

MUSEUM

GILBERT & GEORGE
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“ONE IS NO LONGER THE OBJECT, ONE IS THE SUBJECT”—PENNY SLINGER

According to the British Film Institute, production for *The Other Side of the Underneath*—a now cult film written and directed by Jane Arden, in which artist Penny Slinger was co-art director, as well as an actor—began on 2 August, 1972, in Wales. Slinger released multiple photographic self-portraits in the same year.

Words PHILIPPA SNOW

An American artist born and raised in Britain, Penny Slinger is perhaps best known for her reputation in the 60s and 70s as a puckish, naked beauty plumbing the depths of the psychosexual, the Freudian, and the surreal. Her volumes *50% The Visible Woman* and *An Exorcism*, first published in 1971 and 1977 respectively, employ more-punk-than-punk collages as a narrative medium, and resemble femme wet nightmares. With her chic and urgent merging of the British (the repressed and vaguely sadomasochistic) with the quintessentially American (the girlie body as a weapon of mass seduction, ergo mass destruction), her images feel timeless. If the work does not look unexpected now, it is because of its own influence on feminist aesthetics in the modern age—I guarantee that nearly all your favourite Tumblrttes are Slinger fans, if only by osmosis.

“When I first started making work,” she has explained, “it was unthinkable for a woman to show herself unclothed unless she was in a men’s magazine.” Sex sells, yes, but Slinger’s dark and playful use of nudity for self-expression is no sellout. It is interesting to note that while the art establishment is comfortable with reproducing earlier pieces, they are, by the artist’s own admission, far less interested in her later, more mature—and self-actualised—unclothed self-portraits. I love Penny’s earlier works, but I also think that women should be seen and heard post-girlhood, being wiser and more generally intriguing with the passage of each decade. I can only hope they find a platform and that Slinger’s radical approach on this front, as it has on several others, ends up being recognised. “I think a lot of what Penny does is make maps of her own life,” says the artist Linder Sterling. “[And] that cartography is psychological and sexual. It helped people like me see that there is a map, and that someone was slightly ahead of me on this journey.”

I WONDERED IF YOU COULD TALK A BIT ABOUT YOUR WORK’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE IDEA OF GLAMOUR. SOMETHING I REALLY LIKE ABOUT IT IS THE WAY THAT IT MAKES ME THINK OF THE WORD IN ITS ORIGINAL SENSE: ‘GLAMOUR’ AS A FORM OF MAGIC.

Well, the definition of glamour is interesting—culturally, we associate it with the whole world of fashion, and with a particular lifestyle. But if you track it back to its magical context, it’s all about creating an illusion in order to make things appear as if they’re something other than they actually are. I would say that I’ve enjoyed using those tools to crack open the false [socially accepted] idea of glamour ... so that I can reveal what’s underneath the mask. It’s true that I’m a woman and I’ve always liked to play with my allure, but I haven’t been willing to sacrifice my principles in the process. I’m always much more interested in the kind of beauty that endures.

IT’S INTERESTING THAT YOU TALK ABOUT ENDURING BEAUTY, BECAUSE I READ IN AN INTERVIEW THAT YOU ARE STILL MAKING NEW NUDE AND BODILY WORKS NOW—WHICH I THINK IS FASCINATING AND A LITTLE RADICAL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ART WORLD. AGEING SEEMS TO

BE TOTALLY TABOO WHEN IT COMES TO WOMEN MAKING WORK ABOUT SEXUALITY OR THE BODY ...

Absolutely. It’s the next challenge, artistically, that I’m making a conscious decision to set myself: because first I took on the liberation of the feminine, and then the introduction into modern western culture of the sacredness of sexuality. So this last agenda is a logical progression: to establish the undeniable relevance of a woman in her later years, because so much of our society is governed by the laws of attraction, whether overtly, or covertly—and it’s led to an enduring immaturity, to the detriment of culture. In particular, once a woman is no longer seen as being sexually desirable, she is no longer felt to be of use.

IT’S AS IF WE’RE SUPPOSED TO CEASE TO EXIST AFTER HITTING, I DON’T KNOW, 30.

And I’ve despised this attitude for a long time, as well as everything it leads to in terms of plastic surgery, the terrible loneliness of those who are cast off and discarded by the social matrix, and so on. So I am using my own body. I’m continuing to be my own muse at 70. I actually find that the beauty of my being hasn’t diminished at all over time—it’s enriched. So why should the course of time, or time’s effects, make me any less viable or valuable?

I THINK THAT ONE OF THE STRANGEST THINGS ABOUT THE ART ESTABLISHMENT IS ITS CLOSE-MINDEDNESS, GIVEN THAT ART IS MEANT TO BE ONE OF THE FREEST—OR AT LEAST, THE MOST ‘CREATIVE,’ WHICH YOU’D SORT OF HOPE WAS SYNONYMOUS WITH THE ‘FREEST’—DISCIPLINES. ANOTHER EXAMPLE: YOU’RE A VERY SPIRITUAL PERSON, AND MUCH OF YOUR WORK IS EXPLICITLY SPIRITUAL. DO YOU THINK THAT THE ART WORLD HAS A CERTAIN RESISTANCE TO SPIRITUAL OR ESOTERIC THINKING?

I have not yet found an opening for my more spiritually-oriented pieces. In my art—and in my life—I’ve given free reign to the various aspects of my psychic landscape, but so far, only a certain segment has ended up finding a platform in the world of fine art.

IT FEELS LIKE A TOTAL PARADOX THAT WE EXPECT AN ARTIST, I.E. SOMEONE WHO IS BY NATURE CREATIVE AND EMOTIONALLY ATTUNED, TO BE PRAGMATIC AND ONLY INTERESTED IN ‘RATIONAL’ SCIENTIFIC THINKING.

Totally paradoxical! I do believe that in time, the work will all be seen together, and regarded as a whole—I hope that can happen in my lifetime. That said, an artist can never let the reception their work receives be the thing that dictates their practice. They have to hold fast to their inspiration, no matter what others may think, or how other people might react. If you look at the history of art, you can see that the artists whose work was appreciated and purchased in their lifetimes are often forgotten by the next generation, whereas the ones who struggled because of the radical nature of their work are often the ones who seem to have lasting significance.

THAT’S TRUE—YOU HAVE TO HAVE PATIENCE FOR THE

LONG GAME. IT TAKES TIME TO BUILD A COMPLETE, COHESIVE, PERSONAL BODY OF WORK.

It does remain a mystery to me, though, that the spiritual face of art is the one that has such a hard time being integrated into the actual culture of the art world. It seems such an obvious, and necessary, marriage. But in my experience, the intensely personal is much easier to stomach than the transcendental. Having focused for many years on the transmission of the energies of the Divine Feminine, as a natural evolution from my work on the self and the subconscious, I’ve certainly returned, of late, to the more directly personal—firstly, to help build bridges to the art world, and secondly, because it actually feels like an integral part of my journey to come back to modality at this point. Otherwise, I wouldn’t do it! But with my early work getting a foothold currently, I find it’s vital to me to be seen as an active, living artist, and not just as an historical figure.

SOMETHING I THOUGHT WAS VERY MUCH AHEAD OF ITS TIME ABOUT YOUR BOOK AN EXORCISM IS THE FACT THAT ALTHOUGH YOU AND [FORMER PARTNER] PETER WHITEHEAD WORKED ON THE IMAGES TOGETHER, HE IS VERY MUCH A SECONDARY FIGURE. IT’S ALMOST THIS INVERSION OF THE IDEA WE HAVE ABOUT MALE/FEMALE ARTIST COUPLE DYNAMICS, WHERE HE BECOMES LIKE THE TYPICALLY FEMALE MUSE FIGURE—A VEHICLE FOR YOU TO CONVEY YOUR DESIRES AND IDEAS TO THE VIEWER.

Peter and I tried to work together, but it just didn’t pan out: we could never quite work out who was in charge. *An Exorcism* was created not only after we failed to collaborate, but also after the tumultuous break up of our relationship, so it was my own process of psychoanalysis—of processing, and trying to heal an open wound. The creation of this work stretched over a seven year period, and was a super intense endeavour because I wanted to find out who I was. As women, we tend to give part of ourselves away in our relationships, and I needed to retrieve those parts. To his great credit, Peter allowed himself to be the leading man—the animus—in this psychodrama, even after our break up, and to be directed by me to shoot the photos of myself, and my girlfriend Su, that I needed to act out the various tableaux I envisioned. It was an interesting situation, as we were all the actual players in the drama, while playing the parts of the archetypes I was encrypting. And a lot of the scenarios focus around the roles of power that are enacted between the sexes, so it was a definite role reversal to try them on for size.

SOMETHING I WANTED TO SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT IS A THING I DON’T KNOW HOW TO ARTICULATE IN THE FORM OF A QUESTION—IT’S ABOUT THE DOUBLE BIND OF BEING A WOMAN AND USING YOUR NAKED BODY AS MATERIAL. IT’S EXTRAORDINARILY UNFAIR FOR WOMEN NOT TO BE ABLE TO USE THEIR BODIES FREELY AS A SUBJECT IN THEIR WORK; BUT BY ANOTHER TOKEN, IT’S EASY FOR THIS KIND OF WORK TO BE CO-OPTED FOR ITS MAINSTREAM-ADJACENT SEXINESS.

I took this issue on full frontally, as a conscious decision, from the time I was a student. Woman, especially unclothed, has always been a popular subject matter in art history, but she’s generally perceived through the eyes of a male artist, and depicted through his lens. I was taking up the gauntlet to try and shift this paradigm, depicting myself through my own eyes as self-reflection. And I think the key in what you’re talking about is whether the practice is being used as a tool for self-reflection, for knowing oneself. Because then one is no longer the object, one is the subject; and the body is no longer an object of attraction, but a vehicle for the deeper understanding of the nature of self. Of course, one can’t dictate how a work is viewed, and whatever the intention, people will bring their own projections to it.

I was never averse, as an attractive young woman, to using my charms to draw people in. Woman is by nature magnetic, and beauty touches the soul as well as titillating the senses. But I wanted to offer, in the mode of the surrealists, something more than the viewer bargained for when I drew them in. And my mysticism has always been sexy, too! Either it’s all sacred, or nothing is. It depends on your perspective on yourself, and on the spiritual side of yourself.

DO YOU THINK WE STILL EFFECTIVELY HAVE THE SAME

CULTURAL HANG-UPS NOW AS WE DID IN THE 60S AND 70S?

I think a lot has shifted in terms of what is permissible for female artists—but yes, those underlying currents are still at work. A lot of men assumed that I would automatically be sexually available because of the way I used my body in my work. I guess these instincts will always be there, and men will always be subject to their desires. But the forum is more open now. The open availability of erotic material—particularly on the internet—is certainly a major factor in our current time: but whether this facilitates more connection and more intimacy is ... questionable. Erotically, there is a trend towards alienation in many ways. Where I think we have the biggest shift for modern women is in the arena of social media, which allows us more connectivity, but also can help facilitate an addiction to being more superficially ‘liked’ in favour of enacting actual self-discovery.

I KNOW IN THE PAST YOU’VE RESISTED THE FEMINIST CLASSIFICATION, BUT IT STRIKES ME THAT MAYBE WE’RE ACTUALLY IN A PLACE NOW WHERE THE CURRENT DEFINITION MIGHT FIT WHAT YOU’RE SAYING WITHIN YOUR WORK A LITTLE BETTER.

Definitely! I didn’t feel it was appropriate to associate myself with the feminist movement in the 60s and early 70s, as the political stance was more about getting the same powers as men, and in the process the sexual and sensual side of being a woman was very underplayed. It’s interesting to note that at the time I was growing into a woman in England, the attitude generally was that women did not take any pleasure in sex, and that the sexual act was one that women participated in for the sake of the man, and that it was therefore a kind of sacrifice. This felt like nonsense to me! So I wanted to claim that right to pleasure for myself, and, by extension, for women in general. I find the new wave of feminism to be much more inclusive of all these aspects, from the sensual and sexual to the spiritual. For this reason, I find it much easier now to say that I am a feminist.

AND YOU WERE DEFINITELY PUSHING WOMEN’S SEXUALITY INTO A DIFFERENT ARENA WITH YOUR EARLIER WORK, FOR INSTANCE, CONSCIOUSLY PLACING FEATURES ABOUT YOUR PRACTICE IN MEN’S MAGAZINES—NEW TERRITORY FOR A FEMALE ARTIST. THAT MUST HAVE FELT SUBVERSIVE, AND ALSO QUITE LIKE GAMING THE SYSTEM.

Yes. It was a deliberate strategy to put myself in those kinds of publications, and it did elicit a vicarious kind of pleasure to think that men would be attracted to my naked body, and then—if they read what I had to say—discover they were dealing with a real person, and not just an object. And I also hoped that this real person’s words would challenge a lot of their previously held concepts ... Even if they just looked at my images, it would always be a kind of confrontation, not just titillation.

And there’s something to be said for the heightening of the senses that erotic material provokes: it makes a magazine like that a surprisingly fertile ground to slip in some new ways of thinking, different ways of seeing.

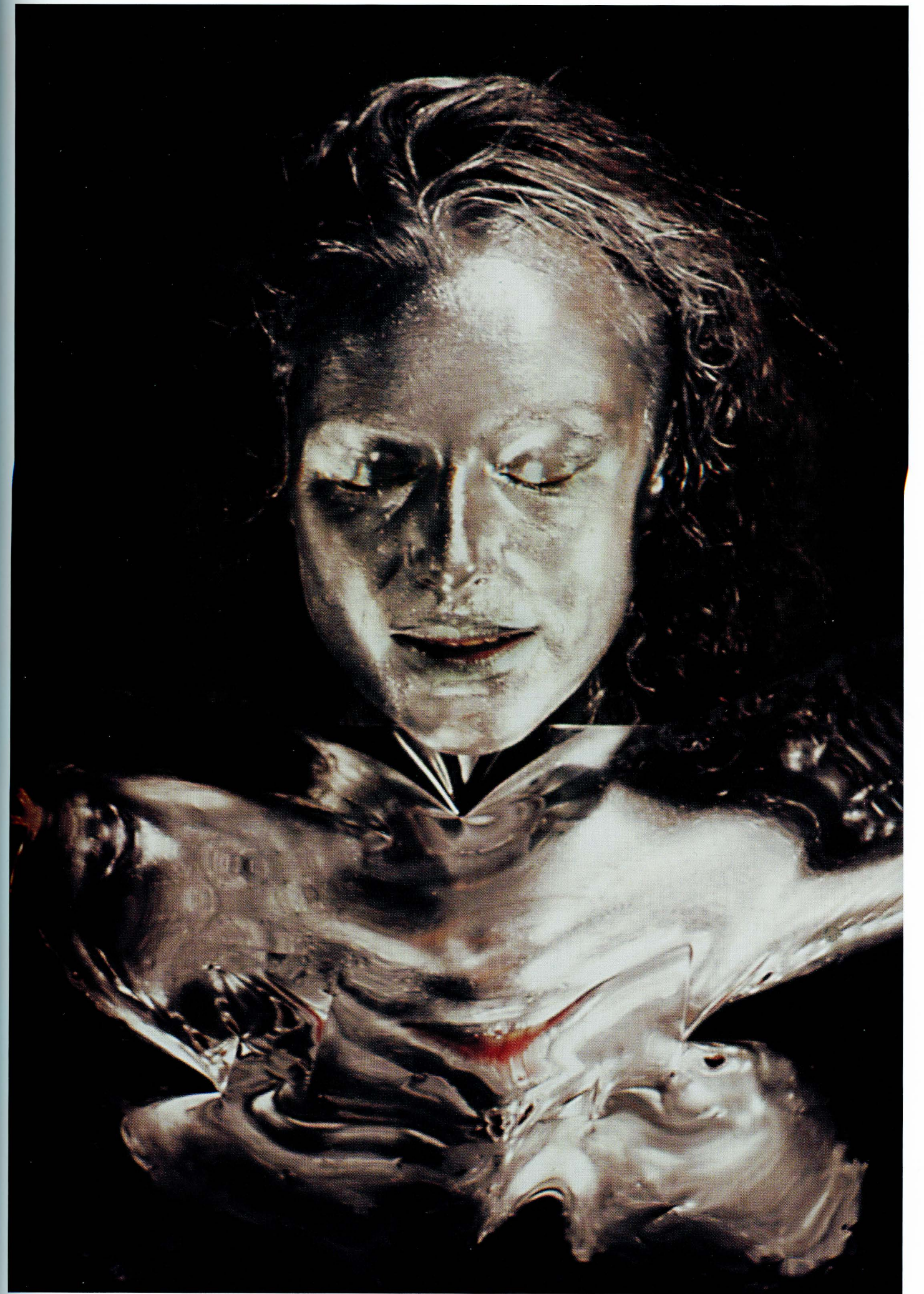
I THINK THERE’S A CASE TO BE MADE FOR YOUR COLLAGE WORK, ALSO, PREFIGURING THE AESTHETIC—AND IN SOME RESPECTS, THE SUBJECT MATTER—OF PUNK, WHICH HAS THAT SAME JARRING MIXTURE OF SEX AND DANGER DOWN AT ITS BONES.

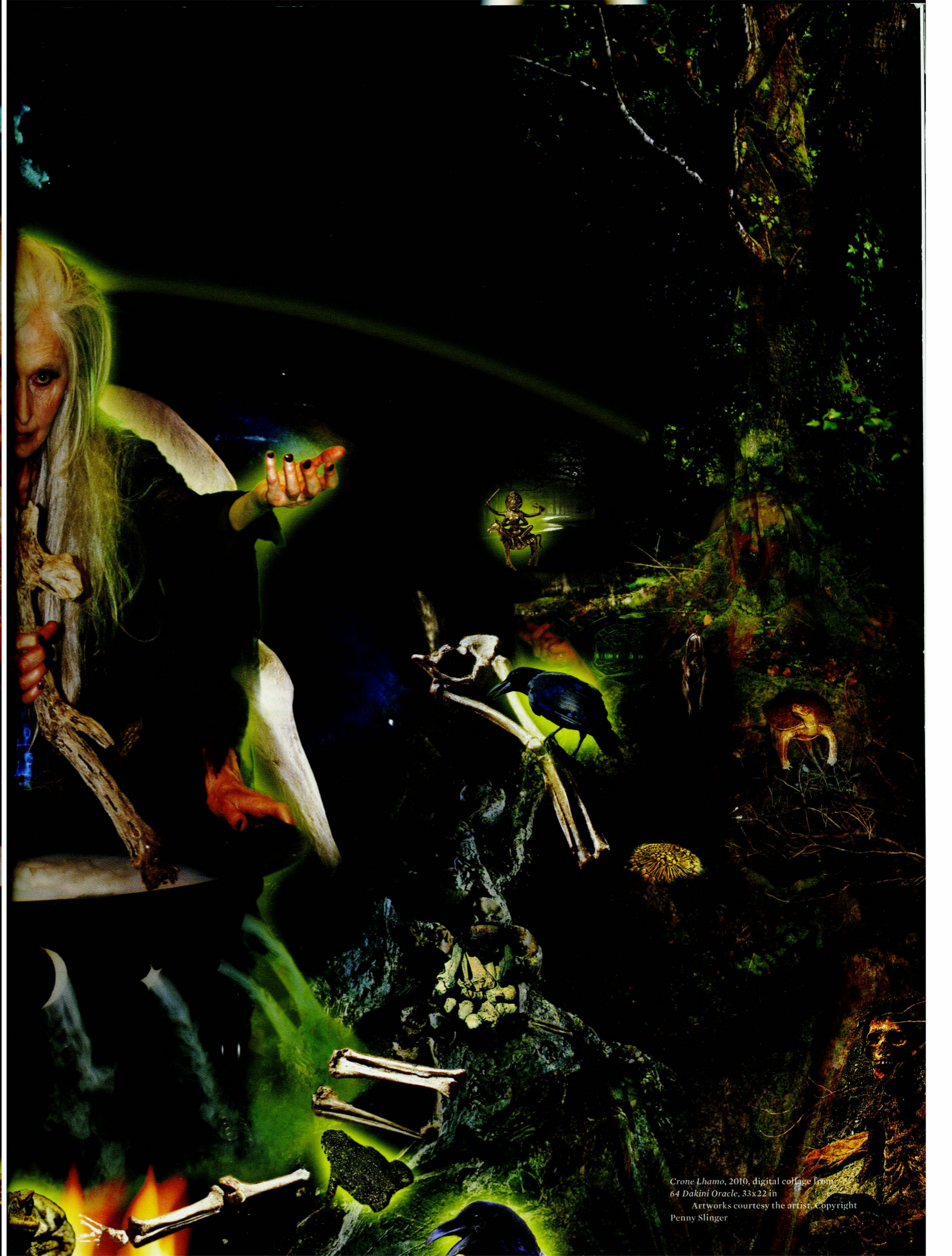
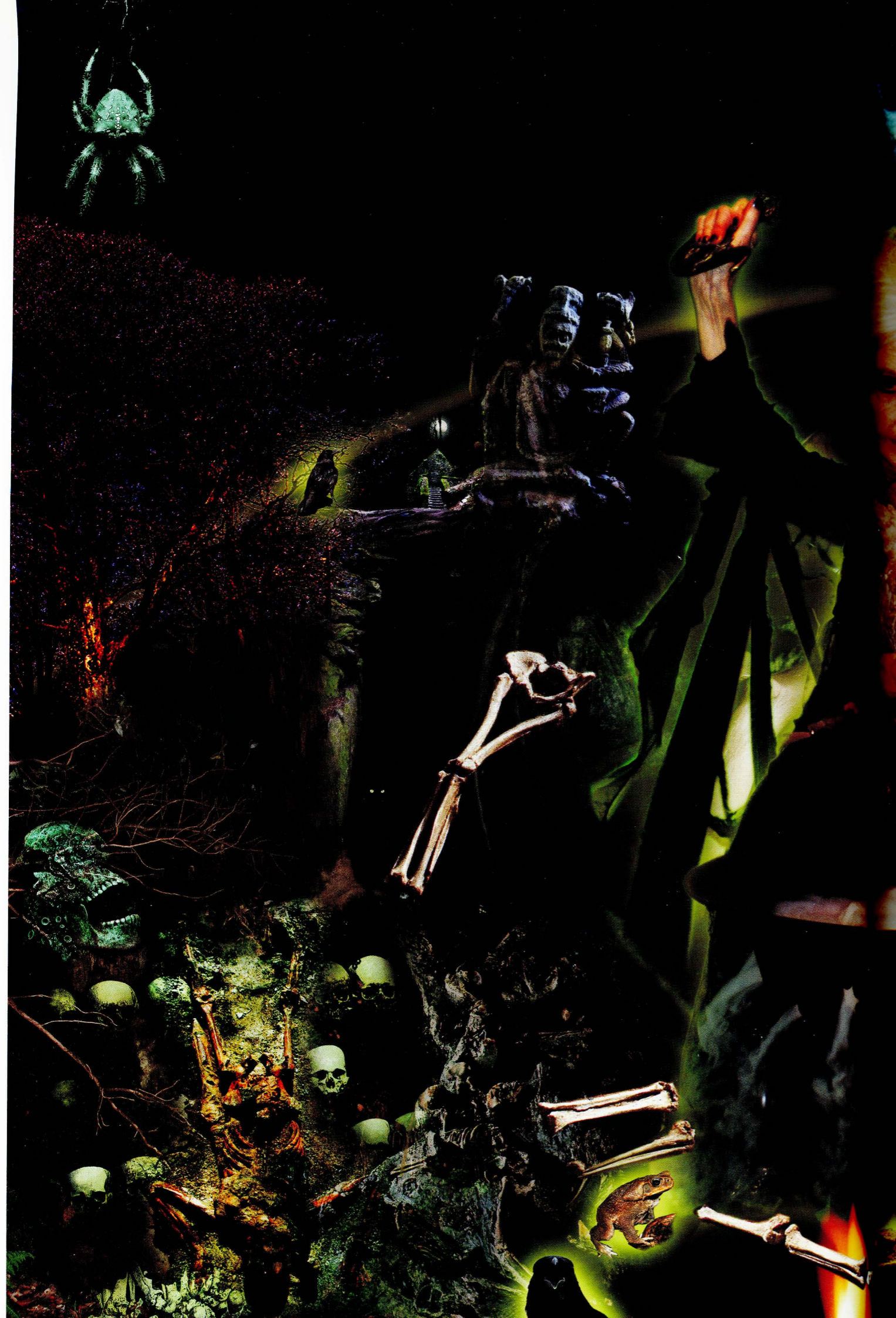
Yes—and I really did want to shake up the bourgeoisie! I couldn’t stand that grey, repetitive world full of little boxes; I think living in it limits your potential to be all that you can be. And an artist such as Linder Sterling, who was fully entrenched in the punk movement, and its aesthetic ... she and I share a lot in terms of our visual language. Linder says discovering my book *50% The Visible Woman* was seminal in launching her artistic oeuvre, and we’ve talked about collaborating for some time now, so let’s see what the future brings. It’s time for women to support and complement each other in what they do—not to be set against each other in competition. That’s so old school.

Philippa Snow is the features editor at Modern Matter, and writes for titles including Frieze, Artforum, The Guardian and The Paris Review. She lives in London.



Secrets, 1970-77, photo collage from *An Exorcism*, 20x14.35 in
Artwork courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
Following page: *Penny and Wedding Cake* from men's magazine, 1973, photograph of the artist with dummy wedding cake (life casts, mixed media, 22x22x42 in), 13x18 in
Penny silver with reflector, 1972, photograph, 11.25x16 in





Crone Lhamo, 2010, digital collage from
64 Dakini Oracle, 33x22 in
Artworks courtesy the artist. Copyright
Penny Slinger