

Observer Design Art

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# How the artist Linder went from Orgasm Addict to Chatsworth House



You have to sit out various periods in culture if you're like me'. Linder at Kettle's Yard in 2019. Photograph: David Levine/The Guardian

The art maverick first made her name in the punk era with collages fusing fashion and pornography, and a major retrospective proves her work still provokes

It's not easy to celebrate female sexuality and vaginas on public transport, but Linder, the British artist known for her uncompromising photomontages, managed it at Southwark Underground, a station that sees 16.7 million people pass through its barriers each year. The 85m-long billboard she installed there last November - a luscious and cinematic sequence of roses, lips, female faces, food and Roman votaries that emerged from research into local figures and places and the archive of London Transport - is called *The Bower of Bliss*. And that, as it happens, is a quaint old phrase for vagina. "It suddenly came back to me when I was filming at *Chatsworth* last year," she says of the term she had first discovered years before in an issue of *Oz* magazine edited by Germaine Greer. The work is a reminder that women don't just need safe spaces but joyful ones, too.

Sex and pornography can loom large in the work of Linder. Among her best known are those where super-tanned 70s Playboy nudes are embellished with explosions of flowers; and naked women in coquettish poses have an electric heater, or a clock, or a Victoria sponge for a head. Linder, who changed the spelling of her first name as punk exploded in mid-70s Manchester ("It felt more European"), has been busy. She spent much of 2018 as artist-in-residence at Chatsworth House, digging through the history of that stately Derbyshire pile to create a film, an exhibition and even a fragrance. "It's such a treasure house. There are parcels in the attic that have never been opened," she says, though a more 20th-century discovery was Debo, Duchess of Devonshire's adoration of Elvis. She also had an exhibition of her finely scalpelled montages at Nottingham Contemporary and created a film and a flag for Glasgow Women's Library.



Original artwork for the Buzzcocks single Orgasm Addict, 1977. Photograph: PR

When we meet, it is at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, where a major retrospective of her work will open in February. After that, she is off to Liverpool to create something for the Biennial, which kicks off in July. It seems that in her 65th year, the world is finally ready for her unflinching, upfront feminism.

Linder likes to describe herself as a pop baby - "I was born in Liverpool in 1954" - but she is better known for her association with punk. Arriving in Manchester in 1976, she chose to study graphic design at the polytechnic "because it felt connected to the real world", though she took the opportunity to make masks out of lingerie, too. She was soon sharing a flat with Buzzcocks singer Howard Devoto, and in 1977 she put herself on the map when her artwork was used for the sleeve of the band's first single, *Orgasm Addict*. The image, of a muscular naked woman with an iron for a head, was both an homage to the pop-art sensibility of Richard Hamilton's 1960s collages and a strident feminist scream against the domestic trap. "I grew up in a working-class family in a tiny mining village," she says. "There were no guidelines for how I should behave, and I found them in *The Female Eunuch* and other texts of second-wave feminism. By the time I got to Manchester, I was ready to go, ready to make my mark."



What I Do To Please You I Do, 1981-2008. Photograph: Courtesy of Stuart Shave/Modern Art, Dependence, Andrehn Schipjken, Blum & Poe

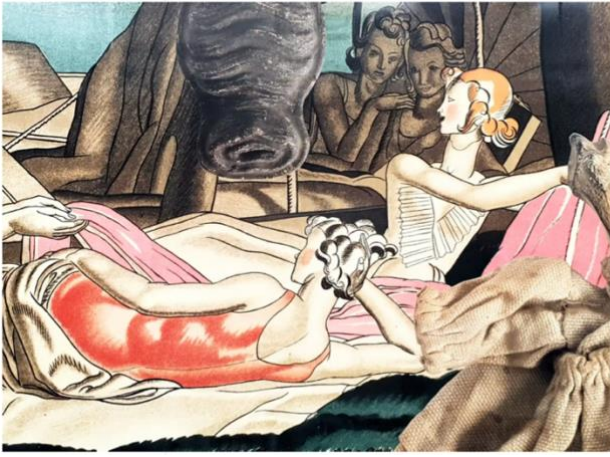
She did, as an artist and a performer. While her imagery, which continually raised questions around gender identity and the power of the male gaze, mirrored the low-tech frankness of punk itself, her own image was defined by sharp cheekbones, quiffed hair and bondage trousers. "I'll never forget the hostile stares I got the first time I wore them," she says. "Manchester was quite a violent place then. We loved Quentin Crisp and his advice to just look straight ahead." Fronting her own band, *Ludus*, at the Hacienda in 1982, she came on stage in a dress made of chicken flesh, and - to further subvert expectations - pulled it up to reveal a huge black dildo. In a city, and on a local music scene, where women were relatively invisible, Linder says now that she felt "like a female astronaut, being sent out into cultural space".

She also became known as Morrissey's muse and went on to photograph him extensively in the early 90s as he toured the US. "We shared the same taste, liked the same books," she says. "We shared a house for a brief period in Whalley Range - it was a red-light district then." With his counterintuitive views on the far-right For Britain party, Morrissey is a touchy subject these days, but Linder is

loyal. "We've always disagreed," she says. "It's a healthy disagreement, the sort that comes with unconditional love."

In the mid-80s, Linder stopped performing. "The underground was over," she says. "Wham! and Bananarama came along and that was strange if you were in the north of England. We had the miners' strike." London had never called to her. But Brussels did, in the form of *Les Disques du Crépuscule*, an avant-garde music label that invited her to the Belgian capital. She lived above a nightclub called *Interference*, and people such as Billy Mackenzie and the Lounge Lizards came and went. "From Whalley Range to the rue de la Tête d'Or and all that civic gilding in the Grand Place," she says. "It was incredible." In 1990, Linder had a child and went to live on the north-west coast. "I carried on making work, hidden away in a cocoon-like place in the north," she says. "You have to sit out various periods in culture if you're like me. The YBAs, for example, they were so much for irony, and that wasn't a game I wanted to take part in. But I've always had the sense that someday acknowledgment would happen."





📷 The Bower of Bliss, 2018. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

The second time I speak to Linder, she is in her archive space, which occupies the top floor of a former textile mill in Lancaster. “It’s a 10-minute walk from where the *Pendle Witches* were hung in the early 17th century,” she says cheerfully. “They were punished for their unacceptable glamour.” (In that period, glamour meant casting of spells, rather than diamonds.) She is keen on witches and mediums, women who defy the social stereotypes and demonstrate the more mystical depths of female psyche. A recent obsession is *Ithell Colquhoun*, a British female surrealist artist and occultist – you can see the influence of her work in the Southwark billboard. “She had a mantic vision of the universe ...” says Linder. “Mantic being to do with divination and prophecy and a little madness. It’s not Enid Blyton.”

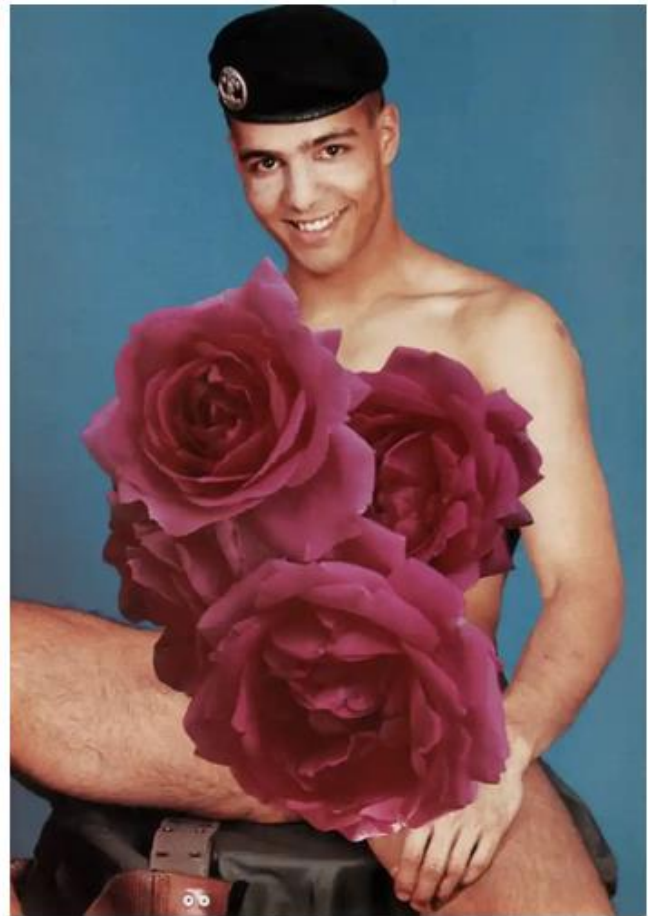
In the archive, established thanks to a generous grant from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, she is surrounded by an astonishing 40 years’ worth of material and is busy categorising every item. “I mean, a fan letter from the 1980s – what is that as an object?” She says it is something she has to do “in case I slip under a bus”. She thinks about her funeral a lot, planning the music. “It’s due for an update,” she says. Meanwhile, she is working on the Kettle’s Yard show with a young curator called Amy Tobin, whose own interests are 70s and 80s feminist art practice as well as the complexities of archivism. “I think she knows more about my work than I do,” says Linder.

As well as frequently being the subject of her own work, she has organised a series of huge productions that are as montage-like as the flat artwork she makes in her kitchen. One, *The Darktown Cakewalk*, staged in Glasgow and London in 2010, lasted 13 hours. It included Lindy hop and beauty queens, witch trials, scenes of prejudice and gold lamé suits. *Richard Nicoll*, the fashion designer who died in 2016, provided the costumes. She has since worked with menswear designer Christopher Shannon on a production that took place on the steps of the ICA in 2016 and combined *Tiller Girls* with *Northern Soul*. More recently, *Louise Gray* designed the outfits worn in the film she made for the Glasgow Women’s Library, another part of the *Bower of Bliss* project, which shows *Mary Queen of Scots* exercising in the bower at Chatsworth. “She creates layers and layers of meaning by drawing together all of her historical, political, female and sometimes very funny notions for her works,” says Gray. “I worked on the ICA piece, too. She was ‘live collaging’ artists, dancers and singers on the stairs outside the ICA. I dressed a 30-strong LGBTQI choir from Hackney, who performed in the rain.”

Kettle’s Yard was once the home of *Jim and Helen Ede*, who moved there in the mid-50s and filled it with their collection of *Lucie Rie* bowls, *Alfred Wallis* seascapes and sculptures by *Brancusi* and *Gaudier-Brzeska*. “It feels like the last gasp of modernism,” says Linder of the house that has been left as they lived in it. “And it really feels like the *Jim Ede* show. We have had many conversations about why *Helen* is so not present here.” Indeed, her room, where she would pass the afternoons as *Jim* entertained Cambridge students, is the only one with no conservation status. Alongside the retrospective of her own work, Linder is creating work for *Helen*. She is making products for the “*House of Helen*” brand that will be available in the Kettle’s Yard shop. “Perhaps it suited her to hide away,” says Linder. “I’m really interested in the idea of the invisible woman – that also has a kind of power.”

For Linder, on the other hand, invisibility is definitely no longer an option. “I think she’s the most relevant artist of our times,” says Gray – though she might not like that accolade. She might just want to be an artist.”

*Linderism* is at *Kettle’s Yard* from 15 February to 26 April ([kettlesyard.co.uk](http://kettlesyard.co.uk))



📷 He the Protector With Virtue Does Be, 2017. Photograph: Robert Glowacki Photography/Linder Sterling