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THE DARK DEFINES THE LIGHT
PENNY SLINGER
SIXTIES LEGEND ON ART & IDENTITY

PETER WHITEHEAD | PENNY SLINGER 1971
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Robert Chilcott: What are your early memories of the Chelsea Art School?

Penny Slinger: Chelsea Art School was a great time for me in that I used all the different faculties there to develop my multimedia base and platform. I was annoying, I know, to the status quo because I didn't want to conform to sculpture in this section, painting in this section, photography in this section, printmaking somewhere else... I got given my own studio under the stairs away from the other students. But in the end I did get a first class honours degree!

I spent a lot of time going out to Private Views with all the young artists who were teaching part-time, just to steep myself in the culture of what was happening in the art world. The work that I produced, especially in the last year as part of my diploma exhibition, got picked up by Roland Penrose and put in *Young and Fantastic* at the ICA in the summer of 1969. That was super fortunate – but I really did establish my themes and my modality whilst still a student.

Duggie Fields [1945-2021] was a student at the same time and one of the few who continued in the art world doing something important. I remember speaking to the staff at the time and saying the girls are a lot more talented than a lot of the boy students, how come they are not getting the same kind of attention? And they said: 'Because they usually drop out and get married!'

Can you talk about the influence of Max Ernst on your work?

When I was at art school I was influenced by my relationship with the teachers who came in part-time, most notably Allen Jones. I found him to be extremely intelligent, perceptive, totally non-sexist or chauvinist in any way – he was actually just a really bright spark and I enjoyed my interaction with him. When I was about to do my thesis I was looking through the history of art to find who represented what I was talking about – this iconographic view of the human being that was not just a representation of



THE DARK DEFINES THE LIGHT

The photographer who became a Sixties legend has lost none of her revolutionary zeal. PENNY SLINGER still champions creative feminism and gender freedom.

TEXT **ROBERT CHILCOTT** | PORTRAIT **PAULINA KOROBKIEWICZ** | IMAGES COURTESY **PENNY SLINGER**



surfaces, but something much more mythic and iconic. And I discovered the collage books of Max Ernst in *Une Semaine De Bonte*. This was such a revelation to me because it represented seamless new worlds put together from old engravings. They were just new *realities*, and a huge inspiration for me.

I wrote my thesis on Max Ernst and was lucky enough to meet him through Roland Penrose. He took me to meet Ernst in Paris. As well as doing the actual written thesis I decided I wanted to be much more proactive and not so academic. I made a film about the Ernst books in which I included other kinds of reference material and new things that I shot – live-action footage. I also made my first book of collage: *50% The Visible Woman*, inspired by Ernst's work but taking it in my own direction. I think that's the best *homage* you can give to someone who inspires you – not copying, but taking the seed and developing it into your own *oeuvre*. I use photographic collage instead of old engravings. I wanted to use the techniques of Surrealism to express the psyche of the feminine and all the layers beneath the surface.

How did you negotiate the sexual politics of the '60s and '70s?

I don't really deal that much with politics except for the politics of direct experience and the politics of *self*. When it comes to sexual politics, I was trying claim a place for the *feminine*, to get women to be recognised as fully-fledged beings. Not only equal to men but equal because of the qualities that the feminine has and exudes, which have been downplayed in our culture for such a long time. So, in the world of art, my strategy was to be my own muse and therefore, in a sense, to be in two places at once – not only the feminine, but the whole being (both masculine and feminine). The way I enacted my sense of self was not only in trying

to claim those feminine qualities but also reclaiming my masculine ones as well. I happen to think every creative act is a marriage of the male and female within.

What do you feel is the importance of a historic, supportive and generous female, or feminist, lineage in art?

Women have been very much set against each other and were in competitive mode, whereas I think we need to be in *complementary* mode. It's all been around men holding the power and women competing to be the chosen ones, to be the recipients of that power. We need to own our own power now and so that old dynamic doesn't need to exist anymore. I have worked a lot with trying to bring women together whilst I've been living in California. These old hierarchies can be thrown out of the window and we can see how each of us has individual

“ *There are 36 children in this class; 35 going one way and Miss Slinger going the other*’

School Report, aged 10

qualities and characteristics. We can start to relate to each other – help, rather than stifle and subdue. I do feel the lineage and the circle of the feminine is strong. Now it's time for it to come to the forefront because culture needs it, our whole world needs the rise of feminine qualities – in both the male and the female heart.

Below :
PETER WHITEHEAD
Study of Penny Slinger c.1969
©Peter Whitehead Archive, De Montfort University

IN 1969, SLINGER WAS OFFERED A PLACE AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART FILM SCHOOL. THAT SUMMER SHE MET AND FELL IN LOVE WITH THE DYNAMIC YOUNG FILM-MAKER, PETER WHITEHEAD, AND ESCHEWED THE RCA COURSE. THEIR INTENSE RELATIONSHIP LASTED ONLY UNTIL 1972, BUT IT HAD A LONG AND PROFOUND EFFECT ON HER CREATIVE LIFE.

What was the immediate connectivity between your own work and that of Peter Whitehead? [1]

When we met it was like a divine spark that happened between us. As Peter spoke at our first meeting he conveyed all his visions and ideas and what films he wanted to make. For the first time I was hearing someone else speaking my language. The Mythic weave he was creating, bringing in the elements and these references going into the French Surrealists and film making. These were all the things that fascinated and interested me, so it seemed like a wonderful marriage for us to bring together our creative spirits and join to co-create something. But it didn't really happen in the way we envisioned. A great creativity came out of our alliance, but not the kind of collaboration that we had thought of. It's been a puzzle for me why that didn't happen. Maybe we were both just too independent, though I have collaborated with other people at other times. Somehow it just didn't really gel, we couldn't really quite decide who was in charge.



“ *my strategy was to be my own muse and therefore, in a sense, to be in two places at once – not only the feminine, but the whole being (both masculine and feminine).*”

Looking back now, Peter was also to do a series of collages around all the photographs we took in this old mansion house [Lilford Hall] and I was to create my own series.[2] We were going to work privately and then look at them together – it would have been a very fascinating experiment. But he never ended up doing his and I did mine – and

Top Left : PENNY SLINGER *Montage of Our Lady of the Owls and Call of the Wild - the Bride* 1969-77/2018

Left : PENNY SLINGER *Sigh of the Rose from An Exorcism* 1969-77

continued the process for many years after we separated. It became, in a way, my own self-analysis of how that relationship broke up and unravelling that whole mystery. It took me about seven years, so it was a very deep engagement, but Peter didn't do that part of it.

With the Lilford Hall footage it looks like it was shot to be cut together, but then you projected just the raw rushes...

I never saw that footage since the '70s. We shot it, it got processed, and it went in the can! I tried to get access to make a film of it in the early '70s. I got a producer for it. That didn't work out, and it just disappeared into his [Whitehead's] archive. It's only in the last few years that I was able to get at it – I loved the flow and the rhythm that we had, and the mood. The rushes – where you're repeating a scene over and

over again in a different way – had a *Last Year in Marianbad* kind of feel about it. We could do various things with it, but just as a presentation in a fine art context it's very evocative – ready-made for a gallery.

You and Whitehead acted as each other's muse – you used his naked body in *An Exorcism*.^[3]

Peter was actually very co-operative even after we had [very painfully] separated due to my engagement with the women's theatre project and with Jane Arden. After that, for several years we kept working together. It really is a tribute to Peter understanding my creativity and the depth of my engagement. The fact that he was willing to both photograph me and I would direct what I wanted – and then letting me photograph him, and him and Sue [Susanka Fraey], who was the third element. And we did a number



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Above : PETER WHITEHEAD [©PW Archive] *Penny Slinger* c.1969
 Top Right : [©PW Archive] *Peter Whitehead and Penny Slinger, Iran* c.1970
 Opposite Top : PENNY SLINGER *Self-Image from An Exorcism* 1969-77
 Opposite : PENNY SLINGER *Call of the Wild - the Bride* 1977

of shoots afterwards and I think he just understood the deepness of the study and was willing to be the *animus*. I was having him – the real man in my life – portray this archetypal energy, and I guess he liked that too. Peter didn't mind being filmed but he said he wouldn't have done those naked shots for anybody else – I'm glad he participated.

You were actually engaging with gender fluidity?

Gender fluidity – in the engagement with Jane Arden and *Holocaust* [the all-woman theatre troupe]? First we did the play *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches*, afterwards we went on to do [the film version] *The Other Side of the Underneath*.^[4] We would do workshops and try to bring up all the things inside, dredging the subconscious layers rather than just the surface of things. One of the characters that emerged for me to embody was the *shadow man* –

“One of the characters that emerged for me to embody was the shadow man – the shadow man had a trilby and a cane and a man's suit, and I played out that role both onstage and often in life too.





PENNY SLINGER *Vagina Dentata* from *An Exorcism* 1969-77

the *shadow man* had a trilby and a cane and a man's suit, and I played out that role both onstage and often in life too. I would enjoy going to openings dressed in my man suit and being able to play with that very important part of opening up the boxes that we're put into. In *An Exorcism*, it felt very important to rattle that box and to start to dissolve the hard lines that separate male and female and to explore the very rich and fertile ground that lies at the interface.

Can you expand upon your shared interest in life, death, transformation, mysticism, and the basic, primeval relationships between humans and animals..?

Yes, well you can't have the light without the dark and the dark defines the light. Peter liked to stay a little more in the darker areas and was very interested in the occult. I've always been interested in spirituality – which includes the occult. I have always liked iconography that

features representing the human, but shows it in a transformational, symbolic way, in an iconic and mythic way. And when you get into that territory of blending animals, birds – all these different creatures that are part and parcel of us – this iconography stems from cultures like ancient Egypt; which was a big fascination for Peter, and one which I shared.

When I did the history of art my first love was Egypt and Horus. The iconography felt very real and authentic, so in my work and in my vision I have always blended the realms between the elements and also all the different creatures. I love to embody the human with bird wings, claws and fur, and mix all these things together. Peter loved it too – he took up falconry. When we were together he felt that he had the licence to be able to pursue this hidden dream, and as he did that it allowed me to have a lot of access to all kinds of birds and animals. In fact, I did practice taxidermy at that

time. I was making little dolls and giving them bird wings and bird heads. I have a work called *My Furry Friends* [which Peter owned] that is my own head with animal fur and two rabbits, one on each side, which I did the taxidermy for.

You and Whitehead both dealt in radical aesthetics...?

Well, I have always liked to try and shake things up. And Surrealism. Having a passion for that idea of the sewing machine and the umbrella making love on the operating table. Dynamic juxtapositions; new marriages; new relationships that allow people to see things in a different way and, often, to shock them. So, in that sense, the *status quo* has always been something that I've found very limiting and wanted to transgress the boundaries. If I felt that the *status quo* was satisfying for the human spirit I might have adopted it. But I didn't. I like to find whatever means I can to shatter the box, but I try and do it in a way that

is both shaking and also stunningly beautiful too

You mention in the documentary^[5] some other abandoned and joint projects?

Yes, we went to Iran because Peter was going to film the Peter Brook production at Persepolis, which was *Prometheus Bound*. It didn't work out, but we were already there so we travelled around a lot ourselves and we actually went up to the Russian border. He met up with a falconer; we were in pursuit of the falcons. We found a desert landscape in the middle of nowhere where he took a lot of photos [for me] of me naked in the desert. I used some in *An Exorcism*. When I rediscovered them not long ago I was quite amazed at the boldness, because this was Iran, and this was me naked. I'm glad we had the balls to do that. We also stayed with Mick Jagger in the south of France around the same time. Peter again was meant to be working on another documentary



PENNY SLINGER *Larval Worm* from *50% The Visible Woman* 1969

with them – that didn't work out.^[6] Everything was kind of falling apart in our relationship, and with the various projects at the time.

In the documentary there is a quote which says: 'When Englishness goes weird something very interesting happens...'

That was Michael Bracewell talking about that! Well, I would be a weird English person for sure but there is a quirkiness that is part of the British culture. Even in the aristocracy you have a lot of weird quirky situations. My exploration in *An Exorcism* was taking a bastion of power – this old mansion house, a symbol for that power – but looking at it now, derelict and desolate. I decided to use that as my stage set for looking at my kind of Englishness, looking at what I inherited from my culture, and how much I wanted to claim for myself, and how much I wanted to divest myself of. Because I do tend to think of myself as a much more multi-cultural, multi-faceted being,

than just what is embedded in my Englishness.

Whitehead says at the end of the documentary that feminism was the biggest issue at the heart of the counterculture...^[4]

At the time I didn't consider myself essentially *feminist* because I saw the movement in that period being very much to do with trying to claim the same kind of rights as men, trying to get equal pay, trying to be seen on the same level. I thought it was really important to claim the sexual and sensual self as well as the political self; those dynamics were the ones I felt had been neglected quite a lot by the feminist movement. I wanted to be the subject of my own sexuality and sensuality rather than being the object of somebody else's. That is really the position I took and it is to me a very central one. Today, feminism has come of age and is more embracing of all aspects of the feminine now, so that's why I can more happily put

myself in alignment with feminism. I've always been about the *liberation* of the feminine.

You developed a serious interest in Tantric Art in the aftermath of the Whitehead breakup?

I had an experience with Nik Douglas – which was very seminal for our relationship – at Andrew Logan's party at Butler's Wharf. It was a fabulous party; I just loved all the decor, a complete immersive 'sensuround'. I took Nik Douglas with me who I was only just getting to know through *Tantra*. I considered him a teacher and a *guru* for that. We were sitting there having a drink and suddenly this beautiful young woman came up to us, I think she was tripping on LSD and her eyes were just big, big, big. She said: 'can you do me this favour? Would you do something for me? It would mean so much.' And we said 'What is it?' She said 'Could you kiss each other, I'd just like to see you kiss'. And we did, and it was our first physical contact. That really was the seed that became the whole relationship.^[7]

In recent years you have also been attending Frieze.

I really wasn't very keen on art fairs before, it seemed like the meat market of the art world, and so I never really attended, but now we had this great opportunity of planting this radical aspect into the heart of this culture, into the commercial side of art we now have this different kind of yeast fermenting, growing, rising. With *Sex Work*, this was our section, and so a number of women being chosen and curated and allowed to show ourselves and our art in this context was absolutely vitalising I think, both for the whole venue of the fair and for the women involved. The idea that we can now have our booths, a focus around what we are doing, not just, 'Let's see what art we can sell', but something where we can say, 'Look we are able to show this work that is radical, but in this context', so I think it's super healthy and hopefully a big opening for new things to come. ❖

Penny Slinger's first solo exhibition was at the *Angela Flowers Gallery*, London, in 1971

NOTES

1. **Peter Lorimer Whitehead** (1937–2019) an English writer and filmmaker who documented the counterculture in London and New York. He filmed the seminal *International Poetry Incarnation* (11 June 1965) at the Royal Albert Hall featuring poets Adrian Mitchell, Michael Horowitz and Allen Ginsberg *et al* (released as *Wholly Communion*).
2. *Lilford Hall* (1969), located in a derelict mansion in Northamptonshire, England. The Lilford Hall footage resurfaced and was shown at Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles, 2014; and *History Is Now* at the Hayward Gallery, 2015.
3. *An Exorcism* was published in 1977 with a grant from Roland Penrose and Lee Miller's Elephant Trust.
4. A nightmarish journey, *The Other Side of Underneath*, shot in Wales in 1972, caused a terminal rift in Slinger and Whitehead's relationship. An extreme feminist, Arden directed Slinger to have sex with another man (Jane's partner, Jack Bond) in the film. Whitehead asked her not to, but Slinger did it anyway. Martin, the husband of Sally Minford, a cellist who provided its soundtrack, objected so strongly to the whole project that he set himself on fire and died as a result. Jane Arden herself committed suicide in 1982.
5. Slinger's life is the subject of a documentary, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*, directed by Richard Kovitch, 2019.
6. The proposed documentary referred to never happened (early 1970s). Whitehead knew Jagger. In 1965 the Stones then manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, had invited Whitehead to film the band's trip to Belfast and Dublin. The result, the original version of *Charlie Is My Darling*, had its first public screening at the 1966 Mannheim film festival. But the film was never officially released due to the legal fights between the Rolling Stones and Allen Klein and a burglary in Andrew Loog Oldham's office, which saw all prints disappear. Nearly fifty years later, in 2012, a new film using restored footage and entitled *Charlie Is My Darling – Ireland 1965* was released by Allen Klein's ABKO Records which owns the rights to all older Stones material
7. Seeking a spiritual guide, Slinger met Tantric scholar Nik Douglas (together 1975-1993). They traveled to Asia in mid 1970s, moved to New York then the Caribbean from 1980-1993. Jointly they made a Tantric Art book, *Sexual Secrets* (1979). Latterly, Slinger was married to microbiologist Christopher Hills, the co-discoverer of the protein-rich plankton spirulina and co-founder of the University of the Trees in Boulder Creek, California. Hills died in 1997 aged 70.