



PENNY SLINGER

A lot of people say that Penny Slinger has disappeared. The truth is just the opposite - she has gone everywhere: psychically, physically, and spiritually. In her iconic book of collage works, *An Exorcism*, one can see little remaining evidence from a previous durational performance that edged on exceedingly treacherous and unsustainable territory. In this psychosexual investigation, she spent the better part of a decade documenting her voyage of self psychoanalysis, using an old derelict mansion in the Northamptonshire countryside, which she and filmmaker, Peter Whitehead, filmed and photographed as her set. On another set, Penny was part of an all-woman troupe called, Holocaust, who came to work in an almost violently intimate capacity. After a tragic series of events that are delicately laid out in her new documentary, *Penny Slinger, Out of the Shadows*, the cast decided to abandon the project and decompress from time spent buried deep in the penumbras of their unconscious minds, and thus all but one surfaced back to the streets of London. Whitehead had taken up falconry and Slinger later emerged with a book of ninety-nine collages published with a grant from historian, poet, and benefactor, Roland Penrose's Elephant Trust. Slinger very clearly takes influence from the Jungian approach to surrealism led by Max Ernst and Man Ray. Looking at her early collage works from the '70s is a little bit like interpreting your own Rorschach tests. And her films and three-dimensional works are evocative and uncanny in a way that feels like the surreality of a childhood dream, recalling the work of Leonor Fini or Luis Buñuel.

interview **SUMMER BOWIE**
art direction **BERNHARD WILLHELM**
portrait **BIL BROWN**
stylist **VAN VAN ALONSO**

After leaving England, Slinger traveled through India with her then-partner Nik Douglas, discovering Hindu and Buddhist tantra, and returning to create works together such as *The Secret Dakini Oracle* book and *Card Deck*, an expansive series of collages that mark the beginning of a continued exploration into what she refers to as awakening the feminine. She also published other books, such as *Mountain Ecstasy* and *Sexual Secrets, The Alchemy of Ecstasy*. In each, she makes an increasingly prodigious attempt to translate Eastern sexual mysticism for the Western audience, the latter of which has been translated into many languages and sold worldwide. Following travels in India and living in New York, Slinger moved to the Caribbean in 1979, and spent the next fifteen years exploring the islands and the spirit of the Arawak Indians who once inhabited them.

I sat down with Penny in a bank-vault-turned-apartment that she was soon to possess in Downtown Los Angeles. Slinger starts a new chapter in a new city after several decades spent making digital collage work, updating her *Dakini Oracle* and hosting a wealth of performance art projects at her former home in Boulder Creek, California. We discuss her take on feminism, counterculture, the spiritual

When you finally finished An Exorcism, the film that you were to make with Peter Whitehead, which instead became a series of collages, do you feel like that exorcism marked a transition into discovering the divine feminine?

Well, right, it was definitely a long work. I was working on that for seven years. It was a deep probing into the nature of self. During that time is when I actually discovered tantra. It's sad because I almost don't like to say "tantra" now because of how it's become simply known as the religion of sex, but to me it's so much more. It's just a way of treating all of life, how to dissolve boundaries between flesh and spirit. So from that point, I embarked on immersing myself in those teachings to try and understand more about it. I did feel like it was an evolution from surrealism. Not hyperrealism, but superrealism. In this case it's not representing an energy that you've dragged up from your unconscious realms, or your dreams, it's actually representing a divine liberated state of being. It just felt so absolutely natural and perfect. From the surrealism into the tantra. From intense self-scrutiny into exploring super-consciousness. And then when I met my next partner in the mid '70s, Nik Douglas, that became my period of immersing myself on this path.

was a major influence and you were contemporaries with Linder Sterling. So, there were these very Western surrealist influences in your work, and then there was this transition into the Eastern influence, and then of course the Caribbean Arawak Indians. Do you feel like there are connections or relations between these periods of your work that defy basic geography?

Oh definitely, yes. It's like a thread, you know. Linder came on the scene a bit after me and picked up some threads to weave her own designs. Those of Max Ernst inspired mine. In the tapestry of our lives, there are many colors and many threads, and the choices you make decide the pattern that's going to come through. For me, life has presented different opportunities. When I discovered tantra, a lot of the art was actually to do with, "How do I share what I've just discovered?" And that's when I did six hundred odd drawings for *Sexual Secrets*.

So, then when I was in the islands, coming into the field of the Arawak Indians who used to be there - all their energy was still there. This whole Amerindian culture really spoke to me in spirit so strongly. And so, in making my tribute to them, I was making a tribute to what culture is, and how it can be understood and

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side of her practice, and her career as it comes full circle.

SUMMER BOWIE: *I know that you're often labeled as a feminist surrealist and surrealism is certainly a strong aspect of your early work, but can you give a rudimentary explanation of the 'divine feminine' and how it relates to your current work?*

PENNY SLINGER: I was really looking at the waking of the feminine. Now she's waking up, and how are we going to embrace this energy? I would say that we're all male and female within, it's not one thing or the other. The atrophy of the feminine has been damaging to men as well because it's part of their nature. In the end, the definitions of gender are limiting. It's just trying to look at certain ways of being, whether you think you have to go out there and conquer and dominate, or whether you think you can work with collaboration and cooperation and a symbiotic interrelationship of things. So, as the feminine is coming into prominence, I've been particularly interested in the more refined, alchemized qualities, like the power of compassion. It can heal so much. Passion is one thing, but compassion is like the water that quells and cools the fire that can get out of control.

And is that what led to your travels through India?

Yes, yes. When I met Nik. He'd been living in India and he took me. I'd wanted to go a long time.

Can you talk a little bit about the 64 Dakinis and this sort of mandala - does it serve as a guide into finding the divine feminine?

So I've developed this oracle that takes inspiration from the 64 Yogini Temples that flourished in areas like Orissa in India, particularly during the ninth through eleventh century. The Yoginis have animal heads and bird heads and multiple arms, they're amazing beings. It was so exciting, and inspiring, and I said, "Oh, I want to do a 21st century version of this." So we did one version when I was with Nik, together, at the end of the '70s. Then later, in this century, I worked on bringing through the fully personified form. The Dakinis mirror the feminine wisdoms that are potential within us all. By creating an oracle system, it allows the most appropriate of those energies to be delivered to the one who is consulting. So it is a very direct transmission.

I want to ask about some of your other pervasive influences, because growing up in Great Britain, Max Ernst

incorporated into our current world view, to transform it and create humanity's sustainability.

The works you created in the Caribbean are not very widely known. Can you describe what you were doing there exactly?

I was in love with the island and the vibration there. I found that culturally, a lot of the people on the island didn't even know there had been Indians living there before. So I made murals for the airport, I did work with the archaeological society, and helped evolve that. Many of the paintings that I made ended up staying on the island. It was just what I felt called to do when I was there. It was like a mini career inside my other career, because it's different. All the pieces - it's like a mosaic, they all fit together. I do remember the statement my teacher made, the head of my department in Chelsea Art School, when I left and they gave me a first-class honor and said, "You've been such a load of trouble and we didn't know what you were doing half the time but when we saw your exhibition, it all came together as a celebration. We had to give you a first-class honors." That's really like the curve of my life. I can see how all the pieces are all a part of one larger

tapestry. As yet, though, the fine art world hasn't embraced it all. It has just decided to re-examine some of the earlier work.

In your earlier work, you can really feel a certain hostility towards social bondage, toward the patriarchy, and then in this work that you made in the Caribbean, and a lot of these more Vedic works, it all feels like this celebration of your feminine power. It's no secret that the art world tends to be more interested in that earlier work, but do you feel that it's because people prefer to hold on to the hostility?

We are in a different phase now than when I was doing my early work. My hostility, if one can call it that, was towards all the things that confine and trap us, and prevent us from living to our full potential. Although we have made progress in the areas I address, I think we still have a long way to go. For me now, in my art, having gone through all these different waves, I've now come back to a mode of expression that ties in very directly to the earlier work and to the themes that I started then, with the headboxes and the three-dimensional assemblages. And then the photo collage that I've been working on at the moment is a kind of stark, black-and-white instead of this technicolor world that I went into for a while. Back into this more pared-down expression and the language that has more reference to surrealism. I'm hoping that it will form a connective tissue that people will be able to see between what they recognize and what I'm doing now. It's the same energy but at a different stage of evolution. I hope I allow people to see I am a living, working artist and not just someone who disappeared or went off into the wild and never came back. I've been working all the time, I just haven't been back until now.

Your documentary, Penny Slinger, Out of the Shadows, was just released. What does it feel like looking back over time at all of your work?

The documentary only goes up to pre-tantra times. My feminist-surrealist period. But it's good because it says very clearly that I disappeared, but I didn't disappear. So, hopefully this will make people recognize that. And if I can get the latest work out, then it will help me to fulfill the other part of what I want to bring through. The whole empowerment of the feminine and the whole sacredness of sexuality, these are things that were big drops of nectar in the pool of culture because they weren't there at the time. My current essence drop is about the relevance of someone who has gathered the wisdom of experience, rather than their irrelevance in our society. You know, the cult of youth, I have felt quite a while that I need to try and challenge this paradigm.

What does it mean to be counterculture in today's era, as opposed to the beginning of your career when you were a symbol for the counterculture in the UK?

That's a very interesting question and



Penny in Bear Mask, 1971
Papier mâché on armature with fur & mixed media,
© Penny Slinger, courtesy of the artist.

Below :
Mountain of Mysteries, 1976-1977
Collage on board
26 x 26 1/2 inches
© Penny Slinger, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe,
Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo



I was actually just thinking about that very subject. A lot has changed and not only are there blurred lines around a current definition, there are a lot of people out there pushing boundaries in so many ways that it's hard to see where the real threshold is. Where are the areas that can be provocatively and meaningfully addressed that can elicit real change? Ultimately, that is what any counterculture must have at its core. How can my expression shift the current unsatisfactory dynamic? I have always stood for freedom of expression and I like to break new ground in consciousness and manifestation, so I think that does and always will put me on the cutting edge. But counterculture in its essence, it's not necessarily something that you choose. It's just something that you are. When I was eleven, my school teacher said that there were thirty-six children in this class, thirty-five going one way and Ms. Slinger going the other.

I want to ask you about technology because you really have embraced technology throughout your career, and now you've been working with digital collage for some time. Over the course of your life has this transition to working with technology been easier with art than it has with everyday life, or vice versa?

Art is definitely my guiding light...I didn't get on a computer until I was over in California, and before I was kind of against computers. And then art put this big shining light over it, "Oh, look at Photoshop! Look at all these wonderful collage tools you could use! All the things you wanted to do!" I had stopped doing collage because it didn't have the capability of doing these things like transparency, overlays, and scale. I literally got on the computer, taught myself Photoshop and learned what I needed to learn about the computer. I'm certainly not a whiz-kid technician, but I needed to use the tools because they are the tools of our age.

Do you see the influence of your work on some of the younger artists that are working in collage today?

Well, these days I think that collage is the main artistic expression. Think of advertising, think of videos...it's moving collage now. It's all forms of collage really. So much as everyone can be a photographer now, collage is really the mode of expression...it's become the darling of our times. It's strange that photography doesn't have the rarefied ethos that it did when I was younger in the darkroom and having a camera was "a thing." On one level that's wonderful because I believe everybody should be able to create if possible - not just artists. But at the same time there's a little bit of a dilution of the artist side. And one of my pet peeves on social media is when work gets shown but not attributed. So you see this plethora of work everywhere, and yet nobody knows who did anything. It really diminishes it. For me, everyone can make a pretty picture, everyone can make a shocking picture, it's about the

intention that's behind that. It keeps everything very superficial and then there's no depth, there's no lineage, no roots, and how can the tree really flourish and have succulent fruit when it can't suck from its roots?

Very true. The loss of this decorum is not just about preserving egos, it's actually about education and the preservation of history. Do you feel like there are any mediums that you see yourself moving into after digital collage or do you feel like, right now, you're doing everything that you need to do with it?

For years while I was doing my events, I was working in the form of moving collage, in making videos and that's something that I've always loved doing, and hope to continue doing because the thing about filmmaking in any form is that it encompasses a lot of other art in it. I love it as a medium, and the new forms of immersive media. I'm about to start working on a production to be shown in a dome.

Do you have a general disposition when you make the work, or does it fluctuate?

Definitely fluctuates. When I was younger I remember doing one work, a painting, I had just played Bach's organ "Fugue" over and over again because I just wanted the mood and vibration of that going in. So, there's a kind of meditation that happens with every kind of art expression and it's different with a painting, or on the computer. Of course, artists are moody people, so you're going to be up and down. That's why I like tantra...because it doesn't say you've got to have this middle path without too much of this and too much of that. I allow myself an emotional palette, but luckily I feel like I have developed the tools to shift energy if I need to. I'm basically at my happiest when I'm creating, and I work from that core.

Do you think there is one effective way to channel the divine feminine? Or can you give one example?

One effective way...you know I had sixty-four forms! There's so many different ways, but the main thing I would say is to find a way to still your own mental prattle. Get yourself out of the way and work on being open and available. There's a saying that the divine can't come unless they're called - and we forget that. It's setting that intention, setting that ground. It's just between you and the energy and finding ways where you can get your mind quiet enough and wide enough. And ask, and ask - I did this when I was recently in Hawaii. I went to Maui after leaving Boulder Creek and every night I'd go to bed and say, "Just help me empty my mind, so that I'm able to receive what the land and the spirits here want to give me." And I guess, after about a week of doing that, I got that. [laughs]



The Hermaphrodite, 1970-1977

Photo collage Exorcism series.

19 x 12 3/4 inches

© Penny Slinger, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo



Swan Lake, 1976-1977
Collage on board
20 x 25 1/2 inches
© Penny Slinger, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe,
Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Below :
The Larval Worm, 1969/2014
C-print from original collage
16 x 11 7/8 inches
© Penny Slinger, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe,
Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Below :
Penny, Max Ernst & Roland Penrose in Paris, 1968.
Photograph by Christine Pearcey.
Courtesy of the artist



Penny Slinger with Max Ernst.

