

[the ultimate recycler of pornographic imagery can date magazines across the Twentieth century by smell]

armed with a surgeon's scalpel, Linder cuts away at imagery from *Playboy* and other magazines to create visual narratives exploring the body and mind of feminism

Linder Sterling

[pornography, photography and photomontages]



L 01

Aarushi Saxena

A female form with an iron box for a head and lips for nipples – is the record sleeve of *Orgasm Addict* by British punk-rock band, The Buzzcocks. British artist Linder Sterling's aesthetic signature inspires a conversation on what it means to be a woman. She explores sexuality, gender construction, and desire through the female lens. Her cut-and-paste photomontages with images predominantly scored from porn magazines have been making their mark in niche society for years. Just shy of seven decades, Linder has mastered the pen, brush, and scalpel as her tools and explored the stage – through confrontational performance art and her punk band, Ludus. Through the years, Linder's narrative of the body has evolved – from sexualization and gender roles to women's rights and health. Her photomontages are formed by cutting images from magazines with surgical precision and engineering them to create a visual narrative. She also speaks about not editing one's life.

Let's talk about your narrative: it is typically worded as radical feminism through punk-art. How would you put it?

Linder

'Radical feminism through punk art' has almost become the journalistic mantra for talking about my work. Punk and feminism are bedfellows. Discovering second-wave feminism as a sixteen-year-old in England rewired my brain and made me think differently. Feminism changes, evolves, and responds; therefore, it should be in the definition, whereas Punk only occupied a few years of my life. Sometimes things need to be pared down. In my work I use a scalpel to cut images to the bare minimum; similarly, my current title is simplistic.

AS

Human anatomy is your prime subject – from earlier depictions of sexualized women to now exploring gender dynamics. How do you perceive the body and its commoditization?

L

In my late sixties, I have lived through almost seven decades and seen the commodification of the human body go off the scale. We are in a period of flux. We are examining gender in a volatile way. I look to Simone de Beauvoir, who said, *one is not born a woman but becomes one* – she had those cultural expectations nailed early on. Gender is similar to performance art. I observe the debate and conversation around gender closely. I have friends of all ages who had a callous time growing up, feeling that they couldn't perform the role of a boy, girl, man, or woman with any confidence, and then suffered all sorts of mental and emotional challenges. This generation is challenging all notions of gender and I am observing the debate and conversation around gender closely.

AS

Pornography in your work: why and how did this influence manifest?

L

As a young child, pre-literate, someone in my family circle would show me pornographic images. Now there is a word for this process; we call it 'grooming'. Thankfully there was an intervention made by my parents when they discovered this, but for quite a long time, I was being groomed for what I presume was an horrific level of future intimacy. Between those images of bunny rabbits and fairy tales like *Cinderella*, there was an abuttal of pornography. This aspect of my childhood is often addressed through my work. In an upcoming exhibition for Blum & Poe, there is an introduction to the incest motif via Myrrha – a mythological character in Greek mythology. In my early years, I tried to find out what kind of a woman I was supposed to be through the lens of both pornography and fashion; they were the two worlds in which women were frequently represented. I didn't have access to explicit pornography until 1976. Instead, I bought a lot of women's and men's magazines, from fashion and gardening to cars and DIY trying to find a reflection or an image with which I could find some parity. I didn't find it within pornography because it is photographed through a predominantly male lens. But a fascination stuck with me because this imagery can be derailed, and it's the perfect material to subvert with photomontage.

AS

Why montages? Is there a reason behind the deconstructive approach?

L

Growing up in the 1950s, there were two channels on television and nothing to do at home. I drew every night and was skilled by the time I was eighteen. I went to art school and continued to draw, but suddenly I got bored and frustrated with mark-making. One day in 1976, I cleared away everything that would leave a trace and was just left with a scalpel that I had been using to cut up mount boards. I started cutting up magazines, which was liberating and joyful. Because I used a number eleven blade on my surgeon's scalpel, manufactured to create stab incisions in the operating theater, I began to make stab incisions into magazines, treating the magazine itself as a body. It felt as though I was dissecting the magazine and the body of imagery in it with the cool precision of a surgeon. I can make a heart surgeon or plastic surgeon, my control of the scalpel is impeccable. The works I made often looked like jigsaw puzzles, and that was when my love for montage began. I remember thinking to myself – I could have drawn for a whole week and never produced an image as shocking as a photomontage that took me ten minutes to create. My earliest photomontages from 1976 are not complex or overworked compared to those in later years. A celebre work from the early years is the photomontage used by Buzzcocks for their *Orgasm Addict* single.



L 02



L 03



L 04

- L 01 *A woman told me that a woman told her*
- L 02 *Where the tongue slips it speaks truth*
- L 03 *Love leaves a memory no one can steal*
- L 04 *A friend's eye is a good mirror*
- L 05 *The absent ones are always wrong*
- L 06 *She who travels has stories to tell*
- L 07 *The past is very unpredictable*

AS It features a woman with an iron over her face, plus two mouths over her breasts. Even now, if I can get one motif that will make the host photograph tell in a new way, I don't overwork it. I'm a concise engineer of the found image.

AS You founded the post-punk band Ludus – what was the relationship between your music and your photomontages?

L In late 1976, a swiftly accelerating pop culture became known as punk – but punk was an American name, and we all hated it because it had nothing to do with the British movement. Short-lived though punk was, it created an instant democracy on the stage. Anybody could pick up a guitar or drumstick or sing; for a while, it seemed unnatural not to be on the stage. By then, I had also been drawing for over twenty years and was interested in using the larynx like I'd been using the pencil or the scalpel: using the word to make my mark.

AS Using found images versus original photography. What is your preference?

L I think it worthwhile when sharing autobiographies not to edit one's life so that unforeseen acts of violence are omitted because violence, as much as love, can shape one's future in radical ways. One of the reasons I started using found images dates back to 1976 when I was on my way home after a photo shoot of The Damned at The Electric Circus in Manchester. A rapist attacked me then, unsuccessfully. Ruptures such as incest as a child or suddenly having a knife held to your throat as a young woman sculpt your life story. Because my camera was stolen by the would-be rapist in 1976, I stopped taking photographs. It felt as though cameras were cursed because I associated them with this traumatic incident in my life. I am also reluctant to work with digital photography instead of analog; working with cut-outs from print media of the last century is sensual. I like to use my nose a lot while working – I can sense the decade of a magazine by its smell. I can also look at the paper and identify if it's from the 1940s or late 1950s, and just a fragment of a magazine page is enough for my sensory detective work. When it comes to digital photography, everything is too clean, almost antiseptic, it hasn't got that deep sensuality of making stab incisions' or the smell of the old newsprint, nor the challenge of handling sticky glue – you cannot grasp the materiality of pictures.

AS What magazines do you frequent to create the montages?

L Recently, people have started donating me pornography of deceased relatives, friends, and husbands' from decades ago. I feel like a social repository since people know I'm the ultimate recycler of this imagery and no magazine ever goes to waste. I have print media from the early twentieth century up to the present moment.

AS There's a tilt of satire, and humor in your work. Can we speak about the intention behind that?

L A joke can be referred to as a gag, but we know that 'gag' has another meaning i.e., something that can mute you, making you feel as though you have no voice within culture and you're being censored. I'm very aware of this double meaning of gag. In a dire situation, humor can be used to puncture the enemy's rhetoric. The photomontage technique emerged after WW1, so its roots are tethered in opposition and shock. We often see photomontage weaponized during periods of civil unrest, in war zones, and within intense cultural and political debates. Humor is invaluable and present in the history of DADA and surrealism. Artists such as John Heartfield created monstrous oppositional photomontages of Hitler in WW2, and now I'm seeing similar extreme imagery emerging from the war in Ukraine. I was born in Liverpool, and there's a unique wit to that city; nobody ever takes themselves seriously there. I grew up with a Scouse humor that permeates my work.

AS Let's talk about censorship and rebellion when producing your art.

L Censorship can be pernicious, depending upon who's in control – it can take root like a virus in some people's minds. At the same time, censorship is necessary to safeguard the vulnerable. Shockingly, an eight-year-old can now see more explicit sexual imagery via a phone than I ever could when I was eighteen. Regarding rebellion, my generation never considered showing work in art galleries because the art world was dull back then. Nobody wanted to put our work in art galleries, so we had to self-publish via fanzines, record covers, and t-shirts. We didn't have the luxury of magazines approaching us. In 1976, when I made my first photomontages, I would use Linder to identify my works. Everybody presumed I was male. They were shocked by the common perception that only a man would dare to buy pornography and only a man would dare to cut it up. Getting my work reproduced was challenging at that time in Manchester. There was only one photocopying machine in the city, and the woman there refused to print my work because she said it was pornographic.

AS Does the concept of action-reaction have a meaning to you, and do you try to translate this into your work?

L Every photomontage that I make transmits action-reaction within the visual plane. I use cut-outs of imagery from diverse sources, and each cut-out battles for the viewer's attention. For Lampoon, you can see photographs of BREXXITT, which push back against pictures of overly large blossoms, snakes, and eagles. The optic nerve has to work extra hard to make sense of the actions-reactions on the visual plane. As for the various symbols within my works, their ability to create action-reaction psychologically depends upon the individual's cultural background and personal history. A photograph of a snake contemplated in Texas could have one reading, whereas, in Bombay or Belgium, it may take on different readings again. Gertrude Stein said, «*Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose*», but I'm not too sure.

AS Your recent montages for Lampoon – what is the story, who are the artists?

L The main photomontages feature BREXXITT from the Texas House of Kenzo creative collective. I was introduced to BREXXITT by the musician and producer Rabit, Eric Burton. I've been in close dialogue with Eric for almost a year, creating photomontages in response to his new album What Dreams May Come. He recently said, «*It feels healthy to consider this collaboration an ongoing conversation. It doesn't feel extractive. It feels like a discovery process even, a sort of a diagnostic where we can uncover the worlds that are shared*». Lane Stewart's art is directed from afar. While working on Lampoon's photomontages, I thought about interior worlds, transformation, twinning, and the reflective self. Texan snakes and the esoteric tradition of kundalini energy rising the spine in a serpentine fashion. There are also references to the deep undercurrent of the influence of classical Roman mythology within the USA and thoughts about cycles of nature versus nurture. The photomontages were all made by hand, using scissors and glue rather than digitally. It's a tradition that can be traced back to the very beginnings of photography itself. When I asked BREXXITT about stereotypes in the media and if she could catch her reflection there, she replied, «*I am everywhere all the time, everyone wants to be me. My culture, my hair, my body, my me*».

AS Your upcoming exhibition for Blum & Poe in November – can you tell me about the theme and process for that?

L One of the central bodies of work at Blum & Poe emerges from Book 10 of Ovid's Metamorphoses, with its stories of Pygmalion, Adonis, Venus, and a lesser known mythological character, Myrrha. The internet facilitates a sense of continuous self-reinvention and metamorphosis; we live in a 'before and after' culture, longing for an instant transformation. Ovid underwent this fascination in 8AD. Also, it's forty years since I created a protest performance with my band Ludus at the Hacienda club in Manchester by wearing a meat bodice and dildo. The works in the exhibition at Blum & Poe will show all of the above and more.

L 01/L 05 photography Junior Fernandez, creative and styling Josue Hart and Lane Steward, talent Josue Hart

L 02 photography Tony Krash, art direction Lane Steward, hair Alecia Farrar, model Rabit

L 03/L 04/L 06/L 07 photography Rosei Matcek, creative directio Rabit, model BREXXITT