



Since first coming to prominence with her collage for the sleeve of Buzzcocks' 1977 single "Orgasm Addict", which spliced an image of a naked female torso with an iron pinched from an Argos catalogue, Linder Sterling (who goes simply by the name Linder) has become known as one of the art world's foremost provocateurs. Her irreverent photomontages – in which glossy images of glamorous women and nude pin-ups are juxtaposed with banal household appliances or concealed by blooming flowers – playfully skewer consumer culture and subvert gender norms. The occult and mysticism are long-standing influences, rooted in her fascination with glamour – a word whose etymology she traces back to the early-18th-century Scottish term "glamer", meaning enchantment or a spell.

"My studio is only a 10-minute walk from the castle in which the Pendle witch trials happened in 1612 when men and women were hanged for witchcraft," says the 70-year-old Liverpoolian artist, speaking from her studio in Lancashire. "So I do find something eternally interesting about women having to be glamorous, and the male gaze in glamour photography."



This month, a vast new solo show of Linder's works will open at London's [Hayward Gallery](#). Titled *Danger Came Smiling*, it marks the artist's first London retrospective and will showcase 50 years of work – from the first collages she made in her student bedroom in Manchester (she cut her artistic teeth on the city's punk and post-punk scenes) to new and previously unseen photomontages. The works showcased on these pages – made with model, photographer and writer Laura Bailey and created last autumn – are infused with a surreal, dream-like quality: in one, the model stands in the snow with her arms outstretched, dressed in a sparkly sequinned dress by designer Ashish, her face masked by a coiling snake; in another she is shrouded by the petals of a large red bloom, her body veiled by a shimmery iridescent film. When [Bailey](#), a “long-term admirer” of Linder's work, reached out to collaborate, the artist was immediately roused.

“It's always delightful when women get in touch and say something as simple as, ‘I love your work and I'd like to work with you,’” says Linder. “I find collaboration incredibly exciting because a lot of the time it's quite a solitary profession. It's me and lots of very, very old books and magazines.”

“I love the element of discovery and the kind of treasure hunt of looking at Linder's work,” says Bailey. “Something she creates or adds will mean something to me, but it might mean something different to another viewer.”

Drawing from a vast repository of source material that spans everything from pornographic magazines to horticultural journals and 19th-century adverts for crinolines, Linder often works with a medical-grade surgical scalpel to “bring the image to life”, letting the instrument guide her like a kind of mystical dowsing rod.

“For some reason, a certain image will present itself and I can see where to make the stab, whereas other images almost have a kind of ‘no entry’ sign,” she says. “It's often hard to bring language to that process because so much of it is done in complete solitude, almost in a state of meditation – I almost don't want to demystify it for myself. So it's very brave of Laura to say, ‘Yes, photomontage me’, because I never quite know where the scalpel will cut or the glue will stick. Every photomontage is as much a surprise to me as it is to the subject.”

For Bailey, part of the thrill of working with the [artist](#) was surrendering to her process and having her self-image be picked apart and reconstructed. “We’re so conditioned to hyper-control, and we live in a world of so much image-making and projection of other people’s fantasies and ideas, that there was something really freeing about letting go and having a chance to shed skins and be raw,” she says. “When you’re overly used to having your picture taken, there are things that become very distorted and filtered in your own mind, about what people think of you, and it’s fun to smash it all up.”



The world rotates around us, by Linder © Linder/Hazel Gaskin

“It’s interesting that you’re talking about shedding skins, and I did use quite a lot of snake imagery,” rejoins Linder. “I’ve learned over the decades to not question that intuitive part, which is far smarter than the logical part. If I start to question what I’m using then it all goes wrong.”

Linder worked with [photographer](#) Hazel Gaskin and Ashish – a frequent collaborator of the artist’s – on the images, which were taken at West Dean College, an art school in the South Downs steeped in surrealist lore. “Those ghosts at West Dean are very powerful,” says Linder brightly, referring to surrealist patron and poet Edward James, who inherited the estate in the 1930s, and artists such as Leonora Carrington and Salvador Dalí, who stayed as guests. “The house itself is in the Domesday Book and it’s where James and Dalí created the Mae West Lips sofa, so we were on hallowed ground in many ways,” she says.

“Part of my aim is to make every woman a sphinx”

– Linder

“I’ve learnt that magic happens when you’re working with someone like Linder,” says Bailey. Ashish’s sparkly creations were also inspiring. “The most striking thing for me was the sense of armour, in terms of how one walks or sits, that had a very powerful effect,” she says. “I’ve worn his pieces for work in the past but I hadn’t fully connected with the power of that.”

“Maybe part of my aim is to make every woman in my photomontages a sphinx,” smiles Linder. “They are all riddles, and every person can come along and hopefully find what they need to find in those works.”

Linder’s enthusiasm for her medium stems as much from her love of print media as her desire to “redeem” bodies that have been sexualised or somehow exploited. “We now live in a world of memes and photomontage,” she says. “Everything’s cut up and reconfigured and an eight-year-old can probably make a meme far more quickly and effectively than I can photomontage. So it makes me all the more determined, in an eccentric way, to honour the scalpel, the scissor, the messy, invisible glue that holds the whole thing together. There’s something quite pacifying about the physicality of the cut.”



Make the clocks circle slower, by Linder © Linder/Hazel Gaskin



And watched you as you stopped time, by Linder © Linder/Hazel Gaskin

Linder has had shows at the [Musée d'Art Moderne](#) in Paris and New York's [P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre](#), but the Hayward exhibition marks the largest on home turf. How does the artist feel to be getting her flowers at 70? "There are only so many retrospectives happening on the planet at any one time, and there are people as equally deserving as I am," she replies modestly. "But it happens to be my turn..." A pause. "Which is thrilling!"

For Bailey, the exhibition is more relevant than ever. "The timing feels so resonant," she says, "in terms of politics, in terms of the digital world that we're operating in and the vulnerabilities around that, but also in a more positive way, in terms of opportunity and creativity and empowerment, especially for young women," she says. "I think the youth's response to the retrospective will be very interesting."

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Visual Arts

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Linder hopes the works will continue to provoke and resonate with new audiences – and is all too aware of the similar pressures facing women today as when she was first creating. "I am fascinated by this horror of ageing. I mean, if I go on social media now, I see adverts for facial-hair devices or lip boosters and I'm thinking, 'Why? Why would I want to look younger than the age that I'm in?'"

"I'm proudly 70 years of age, and I have no desire to look 60 or 50 or 40. Going into my 70s feels very exciting, and hopefully in 10 years' time you'll be saying, 'Linder, what's it like to be 80?'" she chuckles. "I will report back, girls, just you wait. I will be reporting from the front line."

[Linder: Danger Came Smiling](#) is at Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, Belvedere Rd, London SE1, from 11 February to 5 May

Photography by Hazel Gaskin. Styling and clothes by Ashish. Assisted by Amy Stephenson and Sophie Gumienna. Model, Laura Bailey. With thanks to West Dean College, West Sussex. Lighting, Will Corry. Processing and scanning, Labyrinth. Photographic post-production, Touch Digital Production, Tiger Tiger Productions