

Penny Slinger Comes to London with Exorcism: Inside Out



If Slinger's collages are pornographic, then their form is polite, offering negligible imposition and instead asking the viewer to place their face close to the glass.

By **RACHEL BENHAM** July 15, 2024

When Penny Slinger first brought her work to London in 1970, it was seized by the censors and burned. Like China in the early days of Covid, England still believed it could keep pornography out, stopping it at borders and placing it into quarantine, naïve to the digital transmission that was just around the corner and closing its ears to the clamoring voices demanding an end to the Obscene Publications Act.

By modern standards, Slinger's monochrome work is hardly pornography, bearing little resemblance to the videos now so readily accessed on our phones. When pornography breached the mainstream, it lost its subversiveness, morphing into the high-saturation cartoonishness we now must work so hard to hide from our children. By contrast, Slinger's work still subverts, it continues to deviate: it imagines a world in which the female body is no longer accessible, no longer available.

Featuring a collection of her collages from the 1960's and 1970's and articulated by the screening of *An Exorcism – The Works*, Slinger's new exhibition at **The Richard Saltoun Gallery**, *Exorcism: Inside Out*, is an intertextual expression of sexuality, identity and the uncanny, where the intentionality of collage makes her authority explicit. The assemblage and arrangement of paper signs lanced and then stitched monstrosly together appropriates the god-like power of world building, galvanizing a universe of writhing women with their hands placed joyfully between their legs.



Held diminutive and contained within their doll houses, Slinger's bodies vibrate with eroticism.

With works bearing titles such as *A Rose By Any Other Name* and *Enter Athena*, Slinger doesn't so much question the canon as marshal it, gaining strength by the repeated layering of literary allusion and subversion of the initial form. Slinger's artistic acts of salvage remind us how Sylvia Plath uses her father in *The Colossus*, working to confront the stability, the certainty, the unshakable male power that has her, too, thinking of reconstruction, reaching for the glue. This is women dealing in remnants, raking their fingers through the bones of something, stripping it bare, claiming the meat. Like Mary Shelley before both of them, Slinger plays Frankenstein, giving birth to nothing, refusing the maternal outwards flow of life-giver, instead making monsters.

Drawing from each available cultural signifier, Slinger's collages contain a series of repeating motifs: the religious symbolism, the misplaced penis, the myth. Regularly present, too, is the structure of a house, at times represented as a plaything. Here, the allusion points us towards Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House*, her husband's little lark, his little squirrel, anything other than an autonomous being, instead contained and courting disaster when she attempts her tiny acts of deviancy. Displayed on the walls of the gallery, Slinger's deviancy is tiny too, and often framed by the reoccurring house's impenetrable walls.



Slinger's spiraling themes of female bondage, discipline and punishment are expressed in their barest forms.

Appropriately, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* thematically picks up on Jane Austen's tireless fictionalization of the female impossibility of a life lived without equal access to finance and property, but updates it, allowing his heroine to take off her wedding ring and step out of the door. For Austen to grant her female characters anything better than male rescue would have been to drift into the realm of fantasy and undermine the message she wanted to convey. That Nora's viable escape could be conceived of in the 19th Century is evidence enough of progress, but Ibsen, too, was subject to a kind of censorship, being initially required to stage an alternate ending culminating only in Nora's continued domestic arrest.

But unlike Ibsen's Nora who appears to live the sexless life of an infant, Slinger's dolls vibrate with the erotic, and this is precisely what is contained, and what Slinger, through her work, stages the release of.

In this sense, Slinger's video installation, *An Exorcism – The Works*, functions as an expression of these women on the loose. Finally, their size allows Slinger's female bodies to compete with reality, no longer existing as a collection of small portals into a tangled, febrile dream of pleasure and horror but expansive, horizon-filling monsters with power enough to vaporize even the colossal.



In An Exorcism – The Works, Slinger endows her female bodies with impossible penises, leaving the male figure slain at their feet.

Stretched across the back wall of the gallery, the unyielding enormity of the naked female body ensures we do not forget that Slinger's women know what they are wanted for, what they are prized for, and what they are hated for withholding. Women's attempt to shape their sexual destiny through either participation in or withdrawal from this economy invites exploitation and at times punishment; it certainly invites judgement. Slinger, scalpel in hand and with all the dexterity of a surgeon, cuts deep into this system and reassembles it to make it serve her instead.

Like Kazuo Ishiguro's clones in *Never Let me Go*, women's creation of art counters the evaluation of the degraded individual as destructible object, posing a challenge to the purpose of female existence for service, and operating as an assertion of that same depth and sophistication of feeling men have always been granted and which women have historically been denied.

Women artists are often criticized for the autobiographical nature of their work, but placed into context, Slinger's dreaming of women into this place, this size, this house, can be seen as a continuum from Austen to Ibsen to her, and documents the changing cultural representation of women within society. The art disseminates the idea, and the subsequent circulation of the concept within social discourse serves to strengthen the existence of something fledgling.



Slinger's works represent a triumphant reconfiguration of a universe within which her women were previously captive.

Writing has always been a thrifty occupation, an activity women could do in secret, undetected and requiring little more than time in order to be accomplished. But by its nature, art is overt, purposefully exposed, and requiring funding for materials, for space, and for most of history, for consent from one's male protector. The explosion of female artists in the 1970's represents a key moment in our timeline where the tools available to women for cultural production and expression finally expanded dramatically.

Slinger's current exhibition is important due to the role she played in that event, but it is important too for its sheer female-centeredness, for its anarchic joy, and for its display of the female body that existed before our hyper-aesthetic era, pleasing itself, and climaxing without the intervention of anything but its own passionate belief in its right to total existence. **WM**



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