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Happy House

Interview with Penny Slinger

Art and life intertwine in a continuous dialogue of research, memory, and transformation. In this conversation, the artist reflects on her relationship with the unconscious, dreams, and identity, exploring the representation of the feminine through collage, fashion, and the creation of a personal archive. It is a fearless journey

evolution of art, and the search for authenticity. From collaborations in the fashion world to the narration of the body, her path becomes an act of revelation, where creativity and introspection merge to give voice to what often remains hidden.



Is there something you've never revealed, an aspect of your unconscious that you've only been able to communicate through your career?

This is a very interesting question worth pondering. As I have attempted throughout to create a very tight weave between my life and my art, I am not sure what stone I may have left unturned. Perhaps I need to be put under hypnosis and see if something hidden shows up? Otherwise, I have tried to open all the cupboards and release all the skeletons inside, giving voices to them in whichever way I can, through whichever form of media seemed most appropriate, or whichever I had access to and could manifest through. True, I have given shape to much I dredged from the subconscious realms in my artwork, but I have also sought to 'fill in the gaps' by 'tell-all' Memoirs (as yet unpublished, but currently seeking a publisher). Through this multi-faceted approach, I thought I could provide a framework to show how the allegories I created in my artworks were fueled and instigated by my real-life experiences. That seemed to me to be a way of providing the richest and most relatable fabric of a life, inner and outer. As a general comment I would add that I have often preferred art as a way of communicating the deepest aspects of the psyche. It is more challenging to pepper one's small talk with those deep dives than it is to sit alone and plumb the depths of one's inner world and render the findings in an image or a poem that seeks to embody their essence.

In surrealism, the female body has often been explored through a male gaze, as seen in Dalí's *The Woman with Drawers*, which reflects a distinctly male concept of

theme is reinterpreted from a female perspective. How do you think this difference in gender affects the representation?

Let me first state that a true artist I believe is someone who can go beyond gender specific roles and, through the power of empathy and imagination, be tuned in to a bigger picture. An authentic artist in my estimation actually puts themselves in a feminine role when they create. They need to surrender and receive. Only a fool of an egoic artist believes that they are the creator and owner of their creation. It is the gift of the muse (feminine) and they are but the vessel that channels it. That being said, way back when I was a student at Chelsea College of Art in the 1960s, I was looking through the history of art to select the subject matter for my end-of-course thesis. In this research it became very clear to me that the prevalence of male artists was undeniable. In fact, women artists were almost invisible. It was also very clear that the female form, often unclothed, was a favored subject throughout. This presented me with a challenge because I thought 'what is wrong with this picture?' No one could tell me that women did not have talent and vision. After all, I was a woman and I had both. I could not be singular in this. So we were looking at some kind of conspiracy which was preventing women from telling the story of themselves, and only allowing them in as depicted by male artists. I wanted to do something about this state of affairs. So, when I produced my first book of photo collage in 1969, I entitled it 50% The Visible Woman with the premise being that if we are looking at a woman from the outside, rather than being a woman, we were only seeing half the picture. Her inner world was invisible and I wanted to bring that to the light of day.

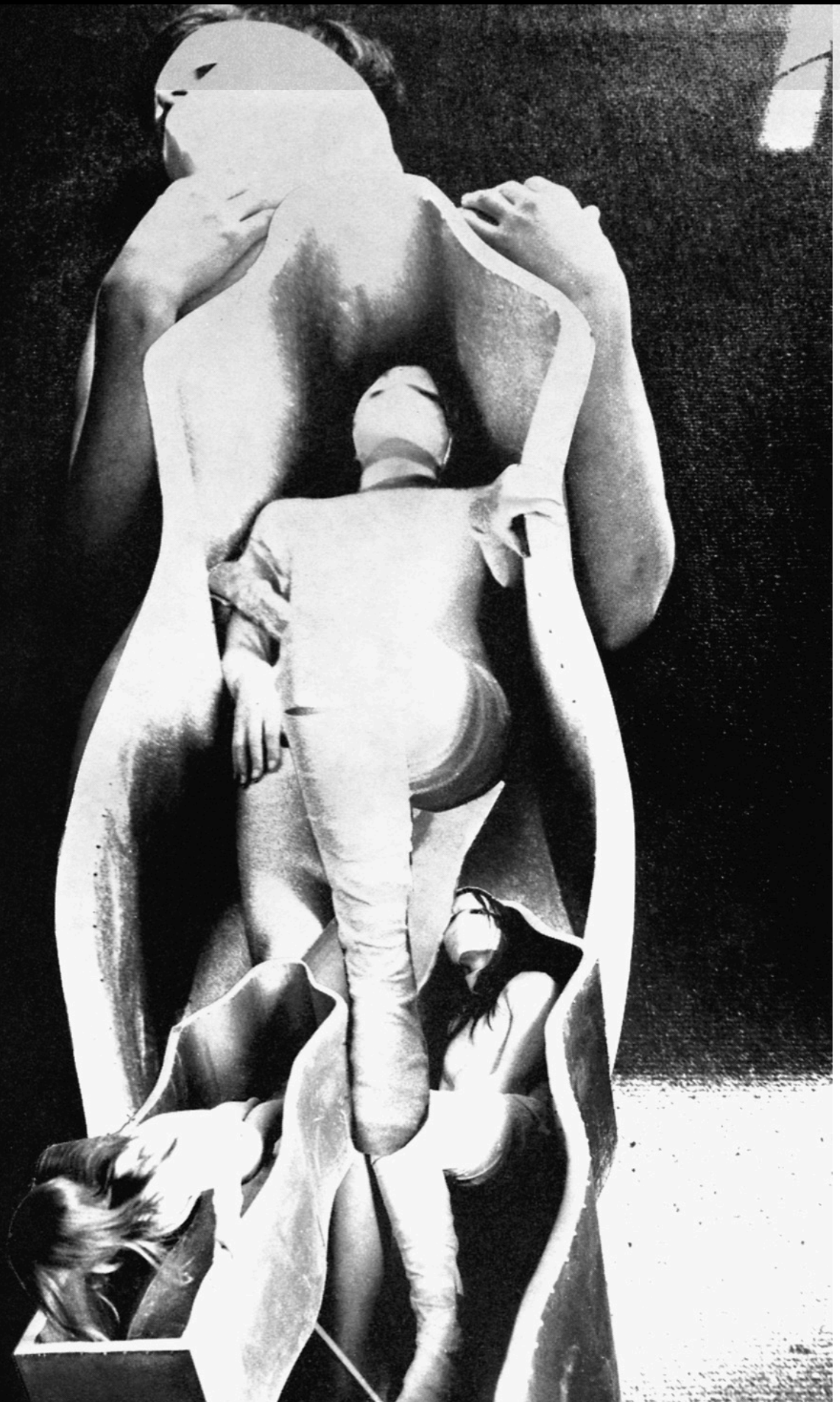
Dali's image shows drawers that open to the inside of the woman, but his drawers are empty as he did not know what was inside. I wanted to mine the feminine psyche and show the inside and bring it out. I claim my right to be both subject and object simultaneously, witness to my own self-scrutiny. As my own muse, as our own muses, I/we can do that. We have access. I have looked inside my drawers all my life!

“I have always lived much of my life in my inner world. The inner mind sky is a place of richness and abundance, stretching so much more infinitely than the reality plane we perceive in the day to day.”

Open the Sepulchre, photo collage from 50% The Visible woman,1969, copyright Penny Slinger.

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Tribunal, photo collage from *An Exorcism*, 1969-77. Verbunde Collection. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Copyright Penny Slinger.

The Dialectics of Experience, photo collage from *50% The visible woman*, 1969, copyright Penny Slinger.

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Vagina Dentata, photo collage from An Exorcism, 1969-77. Copyright Penny Slinger.



As a child, what did you think about dreams? How have they influenced your development? Is there something from that vision that has remained unchanged, and something that has changed over time, leading you to become such a powerful voice?

I have always lived much of my life in my inner world. The inner mind sky is a place of richness and abundance, stretching so much more infinitely than the reality plane we perceive in the day to day. It is my resource and my refuge and always has been. I was always 'different', I never 'fit in'. A misfit like myself seeks their own company and finds solace in the delights within.

Dreams are an important part of this inner landscape, the kind of dreams we have when we fall asleep and enter dreamland. Dreams have various types, weights and textures. Some are simply the subconscious mind regurgitating the events of life, others give form to deeply held fears, others take us to magical and mystical dimensions, and there are those again that whisper prophecies into our sleeping ears...Then there are the dreams that do not need sleep for them to arise. They are visions and inspirations littered across the open mind that come to us as gifts. I have always been blessed with this 'seeing', this inner cinema. I am often amazed and in awe at the splendor I perceive and my art has been my valiant attempt to capture but a fragment of this incredible lightshow. I always felt I had a voice. As I matured and cultivated ways of seeing, I grew stronger in finding ways to articulate what I saw. In some ways I have expanded into the fullness of who I

down, understanding that I would not be able to manifest in this short lifetime and with my limited means, even a fraction of all the miraculous visions that have come to me.

Throughout your career, you've also collaborated with the fashion world, particularly with Dior. What unexpected things did this experience leave you with? As a master of collage, how did you blend your language with that of Maria Grazia Chiuri?

I have always loved fashion as a means of self-expression, that how you present yourself is a powerful opportunity and platform for your creativity to come through. I am not so interested in fashion as a way of following trends. I have designed a lot of clothing in my life, from the 1970s on, but none has actually been put into production. I would still like the opportunity to do that, especially as I see that where fashion is now is much more reflective of how I have always envisioned it than it was previously. When Maria Grazia Chiuri contacted me, it was such a wonderful opportunity as she told me the creative studio would be moving from Dior's historic building at 30 Avenue Montaigne, and that this would be the last fashion show that would be held there, so they wanted something totally transformational to celebrate and mark the transition to the Dior Megastore. Maria gave me free range to envision what I would do in the salons, the studio, the stairway, the entryway and the facade. She was particularly interested in my An Exorcism series. I was so delighted to be able to expand my vision into an immersive experience. I had always wanted to create whole environments in buildings, so this was the opportunity of a lifetime. I meditated on it and decided to create an alchemy through bringing earth, water, fire, air and ether into each of the spaces and having the models walk through this landscape which turned the outside in and returned this majestic and historic building to the elements. Pure poetry. I had the assets, photographed on various travels, in my collection of photos to enable this transformation. This was my largest collage ever, and, along with my creative partner Dhiren Dasu, we diligently crafted each collage assemblage to cover walls, ceilings and floors in every salon. I designed and oversaw a huge 'tree of life' which was installed in the center of the stairwell, reaching through to all floors. Using 3 D modelling technology, I was able to have 4 life size figures installed in key positions. A giant oval lenticular artwork where I blended the faces of Dior models of various ethnicities with the elements adorned the facade of the building, signifying the prevalence of the multi-faceted, multi-national feminine. Both Maria Grazia and myself were mindful to create an immersive experience which would complement the collection that was showcased. What was presented was groundbreaking and a living example of where art and fashion can meet and bring out the best in each other. For me to have such a team and budget to work with was thrilling and expansive. I hope I can do more along these lines in the future. My exhibit last year at Richard Saltoun Gallery, where I transformed the London gallery space, was inspired by the work with Dior. I am not sure if I would say it was exactly 'unexpected', but it was

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certainly gratifying to know that I could oversee such a large production, being mindful and paying attention to every detail. It was certainly confirming of what I can, and could, do. The unexpected element was delivered in the way in which, like a Tibetan sand painting, all the months of effort were showcased that day, only to be torn down and demolished before the end of the evening. A lesson in non-attachment and the fleeting face of fashion.

“The world needs things to change and it will happen one way or another. Be the change you seek. Embody it with every fiber of your being because yes, we are ‘other’, and other is so very needed.”



Fire Salon, Dior Installation at 30 Avenue Montaigne, Paris, 2019. Copyright Penny Slinger.

17. Golden wearable Doll House, last look in Maris Grazia Chiuri's Haute Couture show at 30 Avenue Montaigne, Paris, 2019. Copyright Penny Slinger.

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stairway, Dior Installation at 30 Avenue Montaigne, Paris, 2019. Copyright Penny Slinger.

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Guardian, life-size sculpture in vitrine at entryway, Dior Installation at 30 Avenue Montaigne, Paris, 2019. Copyright Penny Slinger.

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The exhibition ‘Exorcism’ encompasses a long journey, revolving around self-analysis, the search for oneself, and a form of inner exorcism. We live in an era where identity uncertainty is stronger than ever, often fueled by a toxic whirlpool that makes it difficult to see ourselves clearly. What do you think needs to be exorcised today? What do you eliminate daily to stay grounded in your essence? And what would you say to young people, without filters?

Know thyself is a primary spiritual dictum, and I feel it is one that the artist needs to apply to themselves. If we are afraid to look candidly in the mirrors of our souls, how can we present a clear reflection for others? I have applied that principle to my life and art, and the series An Exorcism represents a deep plunge into the nature of my own psyche. It also looked at what we inherit from our culture, our society and what is projected on us by others, especially in our closest and most intimate relationships. So the journey of An Exorcism was to try and unravel, like a detective, these intertwined threads and separate out the true nature of the self from this ball of twine. Times may change, but

but its inhabitants play out the timeless drama on the stage of life. With the prevalence of social media, we have a way to interface with others that we did not before. This provides a powerful platform for outreach but is also fraught with the dangers of being defined by how we see ourselves to be seen rather than how we see ourselves. The remedy for being at effect of all this is to seek to place yourself at the center of your own mandala, to have your own self-reflection be primary, not the reflections and reactions of others. This is hard to do in the climate of the hall of mirrors presented by social media but remember the hall of mirrors is full of distorting reflections, each ruled by the nature of the particular warp in each reflective glass. Know that you stand in your own integrity, unaffected in essence by all these distortions. Do not let them affect the core of your being. It is like clouds that pass across a screen and obscure the image...but they pass, as all weather passes. Seek to ground yourself in what is central to your sense of self, and seek to hold your own integrity, no matter how you may be seen or judged for doing so. And also always hold close the ability to laugh at yourself, not take any of it too seriously. Remember that the hall of mirrors is designed to make you smile. My daily practice is to always revert to source, to feel my connection to my eternal self, anchored in spirit, uneroded by time and radiant with my own inner light. You are the one who can confirm yourself once you recognise the multi-dimensional majesty of your own being and refuse to be defined but self-shrinking limitations.

Why, when a woman explores the subconscious, the unconscious, fetishism, or uses her body as a means of expression, is she often relegated to an “other” category? Why is someone who probes the mind seen as unusual? Is it fear, discomfort, or perhaps the need to fit into predefined frameworks? Do you think this is still a consequence of a deeply ingrained patriarchal limitations.

It is indeed a mystery that the true essence of the feminine has been seen as so powerful that it has needed to be subjugated for so long! It is obviously based on a deep misunderstanding and misconception. True power is not something that needs to be held onto and jealously guarded! It is free flowing energy that moves through us. Shakti (feminine life force) is our birthright. It is best channeled through the feminine attributes of intuition, compassion, creativity, magic, cooperation and collaboration with all the forces in nature, not through dominance and subjugation of these. There has been a false notion propagated that productivity needs to have people in submission, slaves to the system. But, in truth, we are most productive when we do what we love. To know what that is, we have to be given the opportunity to know ourselves. Because this is not realised, people who represent in themselves a rogue element are seen as antithetical to the established system. But they are the bringers of the light. They are the ones who show there is another way, a way where being able to move into realizing one's full potential holds the key to harmony, sustainability and evolution. So to those who hear

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the call, to those who resonate with this understanding, be brave. Stand up for who you are and boldly display your naked truth. Take heart, for it is through us that change can happen. The world needs things to change and it will happen one way or another. Be the change you seek. Embody it with every fiber of your being because yes, we are 'other', and other is so very needed.

After all you've seen and experienced throughout your long career, what would represent the ultimate example of avant-garde for you today? What would make you say we've truly achieved a social milestone, both in terms of women and the creative world (art, fashion, cinema)?

I have received and mapped out a vision of a transformational oracle system which would be created using the tools of our new technologies and bring the qualities of the divine feminine, in her different forms, into direct and tangible communication with all aspirants who consult it. It would take backing and a collaborative team of the top manifesters to realise this. It would be the ultimate example of the avant-garde you speak of, for it would help usher in our next evolution of a feminine-centric, divinely guided, way of being. And it would be a transcendent work of art.

What are you working on at the moment? Is there a project you feel particularly connected to, representing another step in your artistic journey?

Apart from the ongoing artworks I am creating under the umbrella title of My Body, where I am confronting the scourge of ageism and using my naked body to convey my body of experience, my current focus is on creating my archives of My Life as Art. Although it is a mammoth project, I am so inspired to do this as a mega collage of my life. There are many aspects of my art which have not been integrated into my profile in the world of fine art that I feel are really important to be seen as part of my whole art journey. I spent 15 years in the Caribbean and dedicated much of that time to the study and embodiment of the indigenous people of the region, the Arawaks. I spent 23 years in Northern California focusing on ritual performance art. I have recorded all this and there is no one who could weave the threads together as I can because it is my own journey I am cataloguing. It is such an amazing process in my search for knowing myself. With each era of my work, each series, I am reviewing and reclaiming the work as part of my identity as an artist and as a seeker. It is a process of integration and as such, rich in revelation. As I collate and digitise my work, the lights of connection go off. I see how something I did 50 years ago directly seeded an endeavor so many years later. It is a process of self-reflection I would recommend for all, and, as such, I am hoping to make my archive a map, a blueprint for others who can self-create their lived vocation in such a way.

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Celestial Tabernacle, photo collage from An Exorcism, 1969-77. Roland Penrose collection.
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Killing Me, You Make Me Feel wonderful, photo collage from 50% The Visible woman, 1969, copyright
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An Exorcism: A Photo Romance, photo collage, 1969-77, cover image 2024 edition of book, Fulgur Press. Copyright Penny Slinger.

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The Play within the Play, photo collage from 50% The Visible woman, 1969, copyright Penny Slinger.

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Penny with Mouthpiece. Photo by Rory Lewis, Long Butterfly Kimono by Ikonostas, make-up by Rawaaa, 2024. Blood of a Poetess Mouthpiece by Penny Slinger 1973.

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Credits:

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Kimono project: **Ikonostas Couture** / [@ikonostas_clothes.desire](#) **Daniela Corcio** / [@ikonostas_id](#)

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