

The Debutante

Issue 04



**Feminist-Surrealist
Desire**

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Issue 04: Desire

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

Insatiable desire – both controllable and ruthlessly irrational – was a central point of exploration for the surrealists. By reaching into their psyches, the surrealists sought to liberate the mind, fulfill impulses and unlock the true voice of the inner self. As they delved into the unconscious, through various techniques such as automatism, collage and the exquisite corpse, they unraveled the Sadean imagination and disrupted conventions of gender and sexuality. They pushed the boundaries of the body politic.

The limitless potential, and danger, of desire continues to motivate Feminist-Surrealists. Often associated with lust, sex and seduction, desire can take many forms, each as strange and familiar as the next. *The Debutante* Issue 04 examines desire in its many complex iterations – from the erotic to the grotesque, from impermanence to eutopia, and from dreamscapes to portals. We invite you to look beyond the idea of yearning, to a realm of dreams, fear, performance and telepathy.

Reach through these pages to discover your own unearthed desires.

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INTERVIEW

Liberating Pleasure: Penny Slinger in conversation with Rachel Ashenden

Penny Slinger inspired Rachel Ashenden and Molly Gilroy to create *The Debutante*. A trailblazing artist, Slinger epitomises the qualities of Feminist-Surrealism. Her practice juxtaposes the dark and playful aspects of early twentieth-century Surrealism with a radical advocacy for women's liberation. She often works in series, dedicating several years of her life to create art about a culturally provocative subject which stems from her own personal experiences. In this interview, Ashenden probes Slinger on a creative project that spans decades and media: *An Exorcism*. The interview was recorded inside Slinger's immersive exhibition – *Exorcism: Inside Out* – at Richard Saltoun Gallery, London.



All images: Installation view, *Exorcism: Inside Out*, 2024. Photographs courtesy of Dhiren Dasu.

RA: Let's begin in Lilford Hall, 1969. This is where you and your collaborators congregated to film an epic psychodrama. What about the location drew you in?

PS: When I got together with my ex-partner, Peter Whitehead, we wanted to make art together. He was a filmmaker, and as I was really interested in film, and in fact got into the Royal College Film School – an appointment I didn't take up because of meeting Peter – I was very excited that we would create film together. We were looking for the right location, and Peter said to me: "I stayed in this amazing mansion house when I was a student. Let's go and see if we can find it." So, we went off on this magical mystery tour, searching the countryside in Northamptonshire, and miraculously found it. And when we found it, it was like kismet. It was one of those magic moments. The house was a symbol of all the seats of power, and yet it was empty, derelict, desolate. And that to me was an extremely inviting situation because I've always loved secret passages, doors leading to gardens and old empty places that have a history and spirits in them. Lilford Hall was also an open canvas, waiting for something else to inhabit it. When we walked in, it felt as if we were returning somewhere. We got permission from the owner to stay there for a few days, in this empty house, stayed in the cold, dark nights, lit fires and filmed. Then at the end of the time, took this whole series of photographs of the grounds and the rooms, and that became the basis of *An Exorcism*. Our film, titled *Lilford Hall*, was released recently, having been hidden away in Peter's archives for nearly 50 years. I love revisiting this work, because it's like returning to the scene of a crime, and following the path, following the track, and tracing down, in this case, evidence of my own psyche.

RA: You use tactics of shock, play and seduction in your practice. *Lilford Hall*, centres the relationship between two women. Can you tell me about these characters and what they symbolise to you?

PS: When we arrived at Lilford Hall, we didn't really have a plan as such. There were three of us. There was Peter with the camera, and my friend Suzanka, and myself. Suzanka and I became the central protagonists in the movie, and Peter was like the invisible man. He was just a shadow on the wall with the camera, watching us everywhere. There's that strange tension between the unseen man and these two women who were acting as mirrors to each other, walking in this space and experiencing it and connecting with it like another character. The house was not only a set, it was also a personification of something that came out of a very patriarchal structure. And yet here it was, derelict and desolate and up for the taking. So, we took it and inhabited it with all our own fantasies. And in the film *Lilford Hall*, it was an unformed fantasy world that was just about moves and connections, disassociation and association which Suzanka and I played out. We became sisters, floating in this space like spirits who were reclaiming some lost ground.

RA: Would you say that Peter's presence symbolises the male gaze?

PS: It did in a way. As I've often done elsewhere in my work, I wanted the person holding the camera to be just an extension of myself. This is the pre-selfie stage. I considered it to be a reflective kind of photography, so the dynamic between us all was like having words spoken and echoing and other words which are unspoken but still echo.



RA: The medium of film allows you to fully explore your sexuality in all its terms. We see this elsewhere in your practice, but I find it is most vivid here. How did it feel to portray your sexuality so explicitly on screen?



PS: Let's take a look at some of the more sexually explicit imagery. These alcoves are like looking into a picture or a keyhole, and finding this secret world. I believe that we all have secret worlds within us, and those secret worlds are full of eroticism. That eroticism is not just physical, it's a kind of state of mind that lives within us, in our consciousness. There's me in the bathroom from an image called *Private*, and it's our whole idea of a kind of masturbatory fantasy if you like, but then what is that world? What is that realm? We all have those secret realms within us, but I wanted to try and start laying those bare, lay myself there as an example, because I wanted to shift the paradigm about women being treated as objects in a sexual way, to women owning their own sexuality as subjects of that. I want women to willingly engage in the art of pleasure because we get so deprived of pleasure. I remember when I was growing up, the thought that people had generally was that women didn't really enjoy sex, it was something you did for the man to keep him happy. This didn't seem right to me. We have a right to pleasure. Much of the Women's Liberation Movement denied women's sexuality because members believed it meant women were playing into the patriarchal game, but I wanted to make sure we didn't lose it, and so a lot of my practice is about trying to own, accept and liberate pleasure.

RA: I can get on board with that. Your overarching project, titled *An Exorcism*, has morphed and shifted throughout its journey. What does it mean to revisit and repurpose *An Exorcism* nearly 50 years on?

PS: This particular project has been somewhat of a magnum opus for me in the sense that the creation of it, in its main iteration, went over a seven-year period. We started in 1969, I published *An Exorcism* in its first version in 1977. It was a very deep excavation. I would say that I was doing my own personal psychoanalysis, but also on the level, because I was falling apart, I wanted to see why I was feeling like this, what do I need to do to reintegrate myself and to find myself and understand, who am I? Apart from my heritage and my relationships, who actually am I? This was the kind of detective story that *An Exorcism* housed. When I split up with Peter a couple of years after we first went to Lilford Hall, I also had been involved with this woman's theatre group, and that fell apart. When everything fell apart, I felt like the male and female aspects of myself were in tatters. I was on the floor, not knowing how to put myself together again. This journey of *An Exorcism* was really about how to put myself together again – it's a death and rebirth in the classic sense of the hero's journey. This was my heroine's journey.

RA: I read it as a total gift to your viewers as well, inviting them to engage with their own subconscious desires. I'm holding in my hands here a new edition of *An Exorcism*, your collage book, published by Fulgur Press earlier this year. Now, this collage book has had quite the journey, starting in 1977. Can you tell me about that journey?

PS: Well, after I published *An Exorcism* in 1977, it was a pared-down version in the sense that there were only 99 images in it, and just the titles of the works. But then, after that, I had done, in the seven years, a lot of working in different mediums. I'd written lots of things about it, because I was mining my subconscious to find all this imagery, and the writing and the imagery had a symbiotic relationship. They went hand-in-hand. This new edition version – with twice as many images as the original 1977 version – was ready to go at the end of the seventies, and a publishing company called Dragon's Dream wanted to do it. However, they also wanted to do another book of mine called *Mountain Ecstasy*, and they decided to publish that one first. But when shipping the books from Holland, copies were seized and burnt by British Customs. That then put them off, understandably, publishing *An Exorcism*. It sat in my archives for all these years, until now, when Fulgur Press was happy to put it out in this beautiful new edition.



RA: It must have been devastating that your work was destroyed, and you've experienced this kind of censorship at various points in your career.

PS: Well, I guess so. I wasn't actually in England at the time, so I couldn't go to court and battle for it, but I thought it was good it was not me this time, you know. There's a lot of witch-burning in the past, at least it's the books. Putting something into the fire also has a way of kind of immortalising it too – it's the fire of sacrifice, not just the fire of dissolution. I wasn't really too bothered about it, I was actually kind of amused.



RA: We're standing in 'Exorcism: Inside Out', your latest exhibition. What was your vision for this immersive environment?

PS: Ever since I was a young artist, I wanted to do more than just have art on walls. I wanted to share something more visceral that was able to touch people in a deeper way. After I was forbidden to perform an erotic ritual at my exhibition opening at Angela Flowers Gallery in 1973 – for fear of upsetting the neighbours – I felt disillusioned and pushed out of the art world. I didn't want to do more of what I felt was a very sterile format. In a magazine from 1971, there's a picture of me lying naked with fruit on top and it reveals that it's not just a question of showing people my work, it's that I want to give people experiences. All this time later, I've actually got a chance to do that. I feel so happy and blessed to have this opportunity. We've created a world here from all the *An Exorcism* material. It was inspired by my collaboration with Dior, when I transformed 30 Avenue Montaigne. Richard Saltoun Gallery gave me the opportunity to do this in a smaller space, but I think in a very effective and poignant way.

RA: What are your thoughts on the conflation of your art with pornography?

PS: Pornography in the root of the name, is the goddess Aphrodite. Aphrodite Porn is the name of Aphrodite in her erotic form. In that sense, it's a sacred art, it's nothing to do with this sort of dirty word that we are preoccupied with now. Pornography is for titillation, urging people to have some kind of gratification, whether it's self-gratification or with someone else, it's a kind of physical release. Whereas my work, even if we're using certain similar imagery, it's to do with what it evokes in one's consciousness, and in one's emotions – not just in the physical body. When I'm using this imagery, again, I'm a subject rather than an object, and I'm placing myself as an object in an image. I am the watcher and the watched, and I don't think you can say that for much pornography.

This interview was recorded using the Apple Vision Pro and is presented in the Art Universe. The Art Universe is a spatial media platform, where artwork is immersive and interactive in a mixed reality format. It presents the work of over 100 leading contemporary artists. Penny Slinger's film, *An Exorcism*, is available for streaming in the Art Universe.

The Debutante was founded in Edinburgh in 2019 by Rachel Ashenden and Molly Gilroy.

Co-Editors: Rachel Ashenden, Molly Gilroy, Tasmin Petrie and Rochelle Roberts.

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