

Odda Magazine: Penny Slinger's New Exhibition: "50/50"

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Penny Slinger, *The Armory Show*, 1969/2021, archival inkjet print from original collage, © Penny Slinger, photo: Josh Schaedel

London born multidimensional artist, Penny Slinger, who now resides in California, has recently launched her third solo exhibition with Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. Titled "50/50," the project celebrates the 50 year anniversary of her book "50% The Visible Woman." With an expanded new edition of the book and new compositions, Slinger continues her decades long investigation into the unveiling of the feminine subconscious. She speaks with ODDA on surrealism's impact on her artistry, her lifelong dream of becoming a sort of "Lady Picasso," and exploring her body of experience through the glyph of her own body.

VINCENT PERELLA. Who is Penny Slinger? How does surrealism and feminism play a role in your identity?

PENNY SLINGER. I'd say first and foremost, I identify as an artist. I always knew that this was a calling for me and along with that, I thought that I had something to say through my art. Then we come into, "What is it that you want to say?" Going through the system, attending art school, trying to train, I honed and refined this natural talent, I discovered surrealism along the way when I was about to do my thesis. While that may sound a little late in the game, since I'd been at art school for about four years, we must understand that back in the UK at that time, things were a little bit different, and we didn't

have exposure to a tenth of the things that we have exposure to now. We came to surrealism and spent a class or two in art

history, but I hadn't found the books of Max Ernst until I went on my own personal dive into, "What am I going to write about?" and "What do I care about?" I realized I really cared about the human form as an interface and that I didn't really feel attracted so much to just representations of the human form, but rather the symbolic, the mythic and the things that use the human to talk about something beyond just surfaces.

I found a lot in ancient culture and then moving through, I found the collage books of Max Ernst. Ernst had been using collage to create these seamless magical dream worlds; this was my big “aha” moment. I thought collage was just cutting up bits of paper and you would see where they stuck, but here, he was making this whole mythology. I fell in love with that and wrote my thesis on his collage books.

While writing, I found the roots of what the Surrealists were doing in the dredging of the subconscious and in that shock value of bringing unexpected things together. I made my first book of collage, “50% The Visible Woman,” as my direct response to Max Ernst. I thought the best way to give tribute to someone who has inspired you is to do something inspired by them. In making it my own — that’s where feminism comes in. However, it was not really feminism as such, because back in the day, the feminist movement was very much to do with getting equal rights to men and well, frankly, I did not find it sexy enough. It was a little bit unsensual and a little bit political, and so I did not really identify with the movement as such.

However, I would say my work has always been about the liberation of the feminine — the feminine as the prime identifier for me as an artist. This to me, is the act of creation. It is the male and female sides of oneself coming together, making love, and producing the child, which is the artwork. My kind of feminism and liberation of the feminine is for both men and women. When I started using surrealism, I wanted to use it to explore the feminine psyche in a way that I thought had not really been done, and to use myself as a muse as this kind of petri dish for all the things I was looking at and to put myself out there as the example.

V.P. Your third solo exhibition, titled “50/50,” with Blum & Poe launched a couple weeks ago in Los Angeles. Before we dive into the exhibition a bit more, what was it like expanding on your iconic publication “50% The Visible Woman” 50 years later?

P.S. It felt like a very timely moment. We have been talking for a while about getting the book out again, and here at the 50th anniversary, it feels like the right moment, obviously. We have it selling for \$50 too, really making it “50/50” all the way. “50%” is significant because when you are looking at someone, like a woman in this case, you only really see half of what is going on, because all the rest is going on underneath.

In redoing the book now, I was able to combine the first hand made edition with the published version. In 1969, I had made the copies myself and put real snakeskin on the covers and then a couple of years later, managed to publish it. In the published version, there were a few changes — 13 images were left out, as were the wood grain pages which I had put in like doorways for all the different chapter headings. With the new book, the cover combines the image from the published version and the snakeskin from the handmade version, representing the synthesis. I went through both versions so

carefully and then tried to get the best of the best, distilled it, and brought it together to make this now super book here at the end of 50 years.

V.P. One thing I love about you is that you're an artist of different mediums. Why does poetry and imagery pair so well together for you?

P.S. I've always loved words as well as images, so I had a natural facility with making imagery. I also have always heard words just tumable into my consciousness and they often have a very poetic form as they come in and pass through. I love the combination of poetry with imagery because there is nothing to do with explaining the image away. Poetry is another way of making a collage, it's a verbal collage. You are free in a poetic form to bring these thoughts together, like images, and put them in any kind of juxtaposition that you like without being bound by any rules, so the poetic association compliments the images perfectly.

V.P. *Rolling Stone Magazine* once said, “This book will become as important on your bookshelf as Sgt. Pepper is on your record rack.” What was it like being compared to some of the greatest of all time, like The Beatles, at such an early point in your career?

P.S. I mean, let us say we wish that it were, and I am not dead yet, so maybe it still can be! I also hope and claim here, in this moment, that it can be before I’m dead. It’s wonderful to have that kind of review, but you see, I did think that I was destined to be this mega artist, this woman who was going to break through and change everything, like a Lady Picasso. I took these things in my stride because I felt it was meant to be.

V.P. With “50/50,” following the suit of your entire career, you continue to appropriate surrealism’s language and themes, like the woman’s body as an object, dream-state as entrance into the unconscious, and sexual and bodily desires, and show us how that can be applied to everyone individually and our culture as a whole. In your own words, how would you describe the exhibit?

P.S. The exhibit is really all about the book. We have one insert which is a new work, “My Body in a Box,” showing me still doing collage and poetry 50 years later although it’s digital collage now. I’ve got some sculptures to show that other work

was happening at the same time because so often people have seen my collages and think that I'm only a two-dimensional artist, whereas I've always worked between the dimensions and mixed all different media. I wanted to show a couple of three-dimensional pieces which were using similar themes as in the book. The exhibition includes a little QR code so that you can read the poem that goes with the works in the book that we have framed and exhibited. We have brought that in to show the use of technology to enrich it and move with the times.

I wanted to show how I looked at everything, examined it, and exhibited it through my eyes and show how I think I was being seen, and how women are being seen in the media. There are all of these different masks and personas that are shuffled up. I wanted to deliver all this in a surreal package where the elements all dance together in new associations so that people can feel uncomfortable in how they see them. You can see what is going on within. And it's not just blood and guts; it's dream worlds, it's fantasies, it's things that you wouldn't believe this nice girl would be thinking.

V.P. Created during the pandemic, "My Body in a Box" is a new photo series that explores the psychological entrapment and fears that accompany the experience. Did sheltering in place, and ultimately "going through it" with a global community, have any effect on the efficacy of the messaging behind the series?

P.S. I wanted to comment on this global situation. I mean, we're not out the other end yet, but I haven't generally chosen

to comment directly and in real time on things that are happening in a more outside political arena. This felt like such an enormous and landmark moment for humanity, and all over the world everybody was being forced into a time out from whatever they were doing. It was a big opportunity for self-reflection; for individuals and culture as a whole. I thought, "My goodness, I have to comment." For the first couple of months of the pandemic, I was kind of catatonic; I couldn't do anything. I was just absorbing all these energies because I tend to be rather empathic. I feel the things that are happening around in the psychic atmosphere, and it was quite overwhelming. With time, suddenly it all came together as my psyche bubbled to the surface.

I wanted to use the symbol of the box, which I've used so often in my life, and use myself — now as a woman of this age — to try to claim relevance for older women in particular. It's true for men and women, but our culture certainly marginalizes and makes irrelevant the people who come into their wisdom years, so that wisdom just goes to hell, when you know, we need it. We need it to percolate back in and enrich us, mature us to understand this wisdom of experience. I straddle all these different movements and all these different times and have seen so much happen, and that's valuable. I'm a resource and that resource should be tapped to enrich the

soil that new sprouts come from.

So anyway, I'm using myself at this age of 74 to claim my relevance to something happening in real time. And also to try and reflect, through my own being — as I always have — on what was and is going on and to use myself as this guinea pig to portray the experience. Then through my art and craft, to be able to translate and transmit that in a way which could be intelligible to and resonate with others. I knew and continue to know a lot of the things that I was feeling were not just me. I've had experiences in my life of seeing where you shut down or open up to certain things and how that effects your ability to deal with them. We are in a constant contraction and

expansion all the time and we can choose which posture we adopt.

V.P. In the 2021 edition of your book, you have a new conversation with Linder Sterling that I am so excited to read. In a previous conversation, Linder said, "I think a lot of what Penny does is make maps of her own life. 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. Penny is a great cartographer not only of the female psyche, but of the human psyche." I sense this profound power you have to truly transcend and connect with people, do you agree? Do you think you know just how to make the desired impact you want?

P.S. If I really had the desired impact, everyone would recognize the multidimensional being that I am and bring to me all the tools and support to manifest in the glory of the multidimensional being that I could be if I had that “Lady

Picasso” type of recognition. I think I have had a smaller impact compared to what I really could envision. But with that small impact, I’m trying to do the best that I can to communicate from my heart and soul and being and through the blood and guts of it all. I offer as much truth and integrity as I can to bring to the table so that others will not feel alone and feel inspired and encouraged. I’ve been through a lot in my life, and I believe that I have found ways to feel the dark side but also be able to claim the transcendence in it. All we can do as a human being is to try and move through this to liberation, to female liberation. This is what I’ve really been working on all my life and hope to bring through in my art.

V.P. What’s next for Penny Slinger?

P.S. I’m in the midst of a series that I started a few years ago. I’m doing what I can do myself, in lieu of not having the whole team of people supporting me to do what I feel I really could do. Still, I do everything I can, my own self. The whole series I’m doing what I can do myself, in lieu of not having the whole team of people supporting me to do what I feel I really could do. Still, I do everything I can, my own self. The whole series I am working on is called “My Body” and “My Body in a Box” is a section of that bigger project. I have another section of the series called “Animal Totems” where I’m blending my naked

body with different creatures of the world. Yet another is called "The Alchemy of Stuff" and that's a three-dimensional series with big pieces, many four foot by eight foot, about my relationship to material in this world, stuff that we all live with and deal with. I'm now working on the next phase of the work where I'm bringing it together in a multimedia way. I've got a big printer, so I can print life size prints. I'm doing my body life size and then collaging in, painting into that, and also bringing three dimensions into play. I'm exploring my whole body of experience through the glyph of my body now.