C-print
A journal about contemporary art



C-print

# In Conversation: Linder Sterling

*We speak to British visual artist Linder Sterling whose iconic and feminist body of work encompassing decades is on view in Sweden in her first solo exhibition with Andréhn-Schiptjenko. Linder addresses the notion of time running as a fixture in her characteristc photomontages and offers her take on the sexualisation of the male body in media and feminism in the era of social media.*

**C-P:** Your work is noted for addressing traditional gender roles and expectations ascribed to women concerning the domestic sphere, as well as the commodification of the female body in media. How did you arrive at working with your characteristic photomontages?

**L.S**: It was the summer of 1976, I was about to go into my third year of art school and just put away all these materials that would make a mark; crayons, pencils and paintbrushes, mainly out of boredom and frustration. In the arts education we were so urged to draw and paint and it was very intense. By that point I had had enough and slowly begun adding elements to the drawings making collages and at a certain point I was working entirely with photographic imagery to experiment. When I did the first series of photomontages it felt so liberating, so clean, as though I had removed myself from the image, whereas usually as an artist you see yourself with every mark on the page.

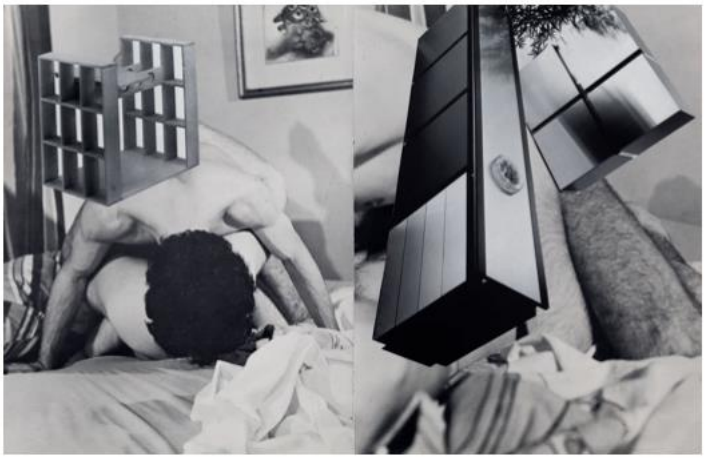
Being a young woman figuring out how I was expected to be and finding my place in the world, I had been looking at imagery of women in fashion magazines, in magazines aimed at young mothers and also pornographic magazines that depicted the female body. It was simple experimenting. I would cut out images from men's and women's magazines and join them together and it was quite playful, with a lightness of touch even though the message behind the work was incredibly serious. Humour, I think that was important too.

**C-P:** Around this time would you have been informed by or have had an interest in what was going on in the avant-garde feminist art movement in the '70s, notably in Vienna with the likes of VALIE Export and Birgit Jürgensen, or in the US with artists like Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneemann?

**L.S:** What you have to remember is that this was pre-Internet age and I was living in Manchester and the public libraries were reasonable but certainly the opportunities to stay informed about contemporary art was limited. I used to get an arts and culture magazine every month called Spare Rib, a feminist magazine which a low-budget black and white magazine of tiny images. That was my only way of finding about any contemporary artist really. So I had some information, mainly textual but even now I'm enjoy learning more about certain artists whose work I might possibly have stumbled across decades ago.

**C-P:** You showed with Andréhn-Schiptjenko at Zona Maco in Mexico but this in fact your first solo presentation with the gallery and first time showing in Stockholm. Given the extent of your body of work, what is the selection for the show like?

**L.S**: I think the exhibition here you could say is a huge photomontage or collage itself. You try to pinpoint series of works that have fairly obvious connections and when put together become a sort of whole where the sum is greater than the individual parts and where each part helps informing the next. I have the luxury of having too many pieces and have had interesting conversations with Ciléne Andréhn and Ian Massey about how much one can subtract and how little is needed to convey an artist's work. The show consists predominantly of photomontage and there are experiments with paints like in the Mantic Stains Series and there are two lightboxes that felt necessary because with photomontage you are always restricted by the size of the found images. In the last 5-10 years the lightboxes have started to emulate the kind of displays you see at airports and the departure lounges or cosmetic departments in luxury stores. They try to tap into that retail vocabulary. The lightboxes are robust and extreme in scale but it's important to remember that they're founded on fragile found images.



**C-P**: I thought to ask you about the notion of collecting, given this element in your work of using found and very specific imagery.

**L.S:** You can refer to it as an archive, a palette. I might buy magazines today that will be incredibly current today and as ten years or even five pass, they might look very dated. What I do feels more and more like working with time itself through representation of various media. The more complex ones, recent ones that are in the show have that sense of time with images joined together from the 50's, 60's 70's, 80's and 90's etc. People will often ask me when I made certain works because there's no way to really know because a work made last year might use imagery from the 40's. Yes, so there is vast collection that I have; it's not catalogued in any way other than stored in boxes with labels.

**C-P:** You said before that in time in gets rarer to feel you are seeing things that appear fresh or novel in the arts and that you intuitively know when you are, which is a sentiment easy relating to given our times of constantly being exposed to vast streams of imagery daily. What excites you today?

**L.S:** Often I find fashion and the mediation of fashion to be extremely exciting and I will have collaborated with fashion, with the late Richard Nicoll and Christopher Shannon and tend to think there is a younger generation of designers in London that is exciting. People love the idea that fashion, music and art are as one but they're really not. These worlds work in different ways to survive. If you are open and permeable as an artist you can have these fantastic discussions, cross-generation and cross-disciplinary. I like an openness to exchange, mainly because I am very curious and want to know about other artist's practices.

**C-P:** You're also a musician and used to do music in the post-punk band Ludus. What's your rapport with music like today?

L.S: Well, I did a five hour performance quite recently at the ICA in London for which I closely collaborated with my son, Maxwell Sterling who is a film composer and who lives in LA. We have a shared record collection him and I. Through my son there's a good way of keeping in touch with a certain aspect of contemporary music. For nine years now I'm studying classical Indian music, playing an instrument called taus with twelve strings which proves quite demanding for the Western ear or mine.

**C-P:** Are you very nostalgic as a person?

**L.S:** Not really but there is fascination about time as a concept which probably leads to studying Indian music. In my work, I don't think of it as nostalgia. I feel more like a historian going back under the skin of a period in time by looking at and working with the imagery.

**C-P:** What is your take on where feminism "is" in 2017, in light of mainstream figures like Beyoncé and most recently Emma Watson emerging as poster people of a supposed "contemporary" feminism?

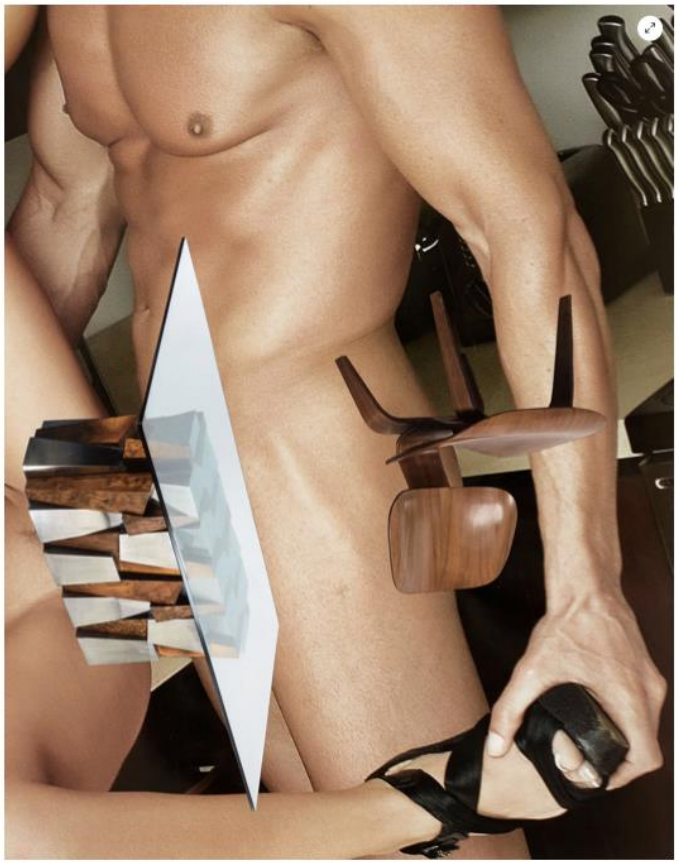
**L.S:** Feminism is as multifaceted and as full of promise as ever, maybe even more so than in the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. When I was sixteen years of age in 1970, the tabloid press in the UK was full of sensationalist features of "women's libbers burning their bras" and "men haters", there wasn't any way thought that the majority of women could be seen and heard to oppose those sentiments. One of the blessings of social media today is that a sixteen year old in Sigtuna can have his or her say on feminism now. I have just looked at #feminist on Instagram and there are 2,256,165 posts, by the time you read this there will be many more.

Feminism has always encouraged a multiplicity of voices, so whether it's Beyoncé, Emma Watson or, on the front line, women such as Malala Yousafzai, we all have to keep stating the obvious over and over again. Trump et al will never gag us!

**C-P:** On a different note, it's interesting that the commodification of the male body remains rare in media still today and found most often in gay porn. Your work also puts sexualisation of men to the forefront. What are your thoughts on the matter?

**L.S:** The male body has always been sexualised within the history art but often in covert ways and within popular culture the sexualisation can become more even overt. The first Calvin Klein adverts in 1982 that featured the pole vaulter Tom Hintaus posing in CK briefs, literally stopped the traffic in Times Square, it was an historic moment of sorts

Over the last decade, I've worked with images of men found in gay pornography, initially working with the images in exactly the same way that I had with images of women found in "straight" pornography. Recently though, for the show at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, I've included images of men and women within the same large-scale photomontages. I'm still working out what's happening on the pictorial frame, it's rather like two very powerful north-to-north magnets sitting side by side, unable to connect in any way. I think that I'll look back at these images in ten years' time and see them as pivotal in my practice in some way.



**C-P:** Lady Gaga gained notoriety wearing a meat dress to an award show a few years ago; something you did decades before and your work was recently plagiarized on the cover of an international arts and culture magazine. You were quoted saying "History after all is one big dressing-up box" which struck me as a great quote. What is your idea of the importance of acknowledging and crediting your influences?

**L.S:** The majority of pop stars of today seem very anxious about acknowledging any sort of influence, as if somehow it would reveal a weakness in their creative DNA. Generationally, we were all much more generous about the development of our shared ideas and reference points, we flaunted them even.

It's so easy for any stylist nowadays to treat history as a series of "looks" without any thought as to why people wore the clothes that they did. Style then becomes as aerosolic as the pixels that illustrate it online. If artists generously share their source material with fans, then both are enriched by the experience, it becomes more of a conversation that anyone can join in, rather than a monologue from on high.

**C-P:** To conclude and get a word in on your collaborative and performative work overlapping disciplines and bringing people together in creativity, what might you be working on in that direction this year?

**L.S:** I'm curating an evening of performance for the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin in July. I will have new works on paper showing in the exhibition that runs at the same time: As Above, So Below: Portals, Visions, Spirits & Mystics. The evening in July will feature a new performance that I'm developing with my son, Maxwell Sterling, we recently worked on a new ballet together with Northern Ballet for the British Art Show 8. For IMMA, we hope to include 50 traditional Irish dancers, along with 10 Northern Soul dancers, 2 choirs and a brass band. At this early stage, everything could change but the desired template is in place. Artists from The Death of Rave label have also been invited to create sonic pieces in response to the themes of As Above, So Below, they'll play in the deconsecrated chapel at the Royal Hospital in the grounds of IMMA.

*Linder Sterling's first exhibition with Andréhn-Schiptjenko in Stockholm is on view through April 22*

www.andrehn-schiptjenko.com

Images courtesy of Andréhn-Schiptjenko and Linder Sterling