



FASHION

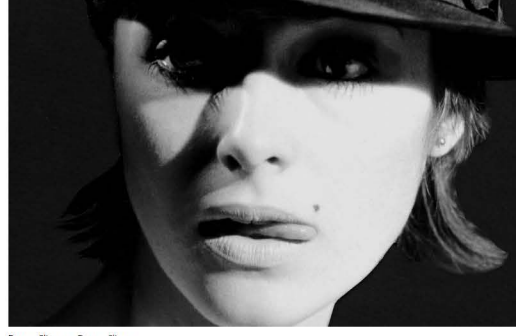
The pioneering feminist artist behind the gold doll's house at Dior's couture show

For Dior's autumn/winter 2019 Haute Couture show, Maria Grazia Chiari reached out to the 1960s feminist surrealist Penny Slinger and the result was magic. Slinger talks to the artist about exploring sexuality, feminine power and the female body

BY HETIE JOHAN
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Penny Slinger

Penny Slinger has a history with houses. In the early 1970s, the artist responsible for giving Dior's recent couture show an occult edge, made surreal sculptures out of doll's houses and used an abandoned country mansion as the backdrop for haunting collage works. Born in London in 1947, Slinger studied at Chelsea College of Arts at the end of the 1960s, when nearby King's Road was the epicentre of the Swinging Sixties. Bold, clever and unabashed, even as a student Slinger was making strikingly original work using the tools of an earlier generation of male surrealists to explore the feminine.



Penny Slinger: Penny Slinger

In her *Wedding Cake* series, made in 1973, Slinger dressed in bridal white as a three-tiered gown, offering herself to be sliced into a critical take on the packaging of women's bodies for men's desires. A striking beauty who modelled for Theo Dörner, Slinger made a political point of posing naked for men's magazines in which she talked about her work, confusing the idea that a beautiful woman in a state of undress was just an object to be looked at.

Slinger's concept for Dior took to her great work *An Exorcism* (1977). Seven years in the making, its experimental — and often sexually explicit — collages set within the spectral, crumbling grandeur of Ilford Hall, a Jacobean pile in Northamptonshire, UK. Using posed photographs of herself, her girlfriend Suzanna Fray and her ex-boyfriend, the flutemaker Peter Whitehead, Slinger used the building as a metaphor for the psyche, later describing the process as one of self-psychanalysis.



Who Knew Her Best, a collage from An Exorcism Penny Slinger

Slinger went on to explore the liberated body more fully in the unabashedly erotic collages of *Mountain East*, currently on show at London's Richard Sisson Gallery. By the late 1970s, she'd stepped away from the art world to pursue her fascination with tantra, co-authoring the bestselling work of erotic scholarship *Sensual Secrets*. To a new generation of feminist curators Slinger's works of the 1960s and 1970s still feel fearless and fresh, exploring ideas around sexuality, feminine power and the female body. Following the release of Penny Slinger: *Out Of The Shadows* — a film exploring her early career, in cinema now — we talk to the artist about fate, the feminine and constructing a fantasy for Dior.

On working with Dior



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"Maria Grazia Chiari reached out to me to collaborate with her as she had seen *An Exorcism*, my series of photo collages from the 1970s, in which I used an English mansion house as the setting for my surrealist portraits. I envisioned an artistic alchemy which would bring the four elements of nature into the building and create an immersive experience as they overtook every wall, ceiling and floor throughout the salons and the stairway, revealing the muse of the building, the many faces of the feminine that have inhabited and inspired this place throughout its evolution. It's a celebration of the elements, fire, earth and water, and the human-made made the story of the mansion. A huge tree was fabricated that inhabited the stairwell like a gigantic tree of life, and photographs from my worldwide travels adorned every surface with textures of fire, water, air and earth embodied as trees, rocks and crystals. Four life-size sculptures were created to embody quantum in the pond, an alchemical garden and a crystal. It was an expansive experience to work with Maria Grazia and her creative team to manifest my largest collage ever. For the last look on the runway, I designed a wearable doll's house, manifested impeccably by Maria Grazia's atelier at Dior. This was a model of the building, covered in 24-carat gold leaf — the embodied gold of the alchemical journey — which opened to reveal the body of the woman within."

On the feminine art

"I was using the toolkit of surrealism, which allowed you to find archetypal symbols from the subconscious and unconscious realms, and then put them together in these new formulas. I very much had the intention of wanting to describe the inner workings of the feminine. I'm a woman, and I felt that it was an area that had been very neglected. The female image and form was prevalent in the history of art, and women used as a muse, but not actually doing into what's happening under the skin, what's in the dreams and fantasies of women, what is really there underneath the skin, rather than just in the manifestation of that skin. My language evolved out of that: trying to find things that captured a state of consciousness, an atmosphere, a dream, a longing."

On body shame and body liberation



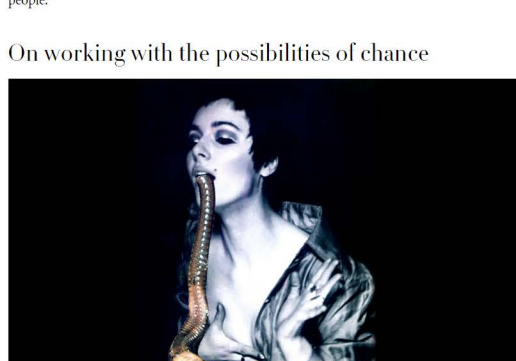
Heads and hands, 1960s/70s Penny Slinger

"Before I went to a concert I thought it was going to be fantastic: a mystical order of sisterhood. When I got there the music was so mean, so bitter, twisted and upright. I was naive, coming on me. I was beginning to sense my body awakening. Other girls I knew had started getting braces. I was very interested in all of this, and yet there it was something you shouldn't have anything to do with; you must completely set all that aside. It goes together with all these ideas of original sin. I was always very curious; I wanted to find out about my body and its feelings. When I was young I had all kinds of experiments with my sexuality and sensuality. By the time I was 16 and the pill came into being, this was a great freedom that we hadn't had before then. I was very keen to experiment and experience all that I could through this vehicle that I felt had been so shut down. Now we had an opportunity to be much more liberated and open, and find out what it was all about. These ideas of the body as dirty, shameful and sinful have so robbed it of our potential to fully experience life with all our senses. All this apparatus that we've given to have joy, to have bliss, shouldn't be taken away from us by cults of shame and taboo. This is the path of the feminine that we so hopefully now embrace, full embodiment, which is the full acceptance of the material, of all that we are, being as used as the spirit."

On making *An Exorcism*

"I found myself in a very shattered state of being because of my breakup with Peter Whitehead, which was a very major relationship for me, at the same time as the disintegration of the Women's Theatre Group. I found myself feeling that I'd lost, in a way, both masculine and feminine sides of myself, and I thought, 'Why is that? What's happening to me? How can I feel this?' I felt I had to examine all the factors that had brought me to this situation: why you feel dependent on the man, what's going on? The old desiccated mansion house is the seat of power, representing a lot of the Western heritage of masculine power, and yet it was desiccated. I used all the rooms, all the aspects of the self, of the psyche, that I felt I needed to explore. All the skeletons were brought out of the cupboard so that I could examine them in the light of day. I was excruciating them by really looking at them and not having them hold me in fear or subjugation. I wanted to get deep because I believed that if I was experiencing this, it must be something common to other people; other people may not have identical experiences, but they have things that are so parallel to this. We all have the dark night of the soul some time or other, and here I was trying to find the light in the darkness that would guide me through to the other side, to be reborn to my true self and understand what was mine and what was the projections of others and the society that I grew up in. If I can go through this game of detection, find the clues, follow them and come out the other side, then I can make landmarks along the way that will be helpful for other people."

On working with the possibilities of chance



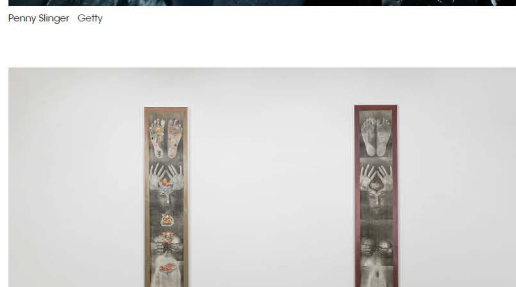
Phantom Horse Penny Slinger

"I like to think of it as spontaneously arising reality: those things that happen outside of control but are guided by who you are. All the heroes and heroines in my life have been much more rational in a sense, and allowed things to happen in the moment. I think you prepare yourself to have that allowance and find a space that it can manifest. This is the thing I love about collage: you have that element of chance encounter. I don't think I could call myself a surrealist if I didn't have that inclination to just be in the moment and see what happens. It allows for more openness in life, and for things to happen that are outside the norm (and I've always tried to live outside the norm). I have also trained my intuition: I've followed my heart and my inclination for better or for worse. Sometimes it's led me to some rather tricky areas, but in the end I wouldn't swap it for any other approach to life. You do your best at all times and then you can your fate to the wind in order to see what providence will offer you. I have always lived my life like that."

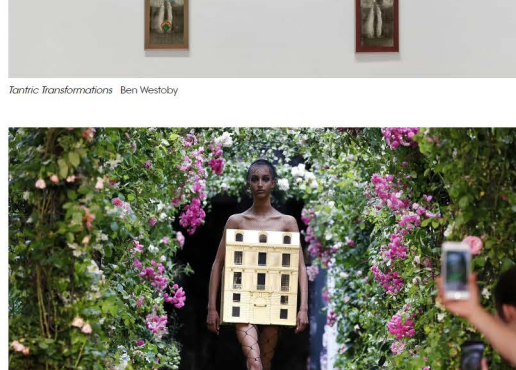
Penny Slinger: *Transit: Transformations* is at London's Richard Sisson Gallery until August 24



Penny Slinger: Getty



Who Knew Her Best, 1970s Penny Slinger



Getty

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