

## Art, Feminism, Magic: An Interview with Penny Slinger

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[Interview by journalist Zora Burden, special to *The Wild Hunt*]

**Zora Burden:** Your work was so revolutionary and ahead of its time. Will you talk about how you became interested in archetypes, metaphysics and surrealism?

**Penny Slinger:** When I did my thesis at art school, I was looking through the history of art and trying to see what really interested me and I noticed that woman as muse was such a central theme to a lot of art but it was generally women looked at through the lens of the male artists. That became pivotal for me. I wanted to be my own muse. I wanted to be the one who was actually observing, as well as observed. This is very important to me. The importance of the woman's eye, rather the woman as the one who is seen. That has been, through all my work, a very central theme and core to it.

When I was trying to do my thesis at Chelsea Art School, I discovered Max Ernst. I was thinking - what do I really want to do my thesis about? I wanted to find something that was going to be an absolutely juicy topic for me, not something that was just going to be academically stimulating. That seemed boring. I wanted something I could really get my teeth into as an artist and would really be provocative for me to be working on. So I started pouring through all the art history books at the library in the art school and thinking about what *really* interests me. What is the core of my interests in art manifestation? What do I find myself most turned on by throughout the history of art?

In doing that, I realized that the human figure, especially the female, the human body was for me an absolutely prime interface. I still feel this way. The human body is our interface with everything we experience, our senses, it's our antennae, everything about this vehicle is something that we then interact with through all our other perceptions of what happens in the world. So first and foremost, the human form. But what about the human form? I'm not that interested in the representations of the human body. I'm not interested in just portraits. I'm not interested in just showing what is. I'm interested in the symbolism of it, in the mythology of it, in the magic of it. In using that human form to show something beyond the physical manifestation, to use that human form to show the multidimensionality that it is heir to.

As I looked through the history of art in different cultures, I found a lot of things in the ancient worlds; in India, in the East, in Egypt and all those cultures which totally embodied that for me. It was in all these highly spiritual cultures where the human form was then used in anthropomorphic ways, in ways that showed a whole mythic nature to that being. I really appreciated and resonated with that. Interestingly enough, in the history of art course, I think we had two classes in the whole of the three years that dealt with the East and with India, no more than that. I thought this was fascinating but it's not really super relevant to what people looking at this now are going to feel connected to and triggered by. It is totally relevant to me because it's timeless but not so relevant to this thesis. I thought what can I find that is more contemporary in the field of art that is going to tap those same kind of veins for me and give me that same kind of mythic feel.

It is then that I discovered the collage books of Max Ernst. That was a revelation for me because at that time in England, there wasn't really much knowledge of Surrealism or exposure to it and we didn't learn much about that in our art classes. I had also used collage from the time I was a little girl lying in bed cutting up magazines and creating images. I used bits of paper in different colors and cut out particular bits of colors or tore them out and stuck them down to reshape them, to create new forms and textures. But you could see all the bits of paper stuck together. I found Max Ernst's work in these two collage books *La Femme 100 Têtes* or *Woman with 100 Heads* or *Without Head* and *Une Semaine de Bonté* or *A Week of Kindness*. These were seamless new realities. Where he'd taken these old engravings and stuck them together but you couldn't see they were stuck together, you couldn't tell that they were collages. It was this new world that he'd created with bits of the old world but they were in a total immersive environment, which you couldn't see the edges of. That for me was a big aha moment of - *oh wow, you can do that?*

You can create new realities like this with previously unconnected realities. He had women with wings, bird headed people, snakes, lion headed men, in all these very surreal and compelling, atmospheric, so *atmospheric*, immersive situations. I thought this is what I want to work with. I wrote my thesis but I also made a film at the same time using images of his collages from his books and other related imagery from my research in books, all kinds of mythic pieces in the weave. Then I shot live footage of oceans and internal organs, all kinds of things. I made this montage film as part of my thesis. For the third part of my thesis, I made a book of my own collages and poems, which was *50% the Visible Woman*. I bound it myself, which I learned how to do at art school. This was me using my inspiration from his work to create my own work in homage to him. I took the tools of surrealism but applied them to photographic collage work, rather than the old engravings he was using and making it something to expose and express the feminine psyche, which I hadn't seen done before.

**ZB: You eventually got to meet Max Ernst and other original surrealists?**

**PS:** I did actually meet him in person through Sir Roland Penrose, who was someone I went to in order to find out more about surrealism. He was a biographer of the surrealists, friend of the surrealists, and surrealist painter himself. He became my patron for a number of years. He introduced me to Max Ernst when I went to Paris. That was a dream come true. I wanted to make sure how I was writing about him, was true to him. I was studying at the same time Carl Jung's *Symbols of Transformation, Psychology and Alchemy, Mysterium Coniunctionis*, all these books on the alchemy of the psyche, which were so expansive and multidimensional. I adored Jung. I didn't like Freud so much, I found him very reductionist.

I brought Jung's way of looking and principles of psychiatry into my probing of the psyche and the collage manifestations of Max Ernst. He was wonderful. I was having a love affair with him through his work, so by the time I met him he was much older. The young artist who had made these collage books, he wasn't anymore, but his spirit was still there. It was interesting, he had more of an androgynous nature to him as he became older. He was so delightful to me, and I was lucky I went with a friend of mine, a student at Chelsea, who took some photos of us together. As we ended the meeting Dorothea Tanning came into the room with her two dogs and greeted us.

**ZB: Your art, particularly for *An Exorcism*, is so raw and vulnerable. It took a lot of courage and bravery as a woman then to create it and seems incredibly empowering. How were you able to be so explicit and fearless in your openness at the time?**

**PS:** Well, my middle name is Delve, so I don't think I had any choice! I had to dig deep. That whole *Exorcism* series came out of my own pain. I was losing my relationship with Peter Whitehead, the

filmmaker I was living with. It fell apart, very much as a result of my engagement with feminism and work within the women's theater group. Our relationship disintegrated and I fell apart as a result of that. I think, so many women know that feeling of when a relationship falls apart, that it's one of the most challenging times in one's life. Then you say, well, who I am? What does it all mean? Because in a relationship, it's like a part of yourself goes out into that other person and you see the other as a reflection of your inner self. So when that gets destroyed, it's as if part of you is ripped out and you feel empty and alone and wonder what is my meaning?

*An Exorcism* was a process. It was an engagement with my own process of trying find out through the devastation that I felt in that breakup. Well who am I? What is mine? What has society projected on me and what has been projected on me by my partner? It was like a whole unraveling, sort of a detective story, which I'm trying to investigate. The beginning of the book has a man with a key and a horrific symbol of the open door in front of a bricked up wall. I often think of happiness being defined by doors opening everywhere, you have so much potential, there's so many opportunities and that feels so bright, you have so much to move forward to. But when suddenly the doors are closed, you're in this dark corridor and it's like the door to one's own inner world has been blocked off.

For me, always, the saving grace has been my own inner world, my own inner landscape, that no matter what happens outside, you always have your own world of inner magic and fantasy to be able to return to and probe. You'll never be alone with that. But when that feels somewhat blocked off, which is what I felt then, I have to now go into this process of self-exploration to find out why I'm in this predicament.

It was a seven-year venture, from the time of taking pictures at the beginning in this empty, derelict mansion house, Lilford Hall in Northamptonshire, to the completion on the publication of it in 1977. In that time, I went into this very deliberate inner probing where each of the images consolidated into the collages of *An Exorcism*. I hadn't known anyone else attempt this in that manner before. I was trying to depict and embody in each of those images a state of mind, a state of being, a feeling, a psychological framework.

I used my own images; of Peter, of animals and birds, of myself, my girlfriend as my alter ego. I used my own archetypal players in this, who were actual players in real life but I used them as mythic and archetypal figures. I wanted them to represent these archetypal anima/animus figures in Jungian language, that would hold the vibrations of these states of mind and of being, which I felt, when I really went in and distilled it, were again quite archetypal. I had chapters which were going through these different phases of looking at all the aspects in one's life from childhood on through. It does go into technically ego loss work - the death of the self, the letting go, and the rebirth at the end. It was like a redemption and at the end I have the man inside me, having incorporated him, and I'm holding the key. I'm emerging into the light again and I have the key to all this in my own possession. To me, that justifies going into the darkness, so that one wouldn't be consumed by fear.

I do believe things like the fear of death are shadows which haunt us and if we're never prepared to look it in the eye, then it's always going to hold this shadow over us, which keeps us locked into a certain framework that we can't escape from until we actually confront it and own it. Now we talk about descent work and shadow work. At that time these ideas weren't really in consciousness in general but I felt they were absolutely key and important. So I felt I had no choice, that I had to do this work, in order to really know myself. I remember going to a psychiatrist during the break up, I was so distraught. He saw me for a couple of sessions and said you know I don't think I need to see you again because you're doing your own psychiatry with your own artwork. I said well thank you, that's what I feel I am doing. That's my own psychoanalysis that I took upon myself and then depicted it through the art of the alchemy. It's like the Nigredo, going into the darkness, that dark matter, which is the raw substance.

Unless you get to that really dark stuff, you don't have all that compost out of which to grow the seeds of the new reality, the one forged when you find those things that can become the pure gold. From the coal become that diamond.

***ZB: Will you talk about how you began creating art as a very young child? You did a nude of your parents when you were four? Was there anyone who artistically inspired you in your youth?***

**PS:** *That drawing.* (laughs) I didn't have a direct memory at the time but that story has always produced a lot of laughter in the family because it did set the tone for how my work was both appreciated and also perceived by my family, my parents. They've both passed now but it was always a source of great pride because of my talents and gifts that they didn't really know where it had come from since no one in my family had that kind of artistic expression. At the same time because it was so bold and embarrassing for them, they wanted to hide it. They wanted to show it but thought how can we because we are naked. I did tend to do that all my life and in my work, it's very unveiled. I was brought up in a pretty typical middle class environment. I didn't have much in my background to bring me to the place that I took off from but I think there's blood family and there's spirit family.

I remember at a certain point in my formative years feeling frustrated there were other girls whose parents were very much in the art world. I thought, why weren't my parents like that? This isn't fair, they're so ordinary, I want something extraordinary! I do think that my parents did give me so many gifts that I only really came to understand later because when I was younger I spent a lot of energy kicking against what I had been brought up into. Being a rebel isn't really a choice, it's something you just can't help, either you fit in or you don't. I didn't really fit in. I didn't feel like everybody else. I felt different, I felt strange, like a stranger in a strange land often. I wondered what I was doing here. I used to fantasize that I had been adopted and they didn't want to tell me. As I got older, I realized all the things I did actually did get from both of them, they were very fine qualities, even if it didn't fit into my view of what it meant to be an artist.

Also, the fact that they did appreciate my talents and didn't try and stop me from being who I was. I had a lisp, I was born with a club foot, I had all these issues but my father and mother really loved me so much. They made me feel that my differentness wasn't because I was lesser than but because I was special. That was a very strong foundation and a lot of people don't have that. I feel so sorry for children who are brought up with parents who don't give them that kind of support. Though I may not have appreciated it deeply at the time, they did give me the strength in something to fall back on in all those times when I did feel alienated and unable to fit in and conform. Though I had to break away because it just didn't work for me. I looked at that whole societal complex and asked is this really where happiness resides? Is this fulfilling? Is this something I can accept to have more of the same? I realized I couldn't.

A few years back when I was in London, I met someone I had known at school when I was 16 or 17 and he said, "You know, you were so different, you kept about from everybody, you traveled to other countries when no one else was and doing all these things." He just knew that I was going to have a different kind of life. I was like that because I just couldn't fit into the boxes that were there for people to fit into. I think some people inherit the legacy of the parents and stay the same. My brothers ended up living very close to my parents and in similar life paths. I knew that wasn't going to work for me. There were painful years, when I know that I hurt them because I had to cut them off but at that phase in one's life, you can't help being selfish in trying to find out who you are. Later, once you know and have your path, you can afford to be more compassionate and generous and empathetic towards others but you have to claim yourself first.

I didn't really have any women artist role models. Much later on I discovered Frida Kahlo. There were influences in the art world like Alberto Giacometti for his intensity and German Expressionists like Egon Schiele. Giacometti, he did these strange, tall, elongated figures and these very gray portraits but what fascinated me about him was he created these pictures with this deep, intense concentration. It was his process really, not so much the end result but being able to see in the artwork the intensity of his looking and his process, that's what fascinated me. Egon Schiele had a very angst ridden style of drawing that really appealed to me at that time in my life.

There was one time when I was 15 or 16 and I went up to London. I was walking around some art exhibits and I went into a gallery and saw this man who was speaking French with a few people listening to him. I saw his aura, it was so big and he had such a powerful presence and I found out it was Giacometti. I have had many artistic inspirations since then but I remember when attending grammar school, where I went from maybe 10 to 15, I had a teacher who taught history. When she taught us about Egypt, it was a place where I felt such connection and resonance, plus it helped she had a hairstyle that looked like Nefertiti. (laughs) So all the pieces came together for me in those classes. I really loved her.

***ZB: Will you explain what about collage work appealed to you so much and how integral it is to manifestation?***

**PS:** I love collage because it allows you to take pieces of the real world and reformat them into another magical reality. That for me is very freeing and liberating, whether it's just to do with the mental space, the mind field, all those places which are the mind sky or whether it's something which penetrates down into the material plane. It's that freedom to live in your own world and create your own world at any time and place. You don't need to be limited and locked down and confined by any precepts of what reality says you can have. The world of the imagination is so deep and rich. It's that which connects this physical plane to the astral or the etheric, whatever you want to call it.

I have never any problem with inspiration, with manifestation and the tools to do that. I often feel like I can only touch the edge of the hem of the skirt of the magnificence of what the Goddess shows us in her realms of multi-dimensional reality. It's so rich and infinite, that field of potential. Those little bits that one can bring down and bring in and manifest are like lifting the edge of the carpet of seeing underneath this huge resource, this huge magnificent realm, which is unlimited and unfettered. That's one of the reasons I like collage. It just allows you to let the elements dance together in an arena beyond the confines of this world circus, to say anything is possible. It's about when you can feel there's so much potential and possibility and one is not hemmed in or pinned down. I don't want to be a butterfly pinned into someone's collection. I want to be able to fly freely between all the realms and gather all the visions and stardust and weave them together into new beautiful pictures of unfolding realities, which don't have any limits to what they can do and where they can go.

If we can't bring magic into life, then what's the point? Unfortunately, a lot of the social structures are very limiting to that. This whole economic reality which makes us confined to having to do jobs, having to do this, that and the other, in order to just survive. So much pins us down into being just a small fraction of our multidimensional beings. I hope that we can shift this into something a little more glorious. All of nature is so profoundly magical. But instead of being that, we just make nature into some sort of resource, which humans are there to plunder and serve their means, is so short sighted and unsustainable.

***ZB: Can you give an example of what your artistic process is like? What is your preferred work environment or atmosphere?***

**PS:** I've worked in so many different fields and atmospheres in my work, each one has had a different kind of milieu or feeling that wraps it all around. At this point, I'm able to function in many different artistic environments. It's nice to be able to shift between the different realms. Each kind of process has its own sets of circumstances.

When I was doing the cut and paste kind of collage, I used to lay all my images out on the floor, cut things out and then be surrounded with all these images like a sea. Then I would bring one of my sets or backgrounds in and put it in front of me and then from this sea of images I'd bring in different players, different dancers and then let them interact and play within the set. Then wait and see when they would have certain gestures or movements that they would then reflect some kind of timeless, frozen moment, evocative of things beyond just what's represented. That's a very intangible thing but you know it when you see it. I used all kinds of ways of getting myself in the right state of mind. I had a friend, Jenny Fabian, who was a writer, she had to take a whole cornucopia of uppers and downers before she could get to the right balance, so she could write. I experimented with all kinds of modes of consciousness because I think an artist really has to look at consciousness. I'd say at this point; I can work in any kind of environment.

I work a lot on the computer these days doing digital collage. That's a different kind of interaction. There's another kind of meditation one has when working on a painting, that's a different kind of feedback loop. The paintings would often speak to me. When I was painting Kali at one point, there was a time when I felt her energy and spirit come into the picture, really early on when it was a rough sketch. After that, every mark on the canvas was done with a lot of reverence because she was really there. Then in the studio, working on photographic shoots, in relation to say the Dakinis, that's a whole other kind of practice.

It's always very important for me to create a sacred space where I could have the person, if I'm working with a model, be able to relax into that, to be able to see you behind the camera, not as someone outside of themselves observing them but as someone who is part of them with the camera, as a third eye viewing them rather than a critical eye or objective viewer. This creates that synthesis, that symbiotic loop, where there's this rarified atmosphere which is magical and allows people to go beyond themselves and bring out things that are unexpected and revelatory really.

For me, art is always a mixture of the intention and that kind of divine accident and you try to create space for that to happen within it. That's the magic force the theater produces when you've got everything set right. That is a ritual space but I don't always do it when I'm just working with my own work, with intentionality of creating ritual in a very formal way. It's almost as though that's already established and set up. I've never had any kind of lack of inspiration. I'm so fortunate that the muse is always with me and dancing in my mind space over time. Then it's just about what is priority to be manifested at that moment.

I'm currently doing big pieces that are three dimensional. This is very demanding on me physically. It's hard, getting older, things can be demanding. I'm attacking these very physical things at this point in my life, at 69 years old, as part of a heroine's journey that I'm prepared to bravely take on doing this. A lot of really well known artists have interns or people who do these physical things for them and eventually I'm going to need that but I want to be able to show that a woman of a certain age is not ready to be thrown into a junk pile or the old people's home or considered irrelevant. I want to show it's my time now to feed my wisdom back into society because that's what society is missing - the wisdom of the elders, with its cult of youth. It can enrich society if we are seen and recognized and understood as being vital and relevant. Not just for myself but for all the other women and their wisdom, who are sitting out

there on the sidelines and need to be in the center of the circle. We need to rejuvenate and regenerate this whole pool of consciousness we're pouring our energy into as we get older.

**ZB: *Was some of your early art originally created solely for yourself as a kind of catharsis, a therapy and personal journey or did you mean for it to have an audience?***

**PS:** I don't see any difference or barrier between that which is of the self and that which is of the other, if you go deeply enough. That goes along with my theory of politics, politics are of the self. Unless you can make inner change, I don't think it's possible to make outer change. You can't make that change unless you're able to be really open, vulnerable and exposed. Unless you can confront it all full frontal, you're only going to get half the picture, you know 50% the visible woman, not 100%. I just try to get to as much of 100% as I can, to peel off those layers. First you take off the skin and then you have muscle, then you take off the muscle and there's the viscera and then you get down to the bones. You have to be prepared to do that psychic strip tease all the way down. You have to see that interface between spirit and matter in all its layers and all its manifestations. Only then can you hope to get to anything deep enough to make any real change.

I'm prepared to put myself and all my feelings and experiences on the line for the transformation and for the alchemy and for the empowerment of the feminine and the realization of what feminine nature is. Back in the days of second wave feminism, I was never really able to fully equate with it because it didn't seem to be getting to the depths of the feminine psyche, it seemed only to do with getting the same power that men had, which was only the tip of the iceberg and there were no real answers there. I felt we needed to get to the point where the inner workings of the feminine were honored, where intuition resides and all these things that really had been veiled to us through social mores. They needed to be ripped away and unveiled. Then we get a chance to get to the soul and connection, which connects us to our own inner self and to everything, both material and spiritual, all at once.

**ZB: *Will you talk about your use of poetry and text in your art and the dark humor you used to convey your intentions?***

**PS:** Humor has always been a life line for me and not taking myself, or the situations I find myself in, ultimately too seriously. Even in the darkest times, a sense of humor can lighten everything and make the most daunting material approachable. I've always loved the combination of word and image. I like to have that connection between the two because I think there is a space that opens up when you can ignite with words and embody with the image. I've always loved words *and* images.

I used to get into trouble at school when I would write because I never used punctuation, I'd just use dashes because it was the way I really enjoyed writing and using words. It was like one stream of consciousness that wasn't edited and was really flowing through. It's that flow, that's the poetic flow and that to me has always been as vital and exciting as the visual side of it too. I've always loved to use those together. When I did *50% The Visible Woman* I came up with the idea of the transparent pages with poetry on it overlaid over the image, so I could place the words on the page in relation to the imagery and cement that connection between the two. That they aren't separate but are interwoven, so those things that can't quite be articulated with words can come across in an image but there is a wonderful opening into realms that can happen with the poetic use of language.

I've always appreciated the poetic form. It's an intricate part of how I see, it's just as powerful and beautiful and provocative as any painting or image. I was thinking of doing a publication that would redefine words that we use and taking out their negative overlays and bringing them back to their purity of essence, so we can start using words again with their full power and magical potency. It's just one of the projects that I haven't manifested yet.

**ZB: Will you talk about the creation of the film *The Other Side of the Underneath* and what that experience was like for you?**

**PS:** The *Other Side of the Underneath* came out of the theater production *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets, and Witches*. I joined this all women theater group a couple of years after I left art school. I was looking for a place where I could share the creative process with others and be part of something larger than myself. When Jane Arden, the actress, playwright, and activist for female rights held a meeting to form this troupe, the first of its kind in England, I jumped on board when she mentioned the key words of creative collaboration and manifestation. We called our group *Holocaust* because Jane wanted to dramatically emphasize the plight of women and suggest that it was akin to one of history's greatest atrocities.

The evolution of the theater piece came through the workshops we did, with Jane presiding, where we dug up all our wounds, power plays and complexes and sought to consolidate their essence in archetypal vignettes to shock and awaken consciousness around these issues. In 1971, we presented at the Open Space Theater in London and at the Edinburgh Film Festival. After that we went on to transform this into a film and went to Wales where we lived, commune style, in an old derelict pub for the duration of the project and process. I played a leading role and co-art directed. It was a very powerful and transformative experience, both full of elation and wrought with angst.

Many of the participants took psychedelics for the first time, on film, as part of the 'group therapy' experiment. I took my first mind altering tab of sunshine on film but in my own private session. Jane asked me to enter the trip on the theme of oppression, but my experience took me to the other end of the spectrum, as I found it liberating and enlightening and helped me access those parts of myself that were whole, intact and in connection with the universe.

*The Other Side of the Underneath* certainly forged new territory in the field of filmmaking and was the only feature film directed by a woman in that time period. It took the precepts of unorthodox psychiatrist R. D. Laing and tried to make a work of art out of this 'anti-psychiatry' approach. However, after the film was shot, the group fell apart as Jane and Jack Bond, her partner and producer of the movie, dropped out of sight and went on to edit and complete the film without the participation of the group. The fall out in the wake of the experience we shared was pretty brutal. For me it resulted in the breakup of my relationship with film maker Peter Whitehead, which took me many years to process.

**CUT HERE SECOND PART SEXUALITY AND DAKINI-----**

**ZB: In your work, you address the subject matter of bi-sexuality and embracing the alchemical concepts of uniting the masculine and feminine within oneself. Do you see a connection between bi-sexuality and the integration of the psyche through spiritual alchemy?**

**PS:** For a number of years, I tried to manifest what I conceived of as being the perfect relationship dynamic for my nature. However, I never really succeeded. I had brief tastes of it, but nothing truly sustainable. It is hard to achieve in this culture and with the power plays that exist in the male/female interface. What I wanted was to have a relationship with a man and a woman, where we all loved each other equally and the energy could flow freely between the three of us. As far as magical formulas exist, I feel the power of three is so amazingly dynamic and full of limitless potential. I love and appreciate women. I have always had women as muses, and I love men.

I felt that if we could get beyond ego, competition and the normal dyad, we could enter realms of pure and exquisite vibration. But it's hard to achieve. We are so insecure in our sense of self. Men are so addicted to holding the reins of power that this virgin territory can feel unnerving and unnavigable. The



only times it seemed to work, if just for a fleeting moment, was when the two women were the primary relationship and bond, and the man was introduced by mutual choice. But to have a sustainable three-way dynamic was beyond my ability to sustain, at least with all the inherited imprinting our flesh is heir to, the social conventions that lock us down.

So although my ideal was not able to be fully manifested in my life, I did keep trying, despite the hurt and fall out. I have always attempted to swim to those further shores in the expression of my art. I have attempted to give form to the male and female sides of myself all my life and enjoy the exchange, both the duality and the reconciliation in union. I have never felt that art and life should be separate functions, so I have tried to play out and integrate it all in '*my life as art*'. My failures are as relevant as my successes, for they all have taken the courage required to put myself on the line, use myself as my own guinea pig in the laboratory of life and the test tube of my own body. I have experimented and I have calibrated the results. I may not have come up with the workable solutions I desired to create new blueprints, but I have held the vision of their possibility and worked towards creating openings in consciousness for them to become realities. I hope we can evolve towards it. Suppressing one's inner androgyny is just as damaging to men as much as for women, as they can't really be open to their feminine sides.

I think about the Divine Feminine coming in is not just to do with women, it's about men being able to own those qualities in their hearts too. Anyone who is involved in an act of creativity or an act of alchemy, you know alchemy is the joining of the sun and the moon, fire and water, the mother and father, the union of the opposites, all magical acts and all creative acts come out of the union and fusion of these. All of these acts are about recognizing the male and female within. We all have all these qualities.

With this gender fluidity, certainly many artists and creative people understand and recognize much more in themselves than the normal male and female in society. This is super important for our evolution into the next level of humanity to be honest. Certainly in my life, I have explored the nature of the self in many different ways. It's so key not to be stuck in these stereotypes of role playing and to be able to shift out of those boxes and into some understanding of the nature of self, which includes all of it, it's the appreciation of everything. We shut ourselves down by our own perceptions of what is socially acceptable and what a man or woman should do, we're only living a small part of our full potential and we could free ourselves from gender specific roles.

***ZB: Will you talk about the sacredness of sexuality and eroticism that is reflected in your art? How you are trying to convey in your art that all sexuality is sacred, not just in a ritual context?***

**PS:** The ritual space is the mindset, the cave of the heart and the way consciousness views all phenomena. Once we reset our way of viewing these things, the whole landscape shifts. Either nothing is sacred or it all is. This is the shift in perspective the Goddess wants to bring now to humanity, to reprogram our warped perspectives that have been instilled for aeons and separate mind from body, spirit from matter. The Goddess offers us an embodied spirituality, one where we can own and celebrate all our sensations as part of Her Divine palette, and begin to live own our bliss. It is our natural birthright and the ecstasy that flesh is heir to is our way of experiencing the Divine play of Goddesses and Gods. It is our way to touch the hem of paradise.

How these marvels got to be designated as shameful, sinful, and profane is a crime against nature and the ecstatic state of being. We have been trapped in a dense materiality by these precepts and robbed

of our ability to touch the skies and live in a world of magic and unbridled potential. It's time to reclaim our sovereignty and our right to divine resonance if we are to have a future in this Eden called earth.

When I co-wrote and illustrated, with over 600 drawings, the *Sexual Secrets, The Alchemy of Ecstasy* in the late 1970s, it was with the intention of sharing an enlightened and liberated view of the field of eroticism and sexuality. I wanted to share my discovery and revelation of a well-established spiritual path, which was inclusive of all this rather than exclusive. It was such an amazing and freeing revelation for me, so I wanted to pass it on. My own inner intuitions now had context and community. I felt confirmed and connected and wanted others to know there was a path for them out of the imposed tunnels of guilt and shame. A shining path.

My collage series, published as *Mountain Ecstasy* in 1978, was the celebration of this revelation in collage art. Out of the dark confines of the house and into the wide open vistas of mountain-scapes, where everything was making love to everything in an orgy of being and the bliss of transcendence. All lines of separation were blurred and the black and white palette of my previous work irradiated with full spectrum technicolor dreams. Each image was a ritual space of tantric delights. Anything and everything was possible and it was all super juicy and enticingly exotic. My travels to India, Nepal, and Thailand informed the palette and texture of this collage series. Gone were the personal images as I found myself extended into the rapture of everything.

***ZB: You spent many years living in the Caribbean and had an art gallery there, so you've addressed the importance artwork has in other cultures having a sacredness and profound meaning as compared to Western art, which many times, is for decorative purposes. Will you elaborate on this?***

**PS:** My time in the Caribbean constituted a mini career of another kind within the spectrum of my art career. It was a time in my life when I turned the lens, so to speak, away from myself and looked out to see others and to use my talent to serve the culture, rather than serve my own process. When I went to the Caribbean, I was feeling pretty jaded with the response my work was getting in the world of fine art, so it was not a big leap to shift focus and see how I could be of service in the culture I found myself in. The whole milieu was so different. At first I attempted to make some multimedia pieces while living there, but found I just could not get the technical support required for such work, so I let that go. Being resourceful and with ability to work in many different media, I opted to choose art processes that required no other input or assistance than what I brought to the table - or rather the canvas or paper.

I returned to painting and started working in pastel as my primary means of manifestation. Coupled with this was the fact that my audience in the islands was not the sophisticated art savvy public that I had been used to. Although the high end tourism to the island did bring visitors with more knowledge of and exposure to the world of fine art, in the main, I was trying to reach the people of the island who had no references in this rarified world. So I wanted to develop a language in my art that would speak clearly and directly to anyone. At first, I started making portraits of local people, developing a style I had started to evolve of portraiture that showed something of the inner being, as well as the outer surface. I also portrayed the sheer beauty of the natural world, often incorporating my surrealist techniques, in which I was immersed on this tropical island, which sung through my being like a warm breeze and bathed me in its luscious azure seas. I was seeking to embody the sensuality of my direct experience.

During this time, my partner Nik Douglas and I were ardently engaged in exploring the archaeology of the island. As we immersed ourselves in this activity, the people behind the artifacts we discovered, started filling my consciousness more and more. These were the Arawak Indians, the original inhabitants of the island, long gone but still totally embedded in the spiritual fabric of the region. I felt their

presence so strongly and it became clear to me that this was my calling here, to give these lost ones face and form and celebrate their eternity. When we got there, the current inhabitants of the island seemed to have little idea of the people who had gone before them and whose spirit was so deeply married to the land, so it became my mission to bring this lost culture to light.

My first exhibition of this series was at a local gallery and achieved much acclaim. Utilizing the proceeds from my art sales, we opened a gallery ourselves called *The New World Gallery*, where I showed my own work and promoted other artists in the region. I wrote a lot in the local paper to encourage art and culture on the island. I must say that, although outside the world of fine art, in which I had previously exhibited, the reasons for which the people there brought my artwork felt much more authentic and satisfying than anything before. Local people, who had never previously bought a piece of art, would come into the gallery and say, 'I have to buy this painting. It has been talking to me. I am having dreams about it.' That is why people should buy art, don't you think, rather than because it's 'a good investment'?

I have always felt that the integration of art and life is key. I have found better models for that in other cultures than the ones we seem to have in modern Western culture. For example, in indigenous culture, art is so deeply interwoven with the spiritual life of the tribe that it's functionality is embedded in its creation. A work of art is not seen as something apart, but as an intrinsic part of the spiritual wellbeing of the community. As such, form and function are synonymous. Art performs the role of 'spirit holder' and immediately has ritual use. When acts on the material plane are directed by messages from spirit, art is created as the interface between the worlds and harbinger, totem, of spiritual energies. This feels right to me and gives art the kind of relevance that seems most appropriate. Nothing to do with self-aggrandizement but service to the good of all and to honor forces way beyond the self.

We find similar application in the art of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and other art of Asia, also in Christian mysticism. Here it is not the artist that is celebrated, but the spiritual beings and realms that are evoked through the depiction. They are more often than not guides to inner contemplation, maps of the mind-sky. Seems to me one of the highest functions of art.

***ZB: What was the process behind the creation of your Secret/Tantric Dakini Oracle deck? Will you talk about the healing aspect of Tantric practices and how this affects creativity?***

PS: Getting familiarity with the energy system that exists within the physical body, i.e. the subtle body of Tantra, reveals that all our centers are connected, from the base, the sexual center to the crown, the top of the head, the fontanel. In Tantric practice, energy is encouraged to flow, to ascend, from the base to the crown. In the base it is raw sexual energy, in the crown it is transformed into transcendence, liberation and pure inspiration, having been informed by all the centers it passes through on the way. In the crown, the energy is visualized as uniting with itself as Shiva and Shakti, the divine male and female principles.

The nectar of their union drips down and collects in the lotus of the heart, as distilled wisdom. The force that activates this ascent is known as Kundalini. She is everyone's own personal inner Goddess, visualized as a coiled serpent. Erotic arousal is a key way to awaken her and encourage her energy to enter the central channel of the subtle body for ascent. If there are knots or blockages which prevent this clear ascent, then her energetic journey is inhibited. These knots can be the result of psychological complexes, traumas, etc. Tantric healing practices help dissolve these blocks, loose these knots, thereby

enabling the clear passage of this subtle life force. The freer it is to flow, the more easily we can access all our creative juice. So this, in a nutshell, is the heart of Tantric healing practice.

As regards *The Secret Dakini Oracle*, when I got together with Nik Douglas in the mid-1970s, he showed me photographs he took of 64 Yogini Temples in Orissa, India, that had recently been excavated and which he had made a pilgrimage to go and see. I was immediately spellbound. They were the most exciting works of art and spirit I felt I had ever seen. The 64 forms of the Divine Feminine were sculpted in niches around the inner circumference of a circular enclosure, open to the air, like a mothership. They were so compellingly surreal, some with animal and bird heads, some beautifully buxom and others emaciated and raw, all holding magical implements and straddling fantastic vehicles. I fell in love. At the moment I saw them, I knew I must make a version of what I saw for our culture and time.

I have always loved the Tarot and oracles in general, but I disliked the doom and gloom that came with reverse readings and the like. I wanted an oracle that would give tools for transformation without the fatalistic overlay. So soon after getting together with Nik, he and I and his girlfriend Meryl started playing around using my collage techniques to create cards that we could use for divination. These were basically energy glyphs and I would do intuitive readings for us and for other people, reading off the energy embedded in the cards. We decided to make 64 of them, like the 64 Yoginis. Nik said the original Tarot derived from this system and only later became more complex and hierarchical.

The cards worked so well, even with people who were skeptical, as they always seemed to reveal some hidden but undeniable truth, that we decided to try and get them published. We contacted the biggest manufacturer of Tarot cards in the world, US Games and Systems in New York and, by a miracle, managed to set up a meeting. The reading I did for the owner sealed the deal and he asked us to write a book to accompany the cards. The images just naturally fell into place in alignment with the major arcana and into four suits, which we attributed to the 4 elements but did not go with the hierarchy of suits as in the traditional Tarot. We added a trilogy of past, present and future cards. I wrote intuitively about each card in a stream of consciousness and Nik added information on numerology and other relevant transmissions. I then created, with collage and paint, two charts for the cards to lay out on, the *Tree of Life*, which contained a version of the subtle body, and the *Map of the Universe* for astrologically based readings.

The deck was published as *The Secret Dakini Oracle* in the late 1970s and republished later as *The Tantric Dakini Oracle*. From all spiritual paths I have encountered, Tantra is the most all-inclusive, the most forgiving, the least prone to dogma and dictum. That is one of the reasons I love it and consider it the supreme path. It is the best suited for the evolution of our times so I shudder when I feel it is being promoted as 'the religion of sex' which is so reductionist and downgrades it's potential to be the way we can make all we are, all we do, part of our spiritual path to liberation.

**ZB: Will you talk about the creation of the online Dakini Oracle?**

**PS:** The Yogini Temples still inhabited my vision field and psychic spaces over the years. I felt compelled to create an even deeper version of these Goddess Temples, one where the energies of the Yoginis/Dakinis would be fully personified and where there would be a standalone oracular system, not one related to the Tarot. I meditated for a long time on the nature of the system, the forms of the Divine Feminine that would be most relevant for a global community and for our current times.

I decided to break all rules and mix all kinds of magical, elemental, and spiritual beings in my circle. I wanted to dissolve previously established spiritual hierarchies. I started actually manifesting the archetypes, shooting them in my studio at the beginning of this century. I started by using myself as the model, then brought in over 50 women over the years to embody the various archetypes. I wanted this to be a 'transferable system', a tangible way to commune with these rarified energy fields of feminine wisdom. I thought of this system as a Goddess Temple for our times and in that tried to take all the divine feminine energies that I felt were most relevant to now, so that it didn't just stay rooted in Indian culture, but drew from all the archetypes that had existed throughout time. I brought them together into this circle of the Divine Feminine and I see them all completely as an extension of myself. All these, I see as me but each a different phase and different quality.

At first I thought I could embody all the 64 myself. But my practice was about creating the circle of the feminine, to bring women together and for people to realize that we don't need intermediaries or priests to stand between us and the divine. If we put our limited egos out of the way, we can invite those divine energies into ourselves - anyone can bring that into their being. I wanted to take all different kinds of women and to show all the different paths and cultures as aspects of the one. That was part of the discipline, that we could bring together all these women into the studio and go through the process of transformation into becoming as much of a divine being as possible, aided by body painting, symbolic ornaments and the props. We would then make the prayer of evocation and invocation to invite that divine energy to come into this vessel that we had created in Her honor and to embody Herself in that for our ritual. Every time we would feel it, we would start crying and shaking, all of us felt that energy came in. It was a divine mirror that we were trying to create to embody and show that reality, the tangible ways we can bring those energies down, to own them and feel them and resonate with them.

I completed the work and put the Oracle online. I don't really feel as though I masterminded this work. I feel the Dakinis themselves created it through me, as their mission statement is to awaken and liberate all sentient beings. An important distinction between the work that I do and other forms of ritual, is in how one relates to spirit and spiritual entities. There are things in the invocation credo that talks about binding spirits and bringing them in to do the work. I don't believe in any binding, in binding spirits, I only believe in inviting and in collaboration. That you create such a resonate and inviting atmosphere, so that being, that entity, wants to come in and cooperate and participate of their own free will. Free will is so key through all the realms. That is truly to me the Goddess path, that of free will and acknowledging and giving that to all and every being, without distinction. That was the divine experiment in the *64 Dakini Oracle* manifestation.

All of the women involved came and made an offering to the Divine, with no financial remuneration. I'm very proud to have been able to do that. There were so many archetypes embodied, though I may connect more deeply to say Isis or Kali or Alchemica, all of them are a part of me, my multi-dimensional self, as they are to the potential in all of us. When I had the revelation of the Tantra exhibition back in the early '70s, I recognized all this and saw it as the next stage from surrealism. The symbolism of surrealism is all there but now it was describing not the subconscious but the superconscious. It was a bridge between those realms. With my book *Sexual Secrets - the Alchemy of Ecstasy*, I wanted people to know sexuality is sacred and that sexuality is the doorway in and if we don't integrate our sexuality and own it as part of our sacred selves, it will block our flow of energy, which is the energy we need for liberation. Tantra isn't just about sex, it's about everything in one's life being part of one's spiritual practice. It's about dissolving those veils between the sacred and the profane, between the spiritual and the material. It's about a fully integrated spiritual path.

**ZB: What is your life like now as a Priestess at the Goddess Temple? You host events and art shows there as well as rituals? Would you like to talk about memories you have of your partner Christopher Hills?**

**PS:** What a blessing it was when Christopher came into my life! And it was the Goddess Kali who made the introduction, but that's another story. In brief, I had just come through a very painful break up with my partner of 20 years, Nik Douglas. It presented one of the most challenging conundrums of my life. How could the person who had been my guru, so to speak, in my initiation into Tantra, behave in ways that I could not condone in any human being, due to my own personal code of ethics? When I met Christopher, it was such a major healing for me as he *saw* me, really saw who I was, my essence, and reflected that back to me in deep and penetrating appreciation. It was the greatest gift anyone can give to another person and a treasure I hold in my heart forever.

Knowing the major importance of the reflection he gave me in my life, I try to pass this appreciation on to others, where I can. Christopher and I came together in our mutual love for and dedication to the Goddess. The deep love that emerged between us was the bonus. It needed a person of Christopher's level of evolution, power and compassion to be my saving grace at the other end of this relationship. Although Christopher and I only had less than three years together in this dimension, it was such a deep, magical and enriching time for us both.

After he transitioned, there was such a huge and palpable spiritual energy present here, and I wanted to share it in whatever ways I could. Over the following years, I opened up this incredible estate in the redwoods to the artistic communities of the region, holding many gatherings and events to celebrate and honor the Divine Feminine, to whom Christopher had dedicated the space. Performance artists of many persuasions made their offerings at Solstices, Equinoxes, etc. in ritualistic multi-media events. My practice at this time was in holding space for others to experience and channel the special energies. I collected costumes from many cultures and filled a room with them for those who attended the gatherings to explore and in which to adorn themselves to experience other aspects of the way they saw themselves. I completed work on the creation of a video/audio studio installed by Christopher to create media that would offer *shakti pat* - the conferring of spiritual energy. It is in this studio, that I came to do all the shoots for the *64 Dakini Oracle*.

During the phase after Christopher's passing, I created a band called *The Goddess Frequency Band*. Our practice and methodology was to be completely without preconception and to just channel what came through spontaneously in the moment. I channeled the spoken word. The discipline was to put myself, my ego, aside and just see what came through, what wanted to speak through me. I found this to be a very authentic Tantric practice. None of the material was released, we performed and recorded hundreds of original transmissions, mainly because there were a group of people involved so it proved hard for all to agree how to handle that part of it. It was a powerful and empowering facet of my manifestation as a multimedia artist. I also performed at the events, bringing forth various aspects, as I discerned to be appropriate for each occasion, of the pantheon of the Divine Feminine. I had a core group of women who worked with me to manifest these ritual gatherings.

**ZB: Which Dakinis do you feel most represent radical transformation and what is the best way to meditate on these archetypes to create and embrace the change they represent?**

**PS:** Many of the Dakinis represent transformation as they are all about innate potential. To manifest that potential, often transformation is required. The great Oracle of the *I Ching* is, in fact, the Book of Changes. The cycle of the 64 Dakinis has much in common with the *I Ching*, but it is its own system. The *I Ching* portrays cycles of change around a wheel of time, one could say. It shows how abundance leads to decay, as fall follows summer and so forth.

The 64 Dakini template is more about standing waves of energy, beyond the passages of time. I chose this approach because the Dakinis are essentially etheric beings, representing Feminine Wisdom principles. In this sense, they exist as eternal vibrations, beyond the ravages of time and its cycles. They are the essential building blocks of a system built on the principles of the Divine Feminine.

*Metamorpha*, the butterfly Dakini, is a good choice to represent radical transformation. Throughout the kingdoms of embodied beings, I have always been fascinated by the fact that the caterpillar completely dissolves, liquefies within the pupa, the chrysalis, before emerging as the butterfly. This felt like the perfect symbol for the complete meltdown that is sometimes needed for the new self to emerge. More often than not we don't even choose that meltdown, it is forced upon us by circumstances. Although it may feel completely devastating at the time, sometimes it is the only way that spirit knows to break down all the hard places of the old self identity, all the armor, all the resistance.

Change is hardly ever easy. We feel safe in our old ways, our established habits, even if it is just those things that are holding us back from being all that we can be, for realizing the magnificence of our soul's purpose. So we are melted down in the forge of the Goddess, liquefied, so that we can be poured onto the new mold.

I envisioned the way to meditate on and with the energies these archetypes represent would be: first to receive and absorb the transmission conveyed in the reading, designed as an initiation into these qualities and frequencies. As the medicine bundle, what each Dakini brings is rich and full. I saw its contents being something the person receiving it would work with for a while. Nothing really casual about it. The length of time would be up to the individual but the Dakini culture offers what is needed to germinate within its new container. The image of the Dakini is like a snapshot into her sphere of influence, her Dakini realm. It is an energy glyph, imbued, through the intent put into its creation, with special qualities.

I felt, ideally, the person receiving the specific Dakini in a reading could purchase a print of her and then have that image to meditate on and commune with in a process of osmosis. In the esoteric traditions, you meditate on the deity and then become one with her, dissolving the boundaries of separation. In this way, divine qualities are transferred and absorbed. The whole intent of an Oracle is that you do not choose, the Dakini chooses for you. So in consulting the Oracle, the choice is made for you as to which archetype is most relevant for you at this time. You surrender your personal will to the guidance of spirit and trust that this will provide you with the greatest opportunity for personal evolution

**ZB:** *Will you talk about the documentary that is based on your life and work? Will you talk about some of the recent shows you've been in and your experiences being back in the world of fine art again?*

**PS:** The documentary '*Penny Slinger – Out of the Shadows*' is about a part of my life, what I call the pre-tantric aspect of my life and work. So it covers my early life up to when I left England at the end of the '70s, although it doesn't cover when I started working in a more tantric vein. It's the work that was more surrealist and feminist but had some real recognition in the world of fine art.

Then When I discovered tantra and went into the next phase of my work and left the UK, I kind of disappeared from the fine art world, although I didn't intend to do that. I thought the footprint that had been made would last, but it was sort of out of sight, out of mind. Now I've had the opportunity to reconnect back into that world, which happened through being included in an exhibition in 2009 called *Angels of Anarchy*.

That's such a great name, this alone would make me happy to be in it. I believe this was the first exhibition on women surrealists, as a group, to be held in England. It ran through the whole range of women surrealists - from the original movement to the more contemporary, such as people like myself, who have been working in the tradition of surrealism. I found it was so vital and refreshing, so very alive. A lot of art exhibitions, especially in museums or contexts like that, sometimes tend to be a bit dry and dusty but there was nothing like that about it. It had a wonderful compliment of different media; there were paintings and collages, three-dimensional assemblages and video, everything all put together in a really beautiful juxtaposition.

The whole exhibition was created by a group of women. It was only women working on it. I have to compliment them on doing such a wonderful job on making something that just *sung with life*. It was interesting that in researching for the exhibit, they noticed that there was a difference between how women's art had been looked after, preserved, kept and the men's. Most of the male artists had been carefully archived and kept in the right conditions but when it came to the women's art, they would find paintings shoved under ironing boards and in the back of the cupboards. They hadn't had that kind of respect we find for the male artists.

I believe it's time for this to change. I believe it is our time. I'm trying to claim my place and a place for other women artists. I was in another show at the Tate St Ives called *The Dark Monarch*, with another woman collage artist named Linder Sterling, who has remained visible and has some traction in that world. She connected dots for me in what I'm coming to see as a theme and thread running through how women artists relate to each other. I feel this is very important, the difference way women artists can relate to one another.

I was talking to an art curator the other day who was putting together an exhibition and brought to her attention a young woman artist whose work I had just seen and felt had some resonance with the project. She remarked to me, there is such a difference between the women artists we've been talking to and the male artists. The male artists never talk about or recommend another artist but the women artists generally do.

That's important, these threads of lineage, this golden thread that connects us all and we need to weave this tapestry, which is inclusive and non-competitive. This is the antidote to this whole competitive side of society we've been brought up in. It's this competitiveness which has keep us apart from each other and diluted the power of the feminine because when we come together and support each other, we are so strong. This is such a rich and fertile circle and this is what we need to reclaim. I've been doing a lot of work over the years to re-forge, honor and collect together that circle. No more gurus and leaders but more of a circle of complimentary aspects of the one.

My art has been something that has been a saving grace for me through many challenging situations, which is ongoing. It's been my lifeline through it all. That's my alchemy. That's my salvation. Everybody has some mine of creativity within them and it takes different forms, colors, and complexions but that



certainly is a heart line for our own ability to deal with the material world, especially at this time. I'm writing my memoirs of my life leading up to the time when I moved here to California. I'm hoping the documentary will come out and the memories will fill in a lot of the gaps in the film. The memoirs are very transparent. I believe in being real and candid and showing the other side of the underneath, so we're not just putting out there for public inspection all those things that make us look good. All those things that unfortunately social media has imposed, a lot of superficiality, this grand façade for people so they can look good rather than telling it how it really is.

I think, if one is going to put up a mirror for others, which is a very important part of my work, you need to dig deeply enough into your psyche and be ruthless and truthful with what you show. Then you touch into those archetypal areas. Everybody has wounds. If you're willing to bear those wounds and show them for what they are, open those doors to the skeletons in the closet, be prepared to look them in the face and bring them into the light of day, when you're able to tap into the archetypal arena, you find those places of resonance, where the mirror is accurate. Not just some fanfare or distortions, but the accurate picture of the highs and the lows. Then you can create a map or a blueprint and you can show that I went into the depths and darkness but I survived.

I managed to find those tools within to rebirth myself out of those depths. That's meaningful. We can give each other hope because we all have these dark nights of the soul. If you can show something that brings light into that dark tunnel, it can lead you out and through. You can survive. It can be a lifeline for so many others. That's what I'm trying to do with my work and my memoirs, to give others strength where they need it.