

Linder's performances were transportive over the summer—now one has been purchased for the first time

The artist's show across two Scottish locations, co-commissioned by Mount Stuart Trust and Edinburgh Art Festival, offered a dangerous sense of disquiet



Dancers in Linder's show wore Ashish Gupta's sculptural, shimmering costumes
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In June last year I was walking with the artist Linder Sterling in the ancient coastal woodlands just below Mount Stuart, a spectacular 19th-century Gothic house on the Scottish island of Bute. It was a sunny morning, but suddenly the atmosphere changed. A strong gust of wind shook leaves and caused boughs to creak, while gnarled trunks and twisted branches appeared to loom a little closer. The moment passed, but we both felt it. Indeed, that intense, inexplicable *frisson*, which Linder described at the time as "a force", reverberated through both iterations of *A kind of glamour about me*, her powerful new performance work co-commissioned by Mount Stuart Trust and Edinburgh Art Festival, and presented in two Scottish locations this summer.

At the premiere in the towering, colonnaded Marble Hall of Mount Stuart, four dancers held the audience in thrall with a series of erotic, ritualised encounters in which identities slipped, power balances shifted and ancient forces seemed to stir, all guided by Linder's son Maxwell Sterling's improvised music. Shimmering sculptural costumes became protagonists, as did a large forked tree branch which shapeshifted to become antlers, a yoke, a spear and a bier. Even though I was surrounded by Victorian opulence, at times I was transported back to feeling peculiar in the woods.

Linder is best known for the photomontages she has made since the 1970s, which have involved her slicing and splicing images from fashion magazines and softcore pornography, to challenge and subvert gender stereotypes, consumerism and societal norms in the process. My first Linder encounter was back in 1978 when, aged 17, I bought the band Buzzcocks's single *Orgasm Addict*, with its sleeve emblazoned with her infamous image of a woman with a steam iron for a head and teeth-baring smiles in place of nipples. But right from the start Linder also embraced the disruptive power of live performance, most notoriously in 1982 when, as frontwoman of post-punk band Ludus—and many years before Lady Gaga's meat dress—she performed at Manchester's Hacienda club in a bodice made of chicken carcasses and a strap-on dildo.

The dangerous sense of disquiet that runs through *A kind of glamour about me* is reflected in the work's title, which comes from the diaries of Walter Scott. Scott was drawing on the word's origins in the early 18th-century Scottish term *glamer*, meaning a spell or enchantment, and while contemporary glam abounded in the glittering costumes of the dancers in Linder's performance—created by the high-fashion designer Ashish Gupta, known for cladding the likes of Rihanna, Beyoncé and Cate Blanchett in sequinned extravaganzas—she is equally keen to emphasise the darker, more magically subversive meanings. She declared in an interview with *Artlyst*: "I'm not interested in the surface shimmer but in the undercurrent, the manipulative dazzle that cloaks power, seduction, and control. Glamour, to me, is both blade and balm: it binds, it blinds, it liberates."

A near-bacchanalian sense of liberation coursed through the work's second iteration, which took place in a grove of oak trees in Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden. In this outdoor setting the spirit was more raw and—literally—earthier as the dancers shed their costumes to perform half naked, pulling up and even biting fistfuls of leaves and soil. As with all Linder's performances, every aspect was improvised, with the confident precision of the dancer's movements a testament to the choreographer and regular collaborator Holly Blakey. "I thrive on improvisation," Linder tells me. "I always say: you can't do anything wrong if you're improvising, you can't make a mistake."

Performance preserved

Although there are no further performances currently scheduled, *A kind of glamour about me* has recently been acquired by the Mount Stuart Trust, with support from the Art Fund—the first time one of Linder's performances has been purchased. The components include Ashish's costume props, photographs by Hazel Gaskin and a specially commissioned film by the New York-born, Glasgow-based artist Margaret Salmon (who also has a solo show at Glasgow's Hunterian Art Gallery until 19 October).

There is also a strong possibility of future enactments, with Linder insisting: "This is not a one-night spell. It needs to be recast, recharged and reborn in new soil." But for those who can't wait, a more enduring presence can still be experienced in Edinburgh. Only a few stray sequins now remain, but giant photographic images of lips, eyes, butterflies and even an owl have been planted in what the artist calls a "garden of smiles", beside the Edinburgh version of her major travelling retrospective, at Inverleith House until 19 October. But be on your guard: the title is *Danger Came Smiling*.

• **Linder: *Danger Came Smiling*** [@](#), Inverleith House, Edinburgh, until 19 October

