG.6**. The gallery was transformed into an immersive restaging of the series. Wallpapered images spilled over from the walls to the floors, and the gallery's alcoves were transformed into temporary altars for Slinger's erotic deformations of religious icons. It is undeniable that there is a depth and physicality to the original works that is missing within the pages of the book. The layering and joins of the images, their overlapping edges, even the visible shine of the glue: all of these elements build up a visceral materiality that strengthens their force. Conversely, Slinger's animated film based on the series, which was also included in the exhibition, seems incongruously breezy. It is a kind of whistle-stop tour complete with background piano music and voiceover titles, adopting a slickness at the expense of the series' strange spell-making.

However, even on the page, the cinematic power of Slinger's images generates its own momentum. One could argue that her work forms a link between that of Kenneth Anger (1927–2023), with his fascination with the occult, and the subversions of the feminine ideal found in the photomontages of Linder (b.1954). Slinger's imagery veers between a transgressive female sexuality typified by the biblical figure of Eve or the myth of Pandora to woman as fetish object. For example, in *Vagina Dentata* **FIG.7** a woman unleashes a bestiary of ravening mouths and genitals with eagle wings, while snakes slither on floorboards, whereas in *O*, a female head is mummified in a leather mask, contrasted with a statue of St Sebastian.

As the narrative progresses, the incoherence of these culturally prescribed images of femaleness becomes all-encompassing. In *Primal* FIG.8, the central figure screams amid wreckage and debris, encircled by empty, pouting mouths. Her body is a skeleton and a serpent-like creature dives between her ribs. The text reads 'I can't keep it in, I've got to let it out. Everything falls and crumbles in one terrific, heart-rending shout'. Yet for all the punkish, DIY ethos of *An Exorcism*, there is a sense that the published work obeys a conventional sense of narrative resolution. In moving from the chapter 'Death Trip', in which funereal shots of graveyard statuary, skulls and headstones abound, to the beautiful realm of 'Rebirth', where the oppressive confines of the house are metamorphosed into a cocoon bursting with butterflies, a kind of salvational arc is also enacted. There is a neat domestication of the monstrous that has more in common with Hollywood storytelling than the avant-garde; Slinger's adopted hometown is, after all, Los Angeles. In the book's final image FIG.9, one is presented with a vista of transcendence: a black-and-white photograph of a child outfitted in roses, hovering above Earth, arms outstretched among the stars. Below, Lilford Hall stands swirling in the cosmos. We have come full circle: it is neat, redemptive and surprisingly – even sweetly – uplifting.



About this book

An Exorcism: A Photo Romance

By Penny Slinger

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[Order book](#)

About the author

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Footnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are taken from the book under review, which is unpaginated.
 - 2 *Mountain Ecstasy* was created with the author Nik Douglas (1944–2012). It includes found images – many from Slinger’s collection of erotica – and poetry.
 - 3 P. Slinger: ‘Intro to Exorcism images’, pennyslinger.com, available at pennyslinger.com/Works/an-exorcism-2, accessed 4th October 2024.
 - 4 *Ibid.*
 - 5 Penny Slinger, quoted in exhibition text for *Exorcism: Inside Out* at Richard Saltoun, London (3rd July–7th September 2024), available at www.richardsaltoun.com/exhibitions/128-penny-slinger-exorcism-inside-out, accessed 4th October 2024.
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