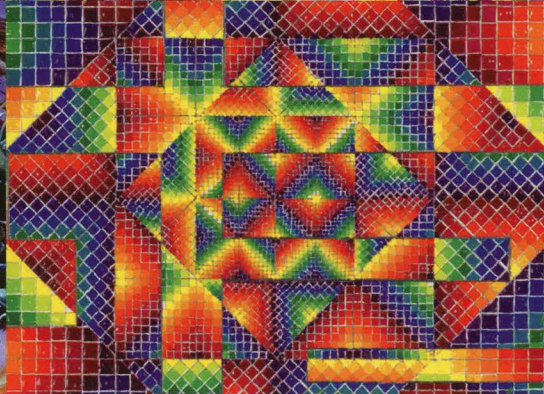


WOMEN of Visionary ART

Josephine Wall, Allyson Grey, Amanda Sage, Martina Hoffmann, Carolyn Mary Kleefeld, and Others



David Jay Brown and Rebecca Ann Hill



Josephine Wall • Allyson Grey
 Amanda Sage • Martina Hoffmann
 Carolyn Mary Kleefeld • Penny Slinger
 Maura Holden • Jessica Perlstein • Emily Kell



WOMEN of Visionary ART



Elizabeth Rosemary Banker
 Emma Watkinson • Hannah Faith Yata
 Lucy Delics • Ashely Josephine Foreman
 Burgandy Viscosi • Nana Nauwald
 Noa Knafo • Autumn Skye



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Tantric Secrets, Feminist Surrealism, Sixty-Four Dakinis, and the Goddess

An Interview with

Penny Slinger

Penny Slinger is a British-American multimedia artist based in Northern California. She is well known for illustrating and coauthoring, with Nik Douglas, the popular Tantra manual Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy (which sold over a million copies, in nineteen translations), and for designing the Secret Dakini Oracle, a Tarot-like deck of divination cards composed of beautifully collaged archetypal images—although her immense body of creative work spans a huge spectrum.

*As an artist, Slinger has worked in a variety of mediums, including painting, collage, sculpture, photography, and film. She studied at the Chelsea College of Arts in London and completed her degree with first class honors in 1969. In the 1960s and '70s, Slinger focused her creative talents on Surrealism to “plumb the depths of the feminine psyche and subconscious.”**

Slinger used nude photographs of her own body (and those of her partners) to create surreal collages in a series titled An Exorcism, which explored ideas relating to dreams, desire, sex, female liberation, Surrealism, and memory. This collection was published in a book by that title in 1977. More of Slinger’s extraordinary collage work appears in the



Penny Slinger, 2016. Digital photograph by Dhiren Dasu.

*L. Gangemi, “British-Born Artist Penny Slinger’s First Solo Exhibition in Los Angeles Opens at Blum & Poe,” *Art Daily*, April 19, 2014, http://artdaily.com/news/69522/British-born-artist-Penny-Slinger-s-first-solo-exhibition-in-Los-Angeles-opens-at-Blum---Poe#.V_sQ4yMrJcx (accessed February 20, 2018).



Penny on the day that we interviewed her at her home, 2016. Photo by Rebecca Ann Hill.

book *Mountain Ecstasy*, and her illustrations can be found in numerous publications. She did the artwork for the back cover of the special themed MAPS Bulletin that I edited about ecology and psychedelics in 2009.

Some of Slinger's paintings focus on the Arawak peoples of South America and the Caribbean, and she produced a documentary about them called *Visions of the Arawaks*. She worked with Nik Douglas and Bhaskar Bhattacharya on *The Path of the Mystic Lover*, providing eighty-four drawings for the book. Slinger's work was also part of the *Angels of Anarchy* exhibit at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2009, and her work regularly appears at gallery exhibitions around the world. To find out more about Penny's work, visit www.pennyslinger.com and www.64dakinioracle.org.

We interviewed Penny at her beautiful home—the “Goddess Temple”—in Boulder Creek, California, on October 8, 2016. Penny has been a good friend for over twenty years, and I have long admired her creative work, regal nature, and beautiful heart. In the following interview we discussed how her creative process differs with different mediums, the relationship between the erotic and the sacred, and the Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle project. —DJB

DAVID: What were you like as a child?

PENNY: Would you like my version, or how other people saw me?

DAVID: Maybe a little bit of both.

PENNY: I was a problem child for my parents because I was different from the start. When I was born, apparently I looked like an alien, because I didn't have any hair and had this big egg-shaped head. I also had a club-foot, and I had to wear leg braces for the first year of my life. I don't remember that, fortunately, but I'm sure that it had some impact on me, and afterward my legs were perfect. There were all these things, such as I had a much worse lisp than I have now. I couldn't do my *th*'s and *r*'s. I think my whole being found it a little hard to merge within the material plane! But that, of course, made me spoiled. I was spoiled because I was fragile, and I used that to my advantage as I grew up—especially with my father, who really doted on me.

They were good parents, but I think I did give them a run for their money. My mom said I was very bossy. It wasn't really so much that I wanted to tell other people what to do; it was more like knowing what I wanted and not being willing to settle. For example, if we went out shopping, I wouldn't get anything if I did not get what I wanted. So, my approach was, if I can't get the right thing, then I'm not going to bother to get anything. I guess I was also shy because of the lisp.



So, I suppose I alternated between quiet introspection and crazy extrovert activity. It wasn't unusual for me to be in the corner crying because I felt so bad about missing my mom and dad, even at eleven years old. I felt alone; it all felt very strange and alien to me. So that led to me being a rather naughty and disturbing influence on my class at school. It was like a pendulum swinging between those poles.

Then I discovered art, very early on, and found that it was a remedy for any kind of being alone or being bored. I could always do art.

REBECCA: Yes, that is most certainly true! Penny, your creativity spans quite a broad spectrum—from film and theater to photography, collage, and painting. How did your creative work begin, and how were you able to get involved in so many different creative fields?

PENNY: Yes, that was both inclination and choice. From early on, I liked, and had a flair for, different kinds of creative activities. I think I settled for fine arts in school because I thought that was something that had the most longevity; you didn't have to retire from it. If you're in the performing arts, more often than not it's a short career. But even though I say that, I still find it's a bit challenging to be able to really be as vibrantly interactive and, perhaps, accepted by society in general when you are not a spring chicken, a magnetic young woman. So shifting that paradigm is something that I'm working on and is going into the art that I'm currently creating.

But back to how I got involved in all these different mediums. From

TALKING TO MYSELF 2
(1970–1977), 8" x 13.5",
photo collage from *An*
Exorcism series.



BIRD IN A GILDED CAGE (1971–2013),
23.5" x 15.5" x 11.75", mixed media.
Courtesy of Blum & Poe.

early on, I would play dress-up and have an assortment of different makeup and costumes that I would put on, and I would try to lure my girlfriends to come and play with me using those things. I would dance alone in my room. I would do collage art when I was very young, just cutting up bits of magazines, if I wasn't feeling well and in bed. All these kinds of activities.

Then, when I got to art school, I was fortunate because I first went to a good school in England, in Farnham, that's now called the Surrey Institute of Art & Design. It was a fine arts school, but it had a lot of different craft activities, as well as a fine arts program. There were a variety of departments where I could explore and learn different creative modalities. So by the time that I left school with my pre-diploma, which I completed before I did my three-year diploma at Chelsea, I was known by the staff for wanting "a glue that can stick anything to anything"—and I think that pretty much sums up my approach ever since.

I don't like limitations. I don't like boxes. But, of course, not wanting these things made it harder for me to be marketable—because you always need to have a box and a label to be marketable. I like to use boxes as a creative device, but that's more like a "magic box," rather than someone else putting you in one. Putting yourself in one as a device is fine, if you're doing it for imaginative and creative reasons.

When I was young, I thought maybe I'd like to be a window dresser, because I liked the idea of taking a space and transforming it into a magical reality. We would go into central London and look at the shop windows, and I would exclaim, "Ah, these enchanted worlds! This is wonderful! Oh, the clothes!" I thought that I'd love to do that. But then when I realized I'd be dealing with a world of shopkeepers, it felt much less charming. So I decided to use . . . multimedia within my own art, and also to do different creative activities, like film and video, combining various mediums together. I think film is a wonderful synthesis. I haven't really had the chance to explore it as fully as I would like to—in the sense that it can combine all of the different art forms into one.

DAVID: How did you first become interested in painting, and how would you describe your creative process when painting, as well as with your other creative endeavors?

PENNY: Yes, it's interesting because every different process has a different flavor, a different frequency, a different interactive feedback loop between you and your work. I enjoy all of them, but they each have different qualities. I first started painting because as a child I could pick up pencils and paint and create something immediately, and I could make collages. I had a natural aptitude for doing this. It came easily for me to do something that was a representation in some way, that had an impact to it, and I think that's one of the reasons I didn't really learn music.

I tried taking a few music lessons, because I could always hear music in my mind—whole marvelous orchestral pieces. However, when I'd sit at the piano and play, I didn't know how to re-create what I was hearing—so it didn't really come out how I had it in my mind. Then the process of trying to learn music was so strict—la da da, da daa da. You had to go back to the ABCs. I think that maybe I didn't have a good teacher, but practicing made me feel *ugh*—I don't want to waste time with the basics. However, with the visual arts, even if there were skills that I wanted to develop, I could still do something pretty good early on.

Painting is an interactive process. I paint, but not as much as using other mediums, mainly because I love polished and finished creations that are all reflective and nuanced. To have that subtlety—of what's in the velvet and grass, and all those really beautiful details—takes a long time. And I don't paint by numbers. Painting with numbers is when you draw the thing, and then you fill it all in fastidiously. I can do detailed drawing, but then I mess up it up as I paint in roughly over it, getting the main tonal qualities into it, the primal, raw balance of the composition. I gradually mold it, like having a piece of stone or something that you're carving with your first or rough cut. Then you put more and more detail into it—and then still more and more fine tuning. So I do that



GALA MIND, 18.25" x 16",
digital photo collage. Used
on the back cover of the
special-edition *MAPS Bulletin*
on ecology and psychedelics
(Spring 2009, vol. 12, no. 1).

when I'm painting, but it takes a long time. I always have a backlog of inspiration; I've never been short of ideas. My only frustration is not being able to manifest everything that I see and receive, and all that's going on in my mindscape.

When I found collage—especially photographic collage—it was so much quicker and more immediate, because I could have that finished surface that I like, that represents reality, right away. I've never been a representative artist in the sense of wanting to re-create reality. My joy comes from putting together disparate elements that look very realistic. But the more reality in a substance, an object, the more shock value you can bring by juxtaposing it with things that it wouldn't normally be juxtaposed with. It's like creating a new world out of elements of known reality, and then putting them together into surreality, in a different kind of space.

I like to use technique, but always in the service of vision. Of course, in using technique, accidents happen and that's all part of the magic, too. Painting has a certain type of meditation to it, which is very specific. I would say one of the most powerful painting experiences that I've had was with *Anacoana*, who's hanging in the other room here. She's an Arawak princess. I got her pose and everything as I envisioned, and I was painting and painting, but somehow she just wasn't looking right. She just didn't look how I wanted her to look.

So I got a cloth and filled it with this light-colored paint, and I wiped it all over the whole face. When I did that—suddenly she was there. I said, "Oh, hello—there you are!" She was so present that for all the rest of the painting process I was pussyfooting around, as I wanted to be very respectful. She was already there. I wove feathers into that canvas. It's all an act of love with this being, who was already as present as any flesh-and-blood person to me.

REBECCA: During your creative process, do you ever listen to music? If so, can you recommend some of your favorite musicians?

PENNY: These days my musical tastes are pretty eclectic. My partner Dhiren plays music all day, as it is one of his passions. Lana Del Rey is currently on rotation. I love her.

In the past I remember I did listen to specific works. Back in the days when I was a student, for example, I did a couple of paintings totally to a Bach organ fugue. The whole mood of this dark organ music became embedded in the painting. I do like music when I'm painting. I haven't been doing a lot of painting lately, but if I'm painting, I do like to have music that creates a space that is resonant with the type of vibration that I'm working with. It's like when monks chant mantras all the time when they are doing the thangka paintings; it's that chanting and that energy that go into every stroke.

So it is good to have the right kind of vibrational field around you, although I can work in all kinds of different environments. I enjoy the variety of interfaces that you get when painting. But if I'm creating my own world, then yes, I'll have either the quiet, and just hear the symphony of nature that is all around, or some kind of music. What kind of music? I like a lot of different ethnic, sacred, classical, and contemporary music—it's such a wide range actually. I enjoy reggae.

Specific pieces of music just hold special energies for me, and these can come from many different genres of music. I generally gravitate toward female singers. I appreciate, for example, the clarity of the intelligent intuition of an artiste like Loreena McKennitt. I have also channeled spoken word and worked with my partner on a number of musical compositions myself.



ANACAONA (1988), 29.5" x 25.5", acrylic, gold leaf, and feathers on canvas.

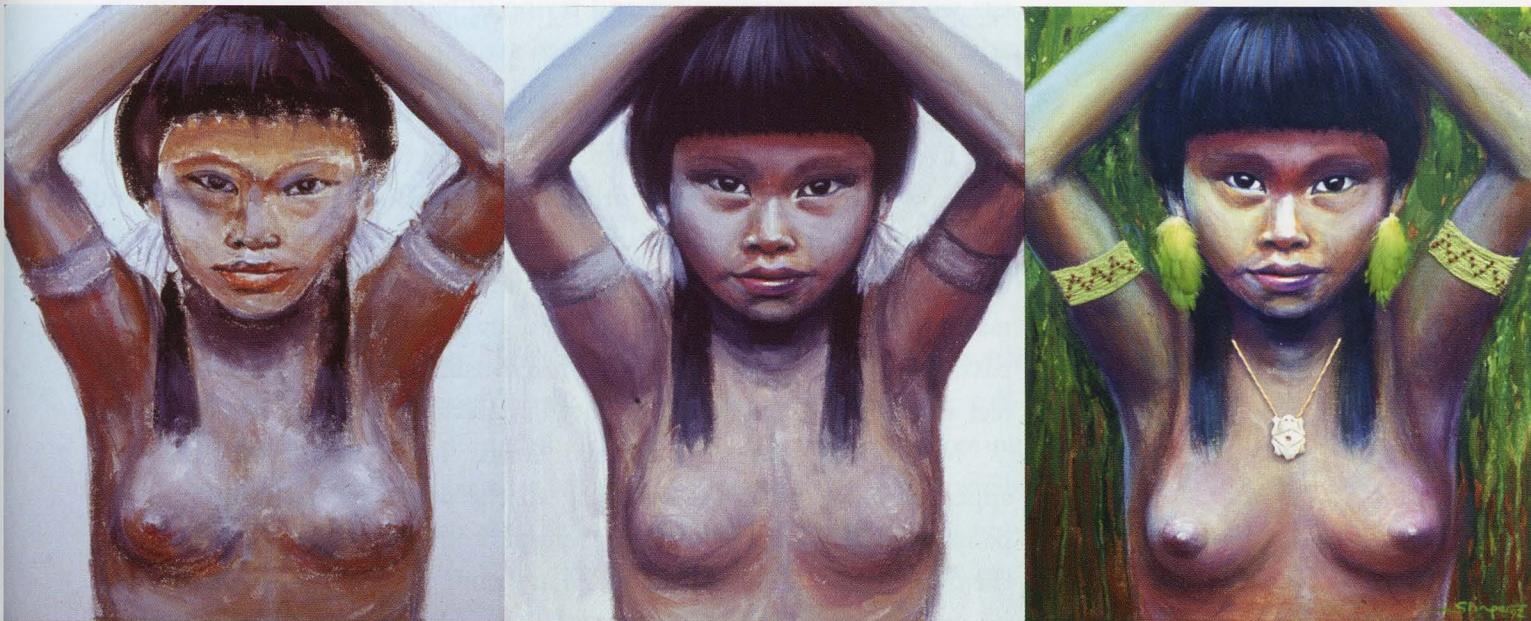
REBECCA: Your artwork is so beautiful, and I'm most curious about how you achieve the unique—sometimes three-dimensional—effects that you do. How would you describe the type of artwork that you create, and can you share some of your artistic secrets, like what specific types of paints, mediums, canvases, and other tools you use when you work?

PENNY: Unless it's a special kind of instance, where I'm literally channeling something onto the canvas, which I do occasionally, generally I make paintings rather like I make collages. I've got the vision in my mind, and then I get the elements that I'm going to put together, and I draw it out, first in my mind, then on the board or canvas. Once I've got it all there, then I'll start using the rough qualities of the tones—the light and the dark of it—as a first pass.

I use some of the techniques from the old masters, with glazing sometimes, and I like that. What I'm doing is not the same as what they are doing with the Vienna school, which is a bit complicated. I found this out when I had an artist friend staying here who did that. It takes a very long time, and as I say, I'm a little impatient really. But I will use the oil painting techniques where I feel they are necessary.

I put in the tonal values, and then I'll add the colors in transparent glazes over it. I put my warm tones and cool tones in transparent layers, so then it really replicates authentic skin tones. For the light and dark of, say, an arm, instead of just mixing a pink of what you think is about the right color, I put these transparent layers over the basic tonal modeling in tints of red, yellow, blue. Then it gives it that luminosity, because we're not just flat colors; we're much more translucent and reflective.

FROG GIRL (1992),
16" x 13", acrylic and
mixed media on canvas
(stages in painting).



I love painting humans, especially women. I mean, *this* body is a good interface. We are in this form, and I am specifically in a woman's form, so I find it's a very authentic interface with everything else. This is something that I put into my artwork, and I enjoy the other elements interacting with it.

REBECCA: Is this a transparent paint that you use?

PENNY: It is a transparent medium I use over opaque tones. I first did that with oil paints, because that's the traditional way, but I found that the oil paints had limitations—especially when I was working in the Caribbean. Being in a hot tropical environment, without a lot of circulating air, I was getting horrible headaches and other health problems by the end of the day from the intense exposure to what's in the oil paint, medium, and solvents.

Then I thought, okay, I'm going to try to change to acrylics. I had been somewhat biased about acrylics, thinking that they were a bit plastic and synthetic. But I learned and trained myself how to use the acrylics in the way I use the oil paints, with a retarder, which I needed for the heat. Otherwise, I'd mix my paint, and by the time I was putting it on the canvas it had already dried on the palette or the brush!

So it was a matter of balancing the retarder medium with a flow-control medium, which at that time I had gotten from Switzerland. Someone told me about it, and that flow medium allowed me to have fluid control. So, that's one little bit of a tip. On each of these subjects, obviously, I could talk a long time about lots of different aspects of the process.

DAVID: It sounds like you have a wealth of artistic knowledge that many artists would love to tap in to. What advice would you give to young artists who are just starting out and trying to build a career with their creativity, and especially to young women artists?

PENNY: Oh, my goodness, this career-building thing is such a mystery to me. I've been through so many hoops with my career. At times I wanted to throw it all away, and then other times I tried to regather it again and looked, in the classical sense, at what a career is. For me, what designates it as a career is the fact that I am definitely a professional artist, as that really is the only profession that I've followed all my life and been totally passionate about. That's been what has consumed my energy. It makes me feel whole, and [like I'm] doing what I'm meant to be doing on this planet.

My art can take many different forms. I can be designing the total appearance of a dakini—collecting all the props and costuming, body-painting the model, then filming and photographing them and collaging the final art piece, using digital media. I can be making life casts and constructing whole installations around them. I can be drawing or painting, printmaking or designing. With all these activities, as long as I'm actively

involved in something that has a creative manifestation to do with it, I am happy. So my basic advice is, do what you love as much as you can.

But, as I said, how to actually have a career is a bit of a mystery to me. When I was younger and at art school I was very fortunate to meet Sir Roland Penrose, who became my patron. As soon as I graduated, Penrose got me into an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. This exhibition, called *Young and Fantastic*, was about Surrealism. I was a feminist Surrealist, I guess you could say.

I was super-fortunate to get into a big exhibition like that coming straight out of art school. Then, with Sir Roland's support, which was such a wonderful boost, I had a one-woman exhibition a year after that at the Flowers Gallery in London. This was excellent, although with the next exhibition I had a couple of years later the artwork didn't sell as well.

For me, however, that second solo exhibit was probably my most focused feminist exhibition. It was called *Opening*, and the subtitle in the catalog was "I'm hungry. I'm not getting enough nourishment. All I get is food to fill my belly. What about everything else?" It was a whole study about food and eroticism, and that's when I created myself as a wedding cake. I made all these tabletops, with life casts and different kind of nourishment and other relevant items collaged with them. There were a lot of mouths and different things montaged with them—things you wouldn't normally associate with them. I made a Mouthpieces series with life casts as well as the photographic collages.

I didn't sell many pieces from that exhibit. At its conclusion I wanted to burn everything. This wasn't because I didn't sell, but as a protest because I couldn't do the exhibition in the way that I wanted to do it—with an opening where everyone was asked to come as brides and/or grooms and participate in an erotic banquet, which I was going to film. But, at the last minute, the gallery owner decided that it was too challenging, and she was concerned that her neighbors in the London Mews wouldn't like it.

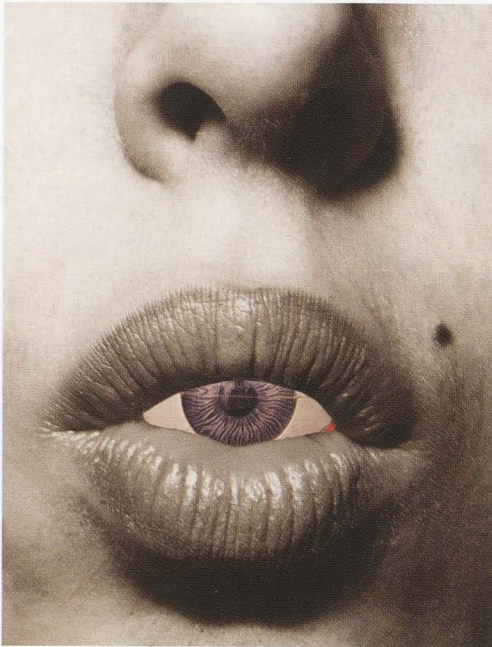
I felt so let down and deflated. I felt that art wasn't meant to be something that is just stared at on the walls. I wanted it to be experiential, an interactive experience that people would have coming to the exhibition. Then the art would be totems of that experience, rather than just isolated, sterile art objects.

So, at that point, I really didn't want to have much more to do with the traditional art world because I thought it wasn't serving my true calling as an artist and what I wanted to do. I think this is where I'm coming from—that at the core of it is that whatever happens in the world, whatever success or otherwise you get, the main thing is to stay as true as possible to your own downloads, your own inspiration, your own vision, and do that no matter what.

Because artwork that challenges people and is not acceptable during a



PROMISED A BED OF ROSES
(1973), 16" x 12", black-and-white
and color photo collage.



I SPEAK WHAT I SEE (1973),
10" x 7.75", photo collage from the
Mouthpieces series. Courtesy of
Riflemaker, London.

certain time period may be just that work that becomes landmark pieces in history later on down the line. So you can never create to please anyone else. That doesn't mean that you do not want to please and share. You totally want to share, because, as an artist, you're not just at home masturbating—you want other people to see your creative work, and if you are inspired, I believe that's a gift. If you have that gift it is meant to be passed on. Naturally, if it is given, you do want it to be received, but you can't count on the nature of the response.

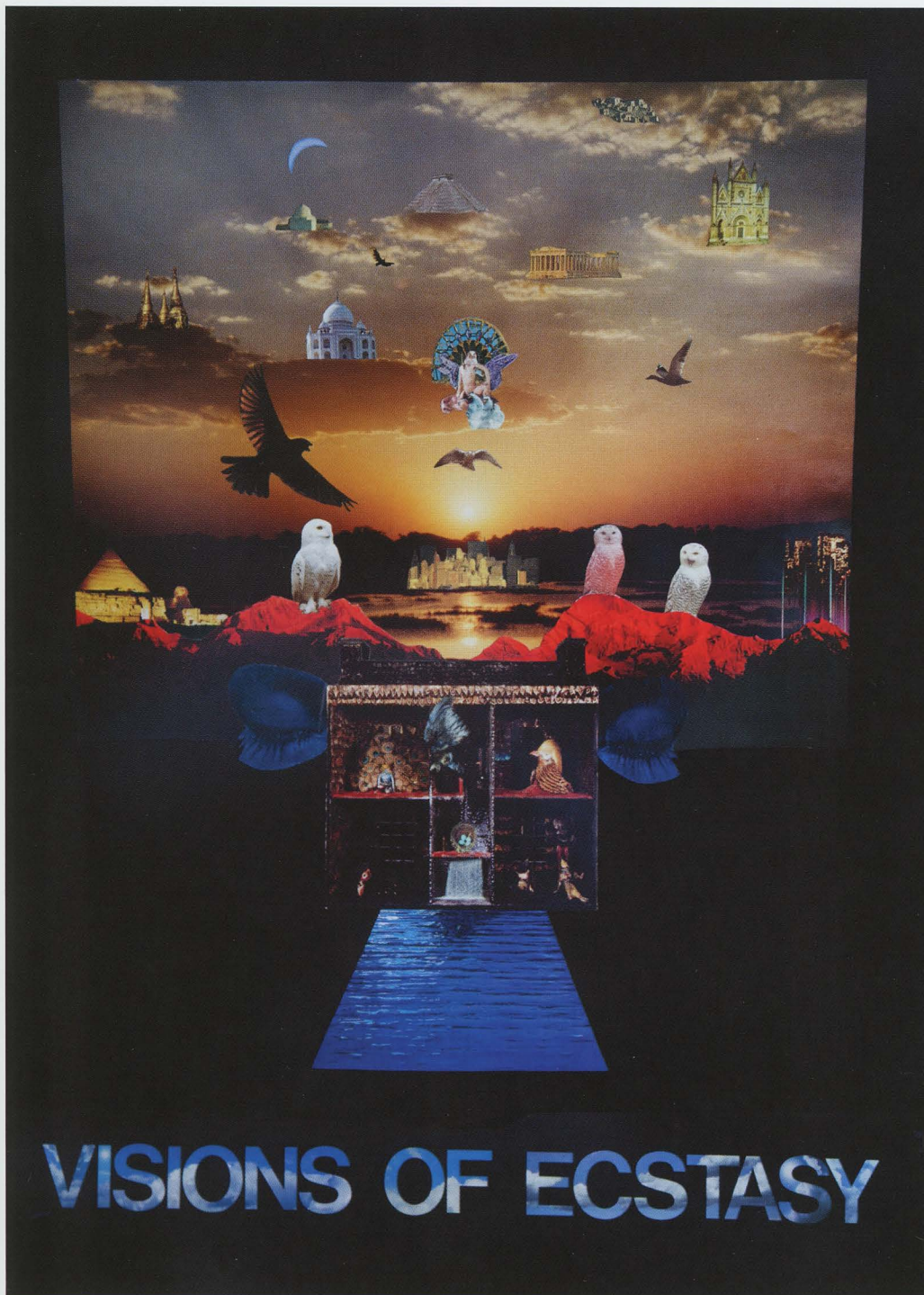
I think that, in the same way, the whole social media experience is killing self-observation in people because now everyone is so addicted to other people's "likes" of what they post online. Even in the world of selfies, which are so popular today, there is potentially the greatest kind of creative art. I used selfies way back in the day, before there were selfie functions on everyone's phones. But it was for self-reflection, not to get a Facebook like. Sure, you like the likes, but you can't do the art to get the likes. In fact, you can do the art and get an absolutely opposite reaction to what you may be expecting. But that can be part of it too. Some of the most innovative art over time has been at exhibitions that people wanted shut down because they were so disgusted and challenged by what was presented at the time.

Now, that doesn't really mean the art was disgusting as such; it just meant that it shook up the status quo. In the world of art, things have been done for their shock value. For instance, when the Dadaists came along, Marcel Duchamp put a urinal up and signed it "R. Mutt"—which was his alter ego—and put it on exhibition as artwork. At that time it hadn't been done before and yet it looked like an art piece. These gestures have been made to shake up the preconceptions of what constitutes art and the value system that the art market runs on.

So how to build a career? I thought that I could build a career on my own, without needing the art world. Having been through that experience with my second solo exhibition in 1974, I felt discouraged. Then in 1977 I did another exhibition in a gallery that was owned by the brother of a woman fashion designer, Thea Porter, who I liked very much, and worked with, so I thought I would give it another go. But it was actually disastrous, as the gallery owner turned out to be a complete male chauvinist, and the whole thing went down badly. Not quite in flames, but the equivalent of that!

Anyway, be that as it may, I was really over it with the art world. Then I came to New York, did an exhibition there in 1982, at the Visionary Gallery,* which was kind of a mini retrospective. But again, it didn't get the reception I had envisioned and had been looking forward to from—

*The Visionary gallery is no longer in business. To see the artwork please go to my website www.pennyslinger.com/works/press. In the archival press check cuttings 82 through 86 to see pieces that verify that Visionary Gallery existed and that I exhibited there in 1982.



VISIONS OF ECSTASY
(1982), 24" x 32",
photo collage.

what I thought was—the sophisticated art audience in New York.

The main thing that I recall from that show was that there were these three powerful, rich men who were all in a position to buy the whole exhibit. They all said they wanted to buy pieces, but none of them ended up buying anything, because I wouldn't go along with the sale! If I wasn't sexually available, all deals were off. I was just disgusted with it all. So I went off to the Caribbean and made a mini career for myself there.

I established my own gallery after a while, and I did the Arawak series, completely outside the mainstream art world. I was very successful as a big

fish in a small bowl. Then I came here to California and created my own website and promotions. I did all this thinking that I was going to be able to create my own career, my own art history, everything, without reference into the art world, art dealers, and the gallery scene—which I found to be pretty fake and artificial. So I did that for several years and discovered it wasn't really working at the level I wanted.

Then the opportunity came to go back into the art world, first by having my work included in an exhibition called *Angels of Anarchy* (the name itself was a fine enticement!), which was the first women Surrealist artists show in the United Kingdom. I was a part of that exhibition, and another show at the Tate Gallery (*The Dark Monarch*) at the same time, which got me back on the map. Then three galleries picked me up and have been showing my work. They all focused on my early work and brought some attention to it again.

So, the long and the short of it is that now, thirty years on or so, I got my work exhibited in the galleries again, and that's building in momentum, in waves. But all I have worked on since that early period, even my post-Tantra work, hasn't been presented in the fine arts world, although my L.A. gallery did show some of the tantric work. But everything I have done since then—none of that's been shown, as of yet. So if you're ahead of the curve, it can be hard to make a living out of it, but you should not let that deter you.

I can say that I'm an example of someone who has lived their life creating art; no matter the challenges, I've always done that. So my life is an example that it is possible. But I don't know what the next phase will be. I'd like to be in a stronger position, which I would have been in if I had stayed in the art world. I see contemporary artists, women artists of my time, and their work is in a different price range than mine because they stayed in the game, so to speak. But it's not over yet, and we'll see how it all goes.

You see, this is the problem that comes with not wanting to be put in boxes! But I wouldn't recommend any artist to be in a box. One last thing I'll say is that I did know a whole lot of successful artists when I was in London, and when I talked to them, they confided that they felt trapped. I wasn't just talking with one of them but a number of them who felt trapped, because their work was selling, but then galleries wanted them to do more of the same, which is anathema to creativity and novelty.

REBECCA: On your website there is an album of your paintings called the Divine Feminine, and you've painted images of the Hindu goddess Kali numerous times. How did you first encounter Kali, and can you explain who she is to you? How has her power affected your life, and what do you think we can learn from her presence?



PENNY EYES (1980), 12" x 15", pastel on paper.

PENNY: Ah, this is a deep subject! When I was in London in the early 1970s there was an exhibition of tantric art at the Hayward Gallery, and it was the first big exhibition of tantric art in the United Kingdom, so I went to see it. It was a big turning point in my life in terms of art and spiritual direction, because I immediately felt at home. I felt that this is it; I recognized it all; I felt it belonged to me, and I belonged to it. One thing I remember saying was that I understood abstract art for the first time. There were a lot of abstract artists, and I knew a number of them, but they never really seemed to have a good explanation for the questions I would ask, like “What is this square? What does it signify for you?” Here there were just five simple downward pointing triangles, one inside another, with a *bindu**—a dot in the middle—and just called *To Her*. It was Kali’s yantra. So I looked at it and I got it. It was as if all of Her was distilled and condensed into that symbol. It was abstraction as essence.

Then I had a vision, not of Kali specifically but of many goddesses, when I took mescaline at around the age of twenty-two or twenty-three. I was on my own, and I was looking at my reflection in the mirror. My third eye appeared, along with this whole light show, like a cartoon almost, with all these different gods and goddesses whom I wasn’t familiar with in this lifetime. They just started dancing and playing in my third eye. So that was the first time I had a direct “visitation.”

Then when I got to know Nik Douglas, who was a great resource for the spiritual and artistic side of Tantra, I went into all of this in depth, and Kali became the ultimate Shakti to me.† Nik identified with Shiva, and Shiva had two wives, Parvati and Kali, like the full moon and the dark of the moon. Parvati is the loyal wife, pale, luminous, and lovely. In fact, Nik’s guru—his teacher—in India called me Paro, a diminutive of Parvati.

But I saw Kali as the ultimate Shakti, who stretches across great spans of time. As incarnate beings we are living within time. So She’s like the mistress of the whole bubble, and She’s the transcending part too—She’s the one who passes you through, from one dimension to another. When I looked at all of the divine beings, all the goddesses, I loved them all. Kali resonated, for She is ultimately so powerful—all resolves into Her, and dies, and is born. And what a grand compassion She must have to be able to absorb all death, as well as all life; She holds it all.

So I loved her, and then when I was experiencing this very intense breakup with Nik, I had a powerful experience with Her. One night I was going through a real “dark night of the soul,” and one of my deepest issues at the time was that Nik had been my teacher and initiated me into many mysteries. If I’m separating from him, how can I stay connected to this

*This is a Sanskrit term, meaning “point” or “dot.”

†*Shakti* is a Hindu word meaning the “female principle” of “divine energy.”



tantric world that I called in and learned to love so deeply? So that night, I was asking, "Who am I? Why am I? What's happening?" Then the goddess appeared to me in the form of Kali. She came to me, and that was my direct connection. Having that direct connection removed all fear, because She is a great remover of fear.

Being bathed in Her grace, I basically said, "I don't want to live except in service of you." I gave myself to Her, and that is how it has been since then. Not long after this I did several paintings of Kali for *Tantra*

STANDING KALI (1994),
24" x 30", acrylic on
mahogany panel.



DON'T LOOK AT ME IN THAT TONE OF VOICE (1969), 8" x 10", photo collage from *50% the Visible Woman*.

Tantric Secrets, Feminist Surrealism, Sixty-Four Dakinis, and the Goddess

magazine, because they were doing an edition on Kali, and I said, "Oh, great, an excuse to do some Kali paintings." When I was painting Kali, it was one of those moments when I felt Her come into the painting early on, and then all the rest of the detail that had to be done came with much reverence.

What can we learn from Her presence? We can definitely learn to become fearless and understand "time beyond time"—that understanding

that we are not time-limited beings, and eventually we must be immersed in infinite timeless time, which is the Great Time that Kali represents. I think that's a wonderful knowing, and that once we own that, once we know that in our hearts and souls, then we have the strength of a lion to go through whatever trials and tribulations this earth plane may offer.

DAVID: How do you think that being a woman has influenced the type of artwork that you create, or has it?

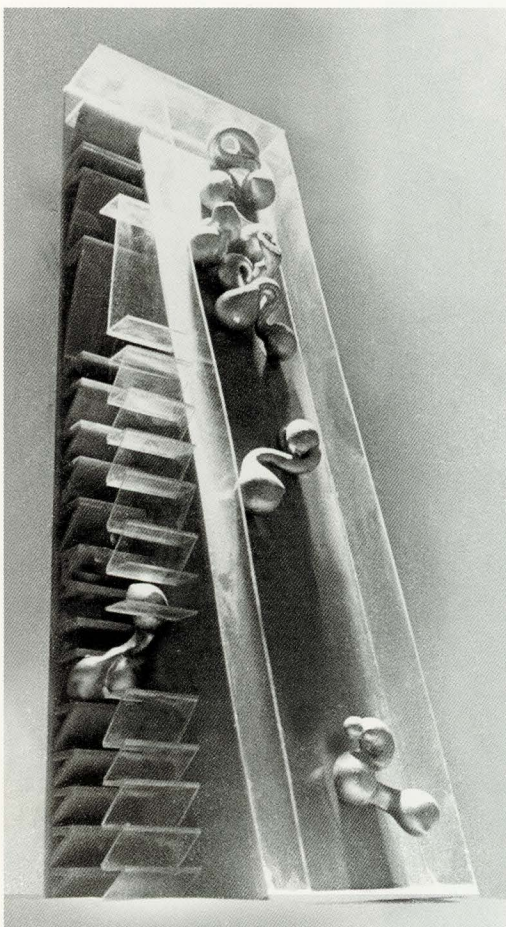
PENNY: Oh yes, it has! When I was a young artist growing up, I used to sign my work "Slinger," so that people wouldn't know the artist was a woman. My whole approach at that time was that I didn't want to be judged on the level of being a woman—because all the successful artists I could see around me were men, so I didn't really want to be seen as a woman artist.

I wanted to be able to be one of the boys, and match up and compete on their level, and so that's why I signed my art that way to begin with. But as I got into my stride, and I did early on, while I was still at art school, I found that I wanted to explore and express art that was experienced through the lens of being a woman. As I was saying earlier, *this* is my interface—my woman's body—and I wanted to bring that into the picture. Also, it was because I saw that in the history of art, the woman's form has been a muse for so many artworks. So I took this stance early on and it's been consistent through my practice.

I want to be my own muse, not someone else's muse, and then that way I'd be standing in two places at once: the observer and the observed. So I used myself. I also found that I wanted to do radical things with the image of self, the body and the being, and what beauty is, and all these different archetypes and clichés, and I could be a lot more ruthless with my own image than I could be with someone else's; so I used myself often.

Then as I expanded out, my general rule has been mostly femino-centric, although I have also painted male Amerindians, and Peter was an animus figure in *An Exorcism*. But generally, the female form and being, as I say, that vessel, that magnetic attraction of the feminine, has been an important focus for me.

Also, a lot of my work has been cultivated to liberate the feminine energy. We are in a bit of a different curve now from where we were when I was growing up. When I was growing up, the feminine really didn't have much of a voice. . . . In England at that time, women really didn't think sex was fun. It was something you did for the man, a sacrifice. Everything was on that kind of level. So therefore I thought it was really important to try and claim all of that energy back. So yes, the psychology of women, not just the appearance of women, has been a predominant theme for me all the way through.



DREAM TOWER (1965–1966),
9" x 18" x 7", Plexiglas and
cast resin forms.

REBECCA: Have dreams affected your creative work? Have you ever had any lucid dreams, and if so, have these experiences had any effect on your artwork or your life in general?

PENNY: Oh yes, definitely. When I was at art school, I made a piece called *Dream Tower*. It was inspired by a dream, and I constructed it out of Plexiglas. Then I made these cascading organic forms from balloons with plaster poured into them and then cast in resin, coming down this rigid tower shape. In the dream that I had, I went up this tower, ascending vertical steps, and I fell down this very steep slope on the other side.

There was nowhere to go except down this slope, but my fall was broken—a kind of interesting symbolism—by the fact that there were all these other women cascading down. Everyone was naked, and we were all falling down this slope. I made that dream into a solid sculptural piece.

Over the years I've experienced different phases. In some, dreams will be more important than in others. Within the whole dream world, there are different qualities of dreams. I certainly know that a lot of dreams are just the rehashing of daily events, other ways of doing things, anxiety and fears, or any of this kind of processing. But then you get those other dreams that have an archetypal vibration to them, and they can feel prophetic. They can feel lucid. They can feel like you're entering another world. Sometimes, in the early hours when I would remember a certain dream, it might then open up a door to remembering a whole series of dreams that have had a similar atmosphere, ones that share a dream landscape.

So there are themes that we weave through our whole life in this dream world, and sometimes they come to the surface, and sometimes not. But you know they're going on there all the time, and my love for Surrealism was because it was bringing subconscious activity into the conscious realms. So that's like thinning the veils, and I believe that with the use of certain types of mind-expanding things, like smoking marijuana, for instance, you can access that kind of reality in a conscious waking state, more so than you would do otherwise—so it's more of an integrated subconscious/conscious place that you live out of and refer to.

DAVID: How have your psychedelic experiences influenced your creative work and spiritual perspective?

PENNY: They definitely have. Not from the point of view of promoting the use of psychedelics, because I do see a lot of people who use them and don't necessarily work with them to get the kind of openings that I believe are their purpose. I see them as tools to help with re-creation, although I'm not knocking recreational use either. You know, fun is fun, and we all need fun, and we should have that when we can, and a lot of drugs are fun.

But with the true psychedelic nuggets, I believe that's where you really grow. It would be hard to think of being that close to someone who hadn't

expanded his or her mind in that way at some time in their life, because it does change your perspective on what this reality plane is. The first time for me was a very notable first experience with psychedelics, because it was when I was performing in this film *The Other Side of the Underneath* with this all-woman theater group where Jane Arden—the woman leading and directing—wanted everyone to take psychedelics on film. So that was when I took psychedelics for the first time in my life.

I took a tab of Orange Sunshine. I didn't take it, as the other women in the group did, in what they called the "group therapy sessions," because everyone was really freaking out in there and I didn't like that context. I did it on my own, with just Jane, the cameraman, and the soundman. It was my first experience, and she wanted me to go into it on the theme of oppression.

Well, none of my footage from this particular shoot was used in the final cut of the film, because my experience had nothing to do with oppression; it was more to do with liberation. I do remember just sitting there and saying, "Ah, I'm alright! I'm okay! I'm actually very alright!" This stood apart from the rest of the filmmaking experience, which delved deeply into the psychology, the traumas, and everything that we were exploring with the theater group and putting into the film.

DAVID: How old were you at the time?

PENNY: About twenty-four. I mean, it's not like today: acid wasn't really available; it only just beginning to come out. There had been a period when Sandoz* had been giving LSD to artists to experiment with before it was illegal. . . .

I just had this amazing feeling of being so connected, and it was, I would say, like a tuning fork, a touchstone, a stake in the ground of what is reality and what is life. I can remember coming back after that experience and walking the streets of London. I walked for a whole day and night it seemed, just feeling that this was more real than any so-called reality I'd experienced up to this point. "How do I integrate this with the rest of my experience?" I wondered.

That's been very much a part of my whole quest: how to integrate that way of seeing once the veils have been lifted. You can lift a little of that veil with art, [which can be seen as an offering] that you put out there to try to open into those realms. For me, that's a big part of life. Now you don't have to keep on doing that all the time. I have such a backlog, from the experiences and downloads that I've been given, and I'm so behind in manifesting all of it. . . . I'm just saturated at this point.

That which is natural, of course, harmonizes with the body, and I believe that the medicine of the natural herbs and vines is a gift given from nature. Their job is to help us connect to the hologram. That's what

*Sandoz is now Novartis, a Swiss Pharmaceutical company.



CELESTIAL TABERNACLE
(1970–1977), photo collage
from *An Exorcism* series.

Courtesy of the Penrose Collection.

they're here for, and so we shouldn't really be separated from them if we want to be connected—and to feel that connection.

I want to say one more thing here about this, because it's also about how these medicines are used. A lot of tribal cultures used some type of plant medicine in order to connect with Spirit and get guidance on how to live their lives. They often had group experiences around that. So for me, it's not about the substance itself, although I do think everyone needs to crack open their consciousness at times so they can see beyond the limitations of what we think is normal.

But then after that, it's how you work with these things. If you take the approach that it was just because you were high, then it doesn't have any real application or deep significance, and none of this mind expansion has any transformative potential and it's just another light show. But for me it's what's within that entices me; it's peeling back psychic layers. So I have never been interested in just representing the psychedelic landscape, but in the meaning behind it, the intrinsic connection with the divine that's available through that portal, that opening.

DAVID: Do you ever feel like you're receiving invisible guidance with your creative work, or that invisible entities or forces are playing a role in your creative process?

PENNY: Oh yes, and without that, where would we be? What I see in my mind's eye, and all that I receive, just feels divinely gifted all the time. It's such a rich landscape of other worlds and other realities, and so I wonder, where are the limits of self? What is self? Is it little self—this little body here? Or is the little self connected to a much vaster Self? And then, in that vaster Self, all information is there, in that immortal being that we are part of. It's like saying the Goddess is so vast, and yet if we understand that we are a part of Her, then we have that ability to be the whole as well as the part. It's like a drop of water in the ocean.

I've had different direct experiences too. I remember one time when I was working on one of the historical murals in Anguilla, in the Caribbean. When I was painting it, I suddenly started hearing this voice in my head, literally talking to me about it. It had a Southern accent and he identified himself. I can't remember the name now, but at the time I remember looking him up and finding out that he was a historical figure. He was an American painter who specialized in painting Amerindians. So I was painting this historical piece on the Amerindians, and this gentleman with a Southern drawl was there talking to me all the way through that painting, and giving me advice about it. So that was a very specific and unusual example.

REBECCA: How interesting. Speaking of disincarnated spirits, I'm fascinated with what seem to be past-life memories, and I suspect that the use of psychedelic substances can unlock these memories. What are your thoughts on this, and have you ever had any memories from what seemed to be past lives? If so, can you share with us a particular past-life memory that you've had, and whether this affected the type of artwork that you've created or the message you want to send out into the world?

PENNY: Yes, again, this is one of those big subjects. I do believe in reincarnation, in the sense that I think that if everybody could hold the idea of karma and reincarnation as being real, then they'd start to act a lot better. (*Laughter.*) Because just taking the notion of karma—that what you do comes back to you—you realize that it's necessary to be a kind and good person for self-preservation. You're going to act better, bottom line.

Then with reincarnation, I don't have a completely fixed approach on this, in the sense that I do think, entertain, and hold reincarnation as being very credible. It may well be so, but I also know that when you get these past-life experiences, many seem to be packed into the same places, whether it be India, China, Egypt, or the Druid times of Avalon. I feel like I have experiences in all these places.



Penny painting
*GOLDEN AGE OF
 ARAWAKS* at her
 home in Anguilla.
 Photograph by Nik
 Douglas, 1988.

Is this because I was actually this “Penny” born there in another time, in a different body? Or is it that this part of the Goddess that I am allows me to be able to tap in to Her collective being, which holds all the vibrations of all these other lives? So this is one of the great mysteries. What’s a mystery to me is that the veil is so thick in a sense, and we can’t just reach through to the other side, to those who have gone. We do have contact with them, but it’s not nearly as strong a connection as you would think it could be, right? That is, if you really believe that consciousness outlives the physical, and I do believe that.

But we’re not getting more direct hits and that’s the mystery. This is where I think that, when mankind is trying to solve the mystery of everything, we become silly—because mystery is beyond what we can grasp, and that’s what makes it able to contain everything. So it’s a good idea to aspire, to try to solve certain things and get some information, of course, for we’ve got to be curious, creative, and inventive. But to think that we can find the answer and simply sign it all off is pure arrogance and folly. It brings to mind what Christopher [Hills]* used to say: “When you go toward Brahma, you can think you’re big, but Brahma is always bigger.”

DAVID: Exactly, the mystery always recedes. The sacred and the erotic

*Christopher Hills (1926–1997) was Penny’s husband. Hills was a visionary microbiologist, prolific author, interdisciplinary philosopher, nutrition and consciousness pioneer, entrepreneur, inventor, and founder of an alternative school and press.



have been a theme in your work. What sort of relationship do you see between sexuality and spirituality?

GOLDEN AGE OF ARAWAKS
(1988), 96" x 48", acrylic on mahogany panel.

PENNY: Again, to go back to my time in England when I was growing up and really not just England but all over the West, there didn't seem to be any connection between the sacred and the erotic. In fact, I went to this convent school for a while because I wanted to be in an atmosphere that was sacred, and I had all these aspirations for being very saintly. But then I couldn't deal with it, because there was this whole split between the spirit and the flesh, and then the shame and blame. I was a young woman, I think I was about ten, so I was just beginning to come into my awakening sexuality.

The fact that there is an ism and schism between the sacred and the erotic—the physical, the so-called profane—never sat well at all for me. So when I discovered Tantra, it was like, “Ah, at last, I knew it all the time!” Then I started to share experiences with Nik (Douglas) that I'd had in the erotic arena, things that were very mystical, things that I hadn't been able to really talk to anyone else about.

I would talk about my experiences and he would say, “Oh yes, that's this specific aspect of Tantra. It's this, this, this, and this,” and it was a revelation for me. I felt, “Yes! I have a lineage and it's all okay.” For me, those experiences were why I wanted to share this knowledge with the world, and that's why we did [the book] *Sexual Secrets*.

Initially, Nik had said, “Oh, these are esoteric secrets; they're only for the initiated. We can't put them out there.”



YAB YUM (1978), 7" x 9", drawing on paper. From *Sexual Secrets*, courtesy of Blum & Poe.

I said, "No, no, no! Look, it helped me so much! It's made me feel like I belong." In a way, I had felt so cut off and alienated. I wanted to share this amazing connection, and I thought that it was just so important for people to know. So *Sexual Secrets* came out of that negotiation, and it was the first book really to bring Taoism and Tantra to a modern Western audience, in a way where they could assimilate it, rather than having to try to grasp it from some difficult, esoteric kind of book.

So that is how much my foot is on this particular platform, and this, to me, is the essence of what the whole way of the Goddess, the divine feminine, is about. It's an embodied spirituality. It's a spirituality that doesn't cut itself off into the ethers. It's about everything being sacred. This kind of embedded sacredness, and this embedded eroticism, is the song of creation, the song of nature. It is everything that you see beneath the veils. *Everything is making love to everything else all of the time.* The gods and goddesses are making love, because they are in bliss, and there is all this amazing bliss running through all that is.

If we can just get in tune, in resonance, with it, then that's *magic*. It makes everything work. So once we start to see the sacredness in our own bodies, please, let's also see the sacredness in all the other bodies—the body of the planet and the bodies of all the beings that we live with—so that we can start to honor them as part of ourselves, as a part of our divine being.

DAVID: In some of your collages you've juxtaposed erotic images with the macabre. Do you see a relationship between sex and death?

PENNY: People often talk of sex being like a little death, but seeing as I don't remember my last death at this point, I can't really say for sure. It is said that the initiation your mother gives you through her yoni is one that confers forgetfulness of your past deaths, and this opens the world for you for your new incarnation. So I don't know if the experience is exactly similar. Other people have said that psychedelics are again like a little death. Shamans practice dying while alive to enable them to traverse dimensions. Sex and drugs have some connection to death, in the sense that they can create a portal into worlds that are full of energy and magic, the intangible and the unknown. The biggest taboos in our society are around these things because people tend to fear the unknown.

DAVID: What sort of connection do you see between sexual energy and creative energy?

PENNY: Again, they're not really separate either. It's just what you're doing with the energy at the time. With the sexual aspect you're not necessarily using that energy to manifest something you can see (unless it's a baby), whereas with the application of creative energy you're bringing form into



manifestation. But I've always thought that the play of Shiva and Shakti is the great symbol for creative energy, because you have to be both active and passive. You have to surrender to receive, because you can't give what you haven't received. Then you need that energy of manifestation to put it out there. We've got this incredible wealth of different energies within our own bodies and minds, but if you don't separate them, then you see it's all one energy, just different notes from the same instrument.

REBECCA: Ecological awareness is important to you. What advice would you like to share about this that you think is important for the world to hear?

PENNY: Christopher [Hills] said, "The Goddess needs to come and press the heart button, so that everybody wonders why they did things in that old energy-inefficient way before." And that's it—the heart just needs to wake up. We need the wisdom of the heart, the wisdom of that experience. Once we open up our hearts again, then we'll be able to know that they are so big that we can hold everything in them—all of nature and all of these beautiful beings.

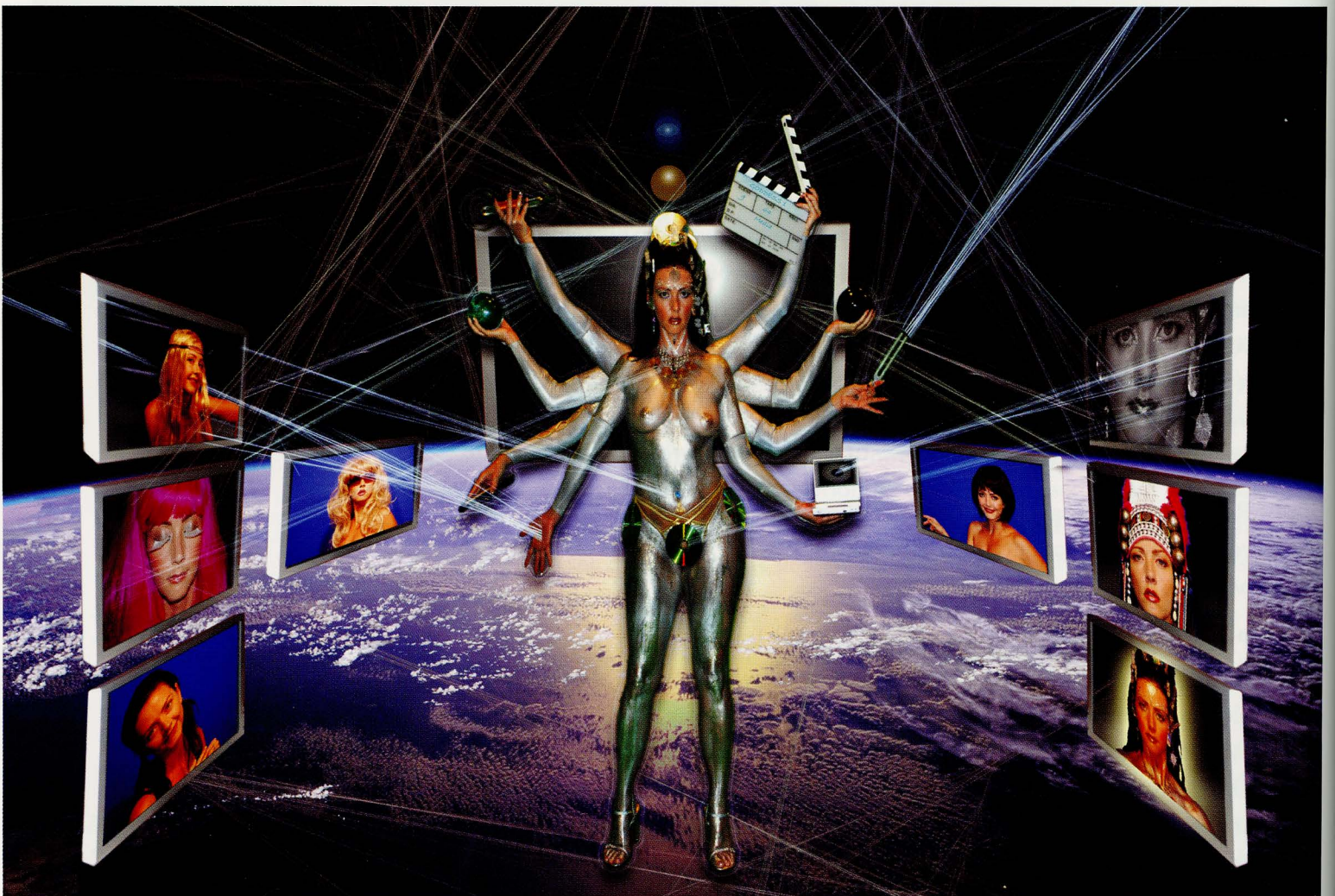
NURTURA (2010), 30" x 20",
digital photo collage from
Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle.

We are not going to put animals in the torture chambers of mass farming. We couldn't because our hearts would be broken. I don't know if you remember these experiences as a child, but I definitely do. When I was on a farm as a child, I saw this little cow being born. Then a couple of days later it was taken away from its mother, and I asked, "What's happening?" They said, "Oh, it's going to be meat," and I remember I was just devastated. It was like my whole world broke open.

We are trained to be hardened because, generally, children's hearts are open. They don't really want to see animals hurt, but we just have to harden and harden because we are told it's all right, that's how we're meant to be. But now we've got to soften. We all have to crack open, and that's why the divine feminine is here: to crack men's hearts open. She is awakening every man's heart, as much as every woman's, so that we can start to undo the crimes against nature that we've been perpetuating for many eons now. It's not sustainable because it's not how it's meant to be.

It's our own demise that we are creating by being so insensitive to all these other creatures that are blessings for us, and that have all kinds of sentient apparatus and means of communication, but we have atrophied

MEDIA (2010), 30" x 20",
digital photo collage.



that in ourselves, and we're not aware of that and how much we have lost.

But the animals are our teachers. Yogis go off into nature to study the animals and gain their wisdom. They have knowing. They can smell across to another field. They can feel the vibrations, and all of these things that we just need to tune back into. With our technology, what are we going to live with? Will we share a world with virtual animals? We won't have any real elephants left; they'll all be in virtual reality.

DAVID: You spoke a little bit about reincarnation earlier. What do you think happens to consciousness after physical death?

PENNY: Of course, no one actually knows. My brother used to say, "You're saying there is life after death? Anyone who says there is life after death is a liar, because they can't prove it!" (*Laughter.*) How can you say there's life after death? You don't know, do you? So there's the great mystery. I don't know. I do believe that the great spiritual traditions have had all kinds of ways of dealing with the interface between this world and the next world or worlds, like the forty-nine days of the *bardo* that the Tibetans map out. Whenever we hear of post-death experiences, it's usually during that time that you've just left your body. So we can know the interface. We know that we see the beautiful bright light and we go toward that. But we don't know too well what happens after that.

Maybe it's a multiple choice. I don't know if you ever have looked at things as a kind of reality grid and seen all of these connections, these nodes that connect things, with what actually happens being dependent on what choice you make that connects this with that dot. We've been given freedom of choice; that's the gift. Maybe it's a little unfortunate in some ways, with the choices that we've made, but there it is. We have to have freedom, as we can't have anything else. Those choices result in certain things happening and other cosmic connections occurring.

So there's all that going on, and it's probably the same on the other side of consciousness. One time I had a psychedelic experience where I saw this whole parallel world. I was with Christopher, and we saw a parallel reality that was not futuristic. It was there all the time; you just had to be able to perceive it to be in it. And that was this grid of consciousness, with hubs in it of collective consciousness where beings congregated and exchanged with other beings who were dropping in. But unlike being completely etheric, to check in and to be eligible to be in that hub, you did it with your whole being. It was a full-body chakra check-in, and it involved your whole authentic being, on all levels.

It was a very beautiful, nonhierarchical, crystal-clear kind of realm. In the center there was this "Grand Central of the Goddess," where She presided. She was in a kind of a media hub, able to project her consciousness onto all these screens in another reality. We don't know how much of

what we internally create is real. I know when the Tibetans are doing their practice, and they're looking at the "pure land," it becomes more and more real in the mind's eye.

So I believe that spiritual practitioners develop realms that they wish to go in and inhabit once they're out of the physical form. But how much like multiple choice is it? I do feel that everything means something, so that whatever we do, and however we develop our being—which is our immortal soul—it does then have an effect on what happens and what that journey is like. But the great mystery is shrouded in these clouds that we can't quite penetrate, although we get little glimpses.

REBECCA: What is your perspective on the concept of God, and what role does spirituality play in your creative process?

PENNY: Right, so I've got nothing against God as such. It's just that God had such a run, and now it's time to surrender His seat. What is simply is, in the end, beyond all gods and goddesses. It's the divine androgyne, we could call it, beyond all duality, which is formless. But I believe that there are blueprints, and that the gender differentiation that we receive does have a blueprint, which continues into the etheric as well.

I just now remembered that Nik used to say to me, "Promise me you'll never be a male being on the other side." (*Laughter.*) But my focus for a lot of my adult life has been the choices I've made on my spiritual path. I've discovered Tantra, and I've had a lot of focus on the Goddess, because it's Her time and I can't help it.

I remember, a while ago, taking a quiz where one of the questions was asking me to decide about what, of all the things in the world, would be the most important gift that I could offer or have. During this time I have been struggling on the material plane financially, which caused a lot of grief in recent times. Nevertheless, I quickly said, "Divine connection." For truly that is the best of gifts; if you've got that, all the rest is transitory.

DAVID: How do you envision the future of Visionary art?

PENNY: This whole Visionary art phenomenon is interesting because of this "box" thing. I thought, for a while, that I was really going to put myself fully in the Visionary art box. When I came here [to California] and I discovered the Visionary art community that was going on, I wanted to belong. . . . I didn't "belong" to the Surrealist movement because it happened before my time. By the time I came into Surrealism, and my brand of it, most of the main Surrealists were gone, so that school of interaction and the nice pool of sharing creativity and collaboration wasn't there anymore. So I felt a bit out in left field. Then I discovered Tantra, but it wasn't exactly like an art movement.

I felt passionately drawn to do my form of tantric art, and then I

found Visionary art. In 1982 I had a show at the Visionary Gallery in New York, and I described myself then as a “Visionary Surrealist.” I thought a Visionary artist was what I wanted to be, but now that’s developed into a whole field of art that has a certain look and feel to it. It’s very influenced, obviously, by psychedelic experiences, and that is embedded into a lot of Visionary art these days. I thought that I would immerse myself in that, and when I was here for the first few years, I was trying to connect with the Visionary art community. I did connect with a number of the Visionary artists, but I didn’t feel taken to that bosom. So I still remained doing my own thing.

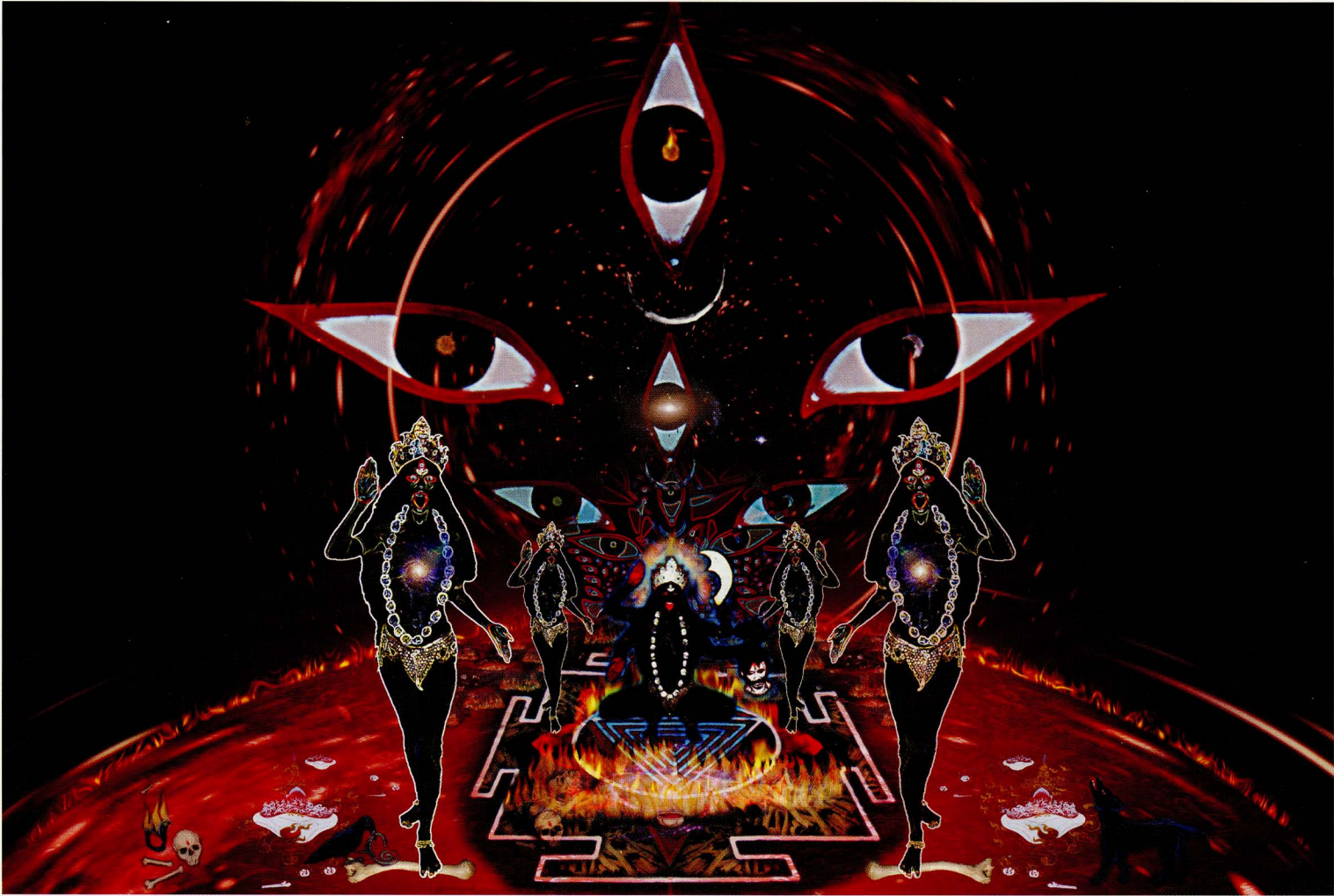
So I’ve got a foot in the Visionary art world, as well as a foot in the feminist world. I was never really a feminist either, but I had my own brand of that. I had my own brand of Surrealism, my own brand of feminism, and my own brand of Visionary art. And where will Visionary art go from here as a movement? I don’t know. I just don’t like doing anything that is more of the same. I want to do my own thing. So, seeing the look and feel in that whole Visionary art world, I felt that I’d go back to doing things a little more starkly and personally, and not so much in that genre.

Of course I know and appreciate Alex Grey. I think that artists like Andrew Jones are doing good work, like with his “dome experience,”* and all that he was cooking and cultivating when he was living here and moving into that. I thought that we could collaborate, but it didn’t happen. I tried. But I think that moving into the more immersive kind of experiences for Visionary art would be a future direction—that’s if I were just looking at it all and scoping it out, not seeing myself necessarily as part of it. Although, given the chance to do an immersive “dome experience,” I would. I nearly did in the past and probably will in the future. Also on my wish list long term is to create holographic collage.

I think virtual reality worlds will allow people to have that kind of simulated experience. One time I read a very beautiful Tibetan meditation all about the birth of the goddess Tara from Avalokiteshvara’s tears, and this was an exquisitely described meditation, extremely visual. Then I just thought, if that was all completely manifested in a virtual artwork, would that help people to become awakened and liberated?

So that was a thought: we could immerse people in these things to speed up evolution, as long as it’s not just “eye candy,” or all the trappings of a psychedelic world without the real meat and potatoes of the spiritual

*According to Merdedith Placko, “These domes are portable tents that allow you to have your own 360-degree projection experience. It’s like having Pink Floyd at the Planetarium in your own back yard. Except it’s a way more immersive experience.” Meredith Placko, “Step into the Beautiful and Terrifying Mind of Artist Andrew Jones,” *Geek.com*, June 17, 2016, www.geek.com/tech/step-into-the-beautiful-and-terrifying-mind-of-artist-andrew-jones-1658605 (accessed February 20, 2018).



KALI (2010), 30" x 20", digital photo collage from *Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle*.

connection. But I do believe that we can give people these types of connections through art, even if they haven't had those experiences in their life. I believe that one can strike those same resonances with the right kind of immersive visionary experience. I think that would have a lot of value myself, as those realms, those landscapes, I appreciate very much, even though, in my own art, I am going back to a little less psychedelic-looking, less Visionary art look and feel at the moment.

REBECCA: Earlier you discussed how Kali stretches across great spans of time, and I'm wondering if you could speak a little more about the nature of time. I listened to an audio recording of a meditation that you and your partner Dhiren created called *Timepiece*,* which I found extremely mesmerizing and really love. So, I'm interested to hear your perspective on time. What is time, and do you think it's real or just an illusion?

PENNY: Yes, and when you think about it, time is kind of relative, isn't it? We are in this time frame, but we all know that the experience of time can vary a lot depending on what you are doing. For instance, I can speak about an experience when the passage of time went by so remarkably

*See <http://pennyslenger.com/Works/timepiece>



ISIS UNVEILING (1976-1977), 26.5" x 31.5",
collage on board from Mountain Ecstasy series.



THROUGH THE GLASS (1970–1977),
18.5" x 12.75", photo collage on
card from *An Exorcism* series.
Courtesy of Blum & Poe.

slowly. This was one of the very rare times in my life when I worked a job. This is when I got out of art school, so I'm going right back to then.

I was in an office, and I had to sit there and answer the phone and do other things. It was in an interesting office; it was a distributor of alternative films, but I had to be there, and I couldn't do anything else, like read or write my own stuff. And, oh, my goodness, it felt like every minute was an hour, whereas other times, I feel that I never have enough time in the day to do the work that I want to do. So it's a very malleable kind of material, time is, and it expands and contracts.

I've also always thought that the most potent way to work with film—which we don't see a lot of in the media—is to take people into a timeless place. That's actually the magic of using time as art. I saw filmmaking as being this superhigh art form from a tantric perspective, because you're actually painting with time as well as imagery. So you can play with that dimension and shift that reality. Because we think we are limited in time, and we all get a certain allotment of time, so as sure as time ticks by, so death the reaper comes.

We have that cyclic sense of being when we are incarnated, that sense that time is often not our friend in certain ways, because when we get to the point when we have our greatest distilled wisdom, that's when the old

physical frame is beginning to fall apart. So that's the way that time is a trickster. It comes like a thief in the night.

DAVID: You talked a little bit earlier about being your own muse. Did you want to speak a little more about that? I wanted to ask you about your thoughts on cultivating and maintaining a relationship with a muse; I thought you might have a unique perspective on that.

PENNY: As I said, I've mainly cultivated myself as my own muse, but I've also had many muses in my life. I had Suzanka, a woman I met when I was at Chelsea, and she became my muse for quite a while. She is featured in a couple of the series that I did when we were together. It was like a mirror. I think that it's interesting that if a woman is working with a muse—whether it's herself or another—there is still that kind of mirror-reflection reality going on, which I find interesting and profound.

If you see the situation as one mirror looking into another, then you'll get an infinite portal. That's the way that I think those kind of reflections are dimensional. But the muse, in a more abstract sense, is that which inspires you. So I've always been very fortunate to have the muse playing around inside my consciousness all the time. Sometimes people can have a creative block, when it's hard to manifest something that they want. But I've never ever been short of inspiration, so I'm very muse-friendly in that way, and it's quite a-musing!

DAVID: Let's talk about dakinis. Why are dakinis important to you? What inspired you to work on the divination deck that you helped to design years ago—the Secret Dakini Oracle—and can you also speak a little about the recent Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle project?

PENNY: Ah, the dakinis! My ultimate muses! I'll speak about the projects, and I'll explain how the dakinis fit into the bigger picture. The first Secret Dakini Oracle I did with Nik, back in 1978, and it came out around a year later. It was based on the sixty-four yogini temples of India, and that's the same system on which the newer oracle, the Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle that I've worked on in recent years, is based. I was inspired when I saw photos that Nik brought back from his pilgrimage to India. I saw photos of this circular temple, with these sixty-four alcoves around the inner circumference, and each one housing a form of the divine feminine, a yogini, in these very surreal and awesome ways.

They had animal and bird heads, multiple arms, and different vehicles that they were on. When I saw them I said, "Yes, this is fabulous, I want to do a version of this for our time." I knew that the moment that I saw it, and we used that as the inspiration for the Secret Dakini Oracle.

At the time that we made the cards, they weren't really full personifications of the dakinis or yoginis. They were "energy glyphs," in a sense.



APHRODITIA (2010), 30" x 20",
digital photo collage from
Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle.

So we created that [oracle], and one of the motivations for me in creating it was that I always loved the Tarot. I loved oracle reading, but there was a lot about it that I didn't like—the way that there are reverse readings, and all that negative energy of doom and gloom, which has a fatalistic aspect to it that does not attract me.

So I thought that it'd be of value to do an oracle system that was really created with positive tools and didn't have all those other overlays. When Nik brought in this body of information about the yoginis, that's when we started. We made these cards to play with ourselves, and then we'd do readings for friends, and then it just went from there. We brought the cards to a company called U.S. Games and Systems, and they asked us to also do a book. Then we correlated the cards to the Tarot, first with the major arcana. Then we had the different suits with the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—without a hierarchy among the suits. There were ten cards in each suit, and we had past, present, and future cards. So we brought them out into the world.

Then, more recently (over the last decade or so), I readdressed all of



this. For a long time I'd been distilling ideas about the system, wanting to do full personifications. I wanted to manifest the energies of the cosmogram of the yoginis, this flying saucer, so to speak, which had these sixty-four rays of the inner tantric sun. These rays represent potential, so there are sixty-four potentials. In the traditional temples there would be a Shiva statue in the center, representing pure consciousness. Shiva is like the pillar of fire that has no beginning and no end. So that's symbolic of pure consciousness in the middle, and then there are all the Shaktis around it, the manifestation of the divine feminine energy beings and their wisdom frequencies.

So I meditated for a long time on what would be the form of these manifestations, because all of the different yogini temples had different systems, and it wasn't always the same yoginis in them. So, because of all that, I felt free to take the liberty to craft it for our times.

Dakinis are etheric beings. In bringing them down to earth I grounded them in the mandala, with the four directions being the four elements. Then I created the system, which is a little bit similar to the I Ching, but

ELECTRA LI (2010), 30" x 20",
digital photo collage from
Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle.

it uses trigrams rather than hexagrams. So three qualities—in this case values of the basic elements of air, fire, water, and earth—combine to be the underlying codex of each dakini. You get air, air, air, then air, air, fire, and so on. So each element has sixteen permutations with itself and the other three elements. These form the basis, the inner core, of each of the manifestations of the dakinis.

There are two reasons why I chose the name *dakinis* rather than *yoginis*. One is that I thought that with the term *yoginis*, people might think of them as being simply embodiments of hatha yoga, not realizing the real sense of the word *yogini*. Hatha yoga is just one form of yoga, but there are many yogas. Yoga is a really big net to connect with the divine. That's really what yoga is: that union. But I thought that idea might limit people into thinking that *yogini* referred just to those physical exercises. So I chose the term *dakini* also because the dakinis' mission is to awaken and liberate all sentient beings—that's their mission statement and what they are designed to do.

They are special among divine beings, too, because they can manifest on the plane of existence. They'll appear to yogis who are doing practicing as an initiation for them. So, I don't really believe that *I* decided to do this and did it. *I think that the dakinis wanted me to do this, and they used me to do it.*

But I had to meditate and try to come up with what would be the most appropriate forms. So I went through all of history, and I found those goddess forms that I thought still held the most attraction, like Aphrodite, for instance. And, of course, I went to the East, too, with Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, because they are the great pillars of goddess energy that have traveled through time. Then I brought in some new ones too, like Electra Li, who has to do with the whole electrical system that maps the planet now. Some are purely elemental, and I wanted to mix into this big melting pot all of the different categories of beings who are usually kept separate and hierarchical.

So we have elemental fairy queens on the same level as the goddess Saraswati. We have pure water beings on the same level as Mistress X, who is a form of a wrathful yogini for our times. I wanted to try to cover most of history and the geographical terrain. We have Oshun, for example, who represents the continent of Africa itself in her being, because dakinis traditionally have influence over a certain geographical realm, and I was seeking to include the whole planet.

So, looking at the big-picture sweep, I did a lot of work with the muse to weave back into the fabric of identity and beingness. I began by first looking at myself and trying to understand myself. My path in this endeavor mirrored the journey of life, with a natural progression in the understanding of myself. When you get to a certain phase in life you begin



to look out rather than just in. Then people generally marry and have children and put that creative energy into another being. At that point, I was actually in the Caribbean, and the others that I saw then were the indigenous people (even if no longer in the flesh). My perception was, "Ah, this is a worthy other that has been swept under the carpet of history. Let me bring these beings forth."

Also, because they wanted to be recognized, they solicited me one day to be brought into form, to be given some kind of appreciation and honor. Their spirits are so strong and were so powerfully held in the land there. So that was me looking up from my self-absorption and bearing witness. The next stage was the evolution of self into Self, gauging how big or small is one's self. It became seeing myself in all these divine archetypes. As with using the tools of Surrealism to bring in the unconscious in that part of my self-discovery, the tools of Tantra provided access to super-consciousness. Beyond that, it's the bridge between these states of consciousness and realms.

In manifesting the archetypes of the dakinis, that's not just about me. Actually, that's why I didn't use myself to portray all the dakinis, which

PHOENIX (2010), 30" x 20",
digital photo collage from
Sixty-Four Dakini Oracle.

I first thought that I might do. This was because I didn't want people to go, "Oh, well, that's just her. She can have connections to the divine maybe, because she's different." I wanted the oracle to be for everybody. I wanted to break that charm in thinking that there are esoteric secrets that you're not allowed to have, that you have to have an intermediary. I wanted to show that anyone can come into the vibration by just holding that quality—just by putting his or her little self aside to receive the direct transmission and embodiment.

When we photographed each of the dakini images and brought in the women as models, it was an act of ritual and prayer. We transformed the models into being as much of an embodiment of that dakini as we could. We'd go into the studio and I'd recite an incantation. I'd say, "Divine dakini, we made this for you. Please, accept this humble offering. If you would like to come and play and inhabit this form, then please do." And they did come in! Everyone involved could feel it. We'd start crying, and we'd feel the waves of energy of this other presence. So that was how that process happened, and that was how the muse extended herself into those offerings.

At this point, because of the connections that happened, I've come back into the art world. Now, because the world of fine art is not yet willing to accept the whole realm of the dakinis, or even indigenous art, I'm making a bridge by using *the personal* again—*myself*—because the art world seems to find it easier to relate to. In fact, a while back a couple of my galleries said, "You've got to take the goddess references off your site. You're saying 'goddess' too much, and that's putting buyers off." So, in any case, I'm going back to the self again, not just for the art world connection, but because it feels authentic and timely to do so. I'm also bringing in many facets in relation to that, but with a less technicolored palette than I embraced for the dakinis.

REBECCA: What are you currently working on?

PENNY: I don't really want to talk about it yet, as I am an alchemist, and it is still in the hermetic vessel. But I will say that I am using myself, my own body at this age, as the central subject matter. I want to show the timeless nature of the muse and break the spell of our "cult of youth."

DAVID: Is there anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to add?

PENNY: I would like to mention the film. . . . It was done by Richard Kovitch, a young filmmaker from England, who came to an exhibition of mine and a talk I gave in London back in 2012. Since then, until now, he's been working on this documentary called *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*. It's about my early life and work, my pre-Tantra work, all of my

Surrealist phase. He's made a ninety-minute documentary, which has a lot of mood and ambience; it's not just talking heads. It has an experiential feel, so I'm very pleased with that.

It should put a stake in the ground for my early phase. I've actually written my memoirs for that time, because I thought that once that film goes out, it would be good to follow that up sometime afterward with a written memoir that fills in some of the in-between details and connects a few more of the dots. It's very candid, because I don't see any point in not being transparent, as then you only get a partial picture and none of the multidimensional aspects can really link up. Cracks open up with the wounds that can create empathy and shared experience. None of us are unwounded.

If you can't be transparent, then how can anyone else ever see the weave of everything? If you just select those things that maybe make you look good, or if you don't look at the underbelly, then a true picture isn't created. I put it all in there because, for me, the truth will set you free. So that's part one of my story, and hopefully we can find a way to where I'll be encouraged to do part two. Part two is pretty wild, so it might need to wait to come out until after I've gone. . . .