

Penny Slinger: sex, ecstasy and exorcisms

11/07/24 Words: Millie Walton


In London, anarchic artist Penny Slinger is staging a full-frontal reawakening



Penny Slinger photographed for *Plaster* in her new show, 'Exorcism: Inside Out' at Richard Saltoun Gallery. Photography by Freddie Stisted

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Shiva, the Hindu god of transformation and creative power, enters the Zoom waiting room. She appears red-haired and bespectacled, squinting into the screen: "Can you hear me?"

This is in fact 77-year-old California-based artist Penny Slinger, joining me from her hotel room in London. Shiva is an accidental alias – she's using her partner's computer – but an apt one nonetheless: Slinger has been exploring the connections between spirituality, creativity and eroticism for over five decades. Her latest exhibition 'Exorcism: Inside Out' at Richard Saltoun Gallery takes the form of an immersive environment with works wrapping the walls and ceilings to mark the republication of her book *An Exorcism: A Photo Romance* from 1977. It also involves the first screening of a film that assembles and deconstructs the artist's original collages and a performance, which is going to be "spontaneous and intuitive – I don't know what's going to happen and nobody else knows either. It's a surreal adventure", she tells me.



The show marks the republication of Slinger's book 'An Exorcism: A Photo Romance' from 1977



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Since the late 1960s, Slinger has made bold, often divisive work that challenges what art – and the artist – can be: from psychic dolls' houses to erotic wedding cakes and tantric explorations. Thousands of copies of her book *Mountain Ecstasy*, featuring full-frontal nude colour photo collages made largely from found images and in collaboration with her then partner Nik Douglas, were deemed so scandalous by UK customs that they were not only forbidden from entering the country, they were also physically burned. "I know people think of tantra as a religion of sex, but it's just that it incorporates sexuality rather than denies it as most other spiritual paths tend to do," Slinger explains. "It's a freeing and very goddess-centric approach to spirituality which says all material bodies are temples. That's what I was celebrating with the work but unfortunately, the customs officers obviously didn't get that."

It wasn't the first time Slinger's work had been misconstrued. As a young artist, she used the allure of her naked (and conventionally beautiful) body to draw people into her images with the intention of "giving them a little shock when they got there": that she was "a subject and not an object." In doing so, she aligned herself with the feminist practices of artists like Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke whose work was similarly caught up in the eternal dilemma of whether femininity and sexuality can ever subvert patriarchal ideals. Slinger remembers a big exhibition in New York where three "very powerful men" who she hoped would buy her work said that they wanted to, but "turned quite nasty" when she wouldn't sleep with them. At that point, she was already becoming disillusioned with the art world but that show was the last straw: she decided to cut her losses, focus her attention on studying tantra and eventually moved to the Caribbean with Douglas. *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*, a documentary made about Slinger's career in 2017,

states that she “disappeared” during this period, but as Slinger points out, this isn’t strictly true: she was always making art, just out of view of the commercial art world, with and among the local islanders. But, as she soon realised, out of sight really does mean out of mind. In 2009, she made her comeback to the art world when she participated in ‘Angels of Anarchy’ a major survey of Surrealist women at Manchester Art Gallery. Since then she has exhibited widely and in 2019, was called upon by Maria Grazia Chirui to create the scenography for the backdrop of Dior’s A/W19 Haute Couture show.



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The show's photo-collages are set in a derelict estate in Northamptonshire

The *Exorcism* photo-collages around which this latest exhibition is based, featuring Slinger herself as well as her former partners the filmmaker Peter Whitehead and actress Susanka Fraey in the gothic setting of a derelict estate in Northamptonshire, may have been made almost 50 years ago but to Slinger they're no less relevant or topical now than they were back then. "It's to do with a journey of self-realisation. Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? All these big questions that we as humans ask ourselves," she says. "For me, the *Exorcism* was very much about owning all of it, the parts of ourselves that we don't really want to admit, opening up and looking at the skeletons in the cupboard, bringing them out to air. The light and the dark, all of it needs to be integrated."

The *Exorcism* may be a deeply personal work that emerged from what Slinger calls "a state of crisis", but to her, it is also a "blueprint of consciousness" that she hopes

can give “confidence to those who are going through their own journey.” It is this spiritual outlook that has until recently kept her work firmly on the fringes of the mainstream art world. One of her gallerists even told her to take down her website because she talked too much about ‘the Goddess’ and “that was off-putting to clients, apparently.” But times are changing. The recent Hilma af Klint exhibition as well as the publication of books such as *The Other Side* by Jennifer Higgie have made it possible to speak more openly about concepts such as self-integration and the divine feminine. Not that Slinger isn’t still pushing boundaries. Her focus now is on “trying to crack the glass ceiling” that undervalues and ignores the experiences of older women through an ongoing series titled *My Body* in which the artist once again uses herself as a muse, this time to tackle “visibility around ageism”.

At the end of our call, I thank Slinger for her time. She responds by thanking me too. “You are now an active part of my practice,” she says, “because you’re helping me to be visible.”



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Information

‘Exorcism: Inside Out’ is on view at Richard Saltoun Gallery until 7th September 2024. richardsaltoun.com

Credits

Words: **Millie Walton**

Photography: **Freddie Stisted**

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London exhibitions

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Penny Slinger