

# Interview with Penny Slinger

Penelope Slinger was born in London in 1947 and graduated from Chelsea Art College in 1969 with a body of work made as a feminist reaction to Max Ernst's collages. Since then, Penny's art practice has constantly shifted mediums and viewpoints irrespective of art world trends, or profitability—as a result, decades worth of work remain unseen by the art world. In all of its iterations, Penny Slinger's body of work is mutable, erotic, confrontational, mystical, and unapologetically Goddess-worshipping.

This past summer I went to visit Penny at her home and studio, The Goddess Temple, a sprawling group of buildings constructed in honor of the Divine Feminine. The Goddess Temple is hidden deep in a grove of redwood trees in the Santa Cruz Mountains, with the word *Resurgam* emblazoned on the awning of the main building. *Resurgam* is Latin for “I shall rise again”—a bittersweet sentiment, as the Goddess Temple currently faces financial hardship and possible closure. I kept repeating the word under my breath during my visit, like a prayer or a spell.

**Eliza Swann: Let's talk about this place, your home and studio. It's amazing here! Tell me about The Goddess Temple—what's the story?**

Penny Slinger: [My husband] Christopher Hills built this place as his retreat property—he was guided to it by divination. He built it to be a safe place on the planet to take the limits off and experience the Goddess' energy direct. He built this place on the principles of sacred geometry and connected it to the sacred energy of the redwood groves. After he passed I have held it in that way. This place has been known as The Goddess Temple—I'm Reverend of

The Goddess Temple, which I established here under the umbrella of the Universal Church of the Master.

**ES: She needs strong reps these days. So, what kinds of work do you do for the Goddess here?**

PS: Right (laughs). There's an amazing energy here and I want to share it as much as possible. We've had performances and multimedia video recordings and parties on key dates like the solstices and equinoxes. It is all dedicated to Her. It's like a healing circle between The Divine and the Earthly realms. When I invite people here it's to be part of this sort of blessing, really.

For the last few years we've been trying to see what's going to happen to the next phase of the evolution here. This space really needs to have some financial support beyond ourselves in order to be able to continue. Once it's had some upgrades done that it needs, it can be offered back out to share again in the form of retreats, gatherings, salons, and bringing artists here for sabbaticals. We need to make it more of a busy heart center for the new paradigm, which is what Christopher said it should be.

**ES: For me, holding space for Goddess worship is a way of accessing stories and tools for resistance and renewal that are in danger of being erased. We need to share human histories that took**

Eliza Swann is an interdisciplinary artist, intuitive, writer, educator, and community organizer based in Los Angeles. Eliza received a BFA from SFAI, trained in hypnotherapy at the Isis Centre, Hindu cosmology with Dr. Vagish Shastri in India, Tarot and Western Magical Practice with the B.O.T.A. Western Mystery School, and received an MFA from Central St. Martins. Eliza is the founder of The Golden Dome School.



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Penny Slinger, *The Web* (1973-74).  
Collage. Image courtesy of  
Broadway 1602.

**place before widespread patriarchy and capitalism to let us know what is possible for humanity. Have you noticed an upswing in interest or support for the Goddess Temple under our new presidential administration?**

PS: No, I haven't yet. One of the most upsetting things about the current regime is that they seem to [be] going backwards in the raising of consciousness that has been evolving about the impact that human life is having on the rest of the ecosystem. I love and embrace all life as part of my self and feel as if my very body is being ripped apart when assaults to the environment occur. If indeed our consciousness makes us the top of the life chain, we sacrifice that position when we plunder earth's body.

I am not sure at this point what the future holds. I am ready to move on from the Goddess Temple if that is what the Universe requires. If support comes and I am enabled to stay here, I will continue and advance the program. That consists of using the facilities to gather those who are the change makers, the visionaries, and give them the opportunity to experience the pure flow of Goddess energy available here.

The beacon of light that the Goddess Temple is will continue to transmit, come what may.

**ES: Do you find that the fine art world is uncomfortable with mystical work that isn't made in the minimalist tradition? I've personally had a hell of a time being taken seriously. It's a little easier here in Los Angeles, but not much.**

PS: I've found that. In fact a couple of my galleries told me I had to redo my website, which I did do. And I made it, I hope, much more art-world friendly.

They said "you mentioned Goddess too much and it's putting our buyers off."

**ES: It seems like the art world has been more interested in classifying you as a 1970s feminist. I've always wondered why the academic and psychological aspects of feminism might be palatable for art world folks, but you can't say the word "Goddess" if you want to be taken seriously. Why do you think the art world isn't ready for representations of the divine feminine?**

PS: This is quite a complex question.

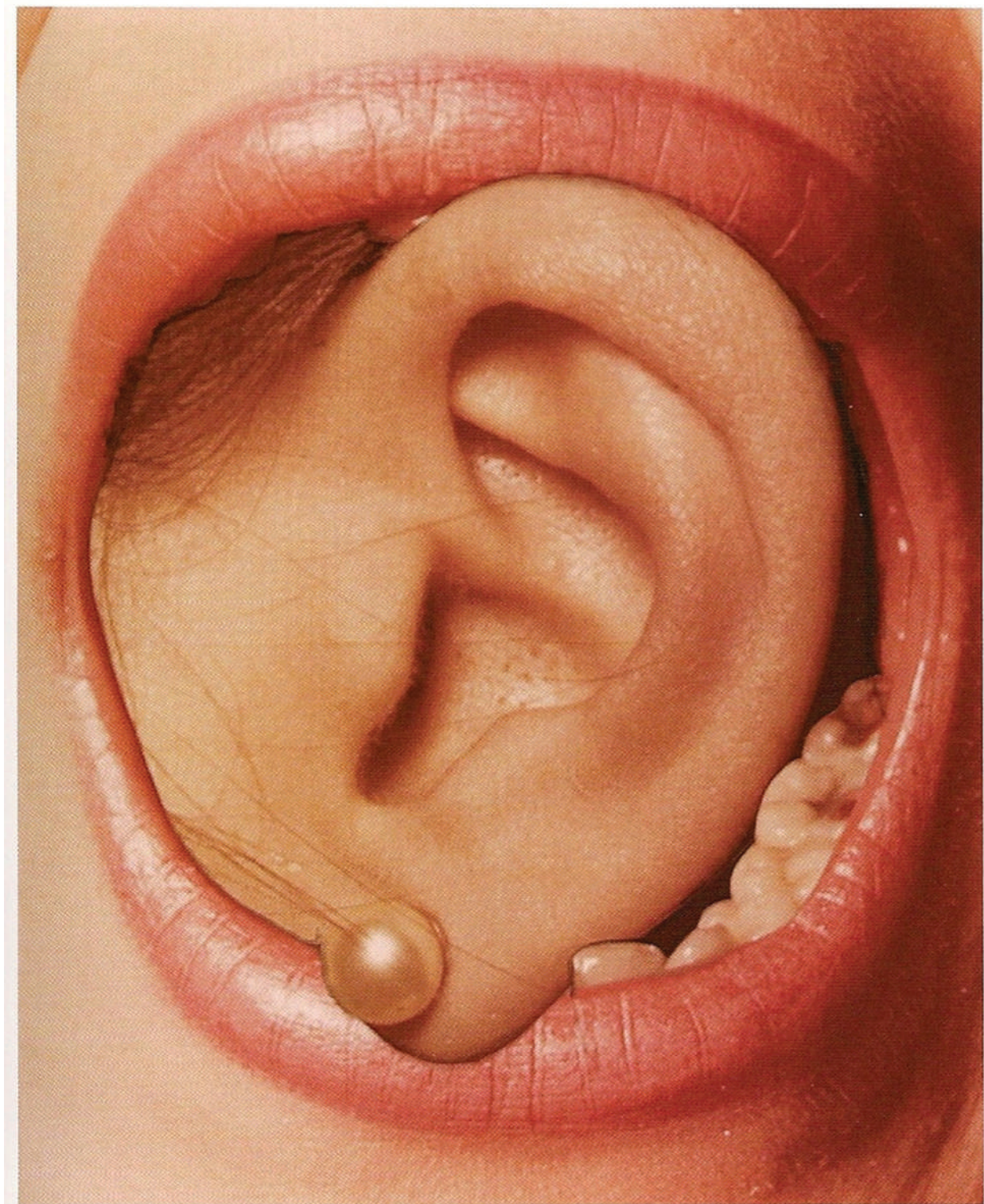
The Goddess movement has picked up a lot of steam since I discovered Her in the early 1970s and when I started doing events and gatherings in Her honor at the end of the 1990s. On the one hand I could reflect that this is great news; that the things I believe hold the keys to evolution are percolating into the social fabric. However, as tends to be the case with any popularization, there is also a diminution of essence, a trivialization, a tendency to take things at face value and face glamor, rather than penetrating to the heart and core of what these things really represent.

To embrace the Goddess in one's life is so much more than putting on a crown and dressing up like one! It is about cultivating all the qualities the Divine Feminine represents in one's heart and consciousness

Penny Slinger is (born London 1947), graduated with a first class honors degree from Chelsea College of Art 1969. In the 1970s she was known for her pioneering Feminist Surrealist collage work. She has published several book including *An Exorcism*, *Sexual Secrets*, *The Alchemy of Ecstasy*, and *The Secret Dakini Oracle*. Penny lived in the Caribbean for 15 years where her work focused on the Arawak Indians. In 1994 she came to California. She is represented by Riflemaker Gallery (London), and Blum & Poe (LA, New York & Tokyo).

**Penny Slinger**





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Penny Slinger, *I Hear What  
You Say* (1973). Collage.  
Image courtesy of the Roland  
Penrose Collection.





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Penny Slinger, *Transmutation  
of Equatorial forest -  
The Hermaphrodite*, (1969).  
Collage. Image courtesy  
of the artist.

and having these principles be the guiding light of all one's actions. This is profound spiritual and psychological work, demanding an absolute kind of commitment. In this society, so addicted to instant gratification, many who receive a taste of this rarefied domain are suddenly teachers, without putting in the kind of self-work required to earn and own that position.

In a lot of the art these days dedicated to the Goddess I also find the kind of honed and refined aesthetic that I respond to is missing. In this way, I can understand why the fine art world may be leery.

Be this as it may, there must be a place for the Goddess in the field of fine art, for it is Her time and those on the cutting edge of social and cultural change know that. My dedication to intense self-scrutiny has brought me here. And I have been schooled in fine art as well as my own direct experience.

**ES: I am really moved by your collage book trilogy: *The 50% The Visible Woman* (1971), *An Exorcism* (1977), and *Mountain Ecstasy* (1978).**

PS: *The 50% The Visible Woman* was made while I was still a student at Chelsea College and I discovered Max Ernst and his collage books. I did my thesis in response to those books and made a film and my own collage book. I hadn't seen anyone really using the tools that Surrealism provided to explore the depths of the feminine psyche and to lay that bare. I collaged pictures of myself and then I wrote poems to go over them. I was very dedicated to the idea of being my own muse, and not being seen through the lens of a male artist, but seen through my own lens. I've done that all my life in work—being the seen and the seer.

So in that space I plunged into this book, *An Exorcism*. And one of the very first images in the book is called *The Brick Wall Behind The Door*, and to me that was a really shocking image of when you open the door to the imagination to go through to your magic world, and it's got a brick wall behind it and you can't get in! And in front of it, Peter (an ex of mine) as the man, the male archetype in the book, he's holding the key. The question was "why has the man got the key?" What are the things that are projected on to me by my whole cultural milieu? What are the things projected on to me by my partner? And what are my things? Who am I in all this?

I worked on it for seven years. I mean it was a big work. I didn't only do the collages; I did a lot of writing. I did a whole film script about it.

After that, I discovered Tantra. I discovered Tantra at an exhibition of Tantric art, the first one in the UK back in 1973. When I was nearly complete with *The Exorcism*, I met Nik Douglas and I went to India for the first time—Thailand, Nepal, all these places.

*Mountain Ecstasy* was really just our playing and coming together, me teaching Nik how to do collage. We were doing these pictures for our own pleasure. Everything was just juicy and erotic and full of bliss and the divine and the profane. Everything all at once.

And they put it out as a book—it did get into trouble. Thousands of copies got seized by British customs and burned as pornography. I had a show in London, and I had a show in New York after. It was too rich really for the British palate, too colorful.

**ES: Your description of working on *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972) is super intense. The film is built around a long sequence**

**that is a sort of group therapy on acid, right? The melt-downs sound horrific. The emotional pain, psychic death, crucifixion. You were doing feminist work with Jane Arden and theatre group, Holocaust: A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches...**

PS: Well, you know, I had never liked to label myself a feminist because of the flavor that feminism had at that time. Of late I've been much more willing to take on that mantle because feminism is now a lot more inclusive—for instance of sexuality, sensuality, and spirituality.

In England in the '60s, women hardly owned their sexuality at all. In those nascent years it didn't feel like it was a very full body experience let's put it like that. It seemed to be much more like, we want the power that men have had and we're gonna get in that world and fight for it. I didn't resonate with the feminist scene because I felt that female qualities needed to be recognized and empowered in their own right too. I have a body and I want to own that body. I want women to be seen for all of ourselves, as full psycho-sensual emotional beings.

Eventually I did become part of this all-women's theater group, Holocaust. And that was because when I went to that first meeting and met Jane Arden, she talked about how she wanted to create artwork that was from a political and an embodied perspective.

With *The Other Side of the Underneath*, we were trying to shake out all the sacred cows and really get in people's faces. We wanted to present the blood and guts of feminism, not just the intellectual and political and more heady kind of side of it.

**ES: What's your relationship to feminism now in your work?**

PS: I got the opportunity to connect back into the fine art world in England with a couple of exhibitions—at The Tate with *The Angels of Anarchy* (2009) show and then at Riflemaker Gallery (2015). The recognition I've been getting has all been around the work that I was doing in the '60s and '70s and hasn't gone past my discovery of Tantra. At this point it doesn't seem like the fine art world is ready yet for the divine feminine work, which is where I've been all these last years since. This year I worked for awhile on a project called *Reclaiming Scarlet* with a young woman who's very much part of this whole wave of feminism that's happening now with The Red Tent movement.

I haven't yet got an outlet for that even though it's in a more proto-feminist surrealist style. My gallery in London just wrote to me and said, "It's very strong and it's very real, but I don't know that there's a market for it." I want to do something that shows that I'm not just a historical figure. I want people to recognize that someone in her later years can be totally relevant and do something in society rather than being cast aside as no longer of use. I would like to have some success and some recognition this time not only for the old work, but for what I'm doing now. I want to put a stake in the ground for all women of this age whose wisdom hasn't been percolated back into the world.

This is why we have such an immature, materialistic society; the wisdom of older women is not being put back into the energy cycles. People are going off into old people's homes filled with drugs to veg them out.

**ES: Are you still using your body as the main vehicle for your collages and life casts?**

PS: Yes, I am using my body in my latest work. I'm 68 and my body has changed somewhat, but it hasn't changed that much since I was 28. So I am wanting to use that as my vessel and to bring that forward to make this statement about it not being over. I'm still embodied!

**ES: Do you have any advice for young artists and activists trying to cope with the Trump presidency?**

PS: Art is the instrument we use to lift the veils and give insight into what is otherwise invisible. At this time I fully believe that awareness needs to come through an opening of the heart. Any work that an artist can do to help do this, even if it means ripping the heart open, is where it's at. We need to melt the deep freeze of the collective numbness. And it starts with the self. I believe only that which is deeply felt can be in the politics of self, that there can be no political change without inner revolution.





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Penny Slinger, *A Difficult Position (An Exorcism)* (1970-77).  
Collage on card. Image  
courtesy of the artist.