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Art



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## Interview

# ‘I was always obsessed with death’: how Linder turned pornography and trauma into art Alex Needham



Linder at the Hayward Gallery, London. Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

At 70, Linder is having a retrospective at the Hayward Gallery – after years of being overlooked by the art establishment. She discusses punk, porn and politics

In 1977, the punk band [Buzzcocks](#) released a single called *Orgasm Addict*, with a record sleeve as jolting as the song’s title. It depicted a lean and muscular, oiled-up naked woman with an iron for a head and smiling, lipsticked mouths for nipples. The collage was scary, sexy and shocking – especially since it was mass produced, seen in record shops and on the streets, rather than confined to a gallery.

“Buzzcocks had just signed to United Artists, so there was quite a large publicity budget,” Linder Sterling, the creator of the collage, remembers. “So that poster was in cities everywhere. It was unmissable. There was no social media, so the effect was hard to track, but years later people say to me ‘I saw that poster in Glasgow, or in a back street in Birmingham, and it changed my life.’”

The poster is in the collection of MoMA (Malcolm Garrett did the graphic design). The iron-headed woman is still Linder's most recognisable image, and a version of it advertises her new exhibition, *Danger Came Smiling*. Like her other collages, it was made from found imagery – often pornography. So what was the woman's real face like? "When I die, I'll tell my son that he can finally show the world the source image," she promises. "Because once you see it, you can't get it out of your head."

Linder was born Linda Mulvey, in Liverpool; at 21 she decided to go by a Germanic version of her first name only. She's sitting in a cafe upstairs at the Hayward Gallery in London, dressed in jeans and a cycling top. "To have a retrospective at age 70 – there's something very joyous about that," she says. *Danger Came Smiling* is named after the second album by her band Ludus; she originally took the title from one of her grandmother's romance novels. "If you're looking at pornography, those workers are vulnerable and they often have to smile," Linder notes. "And think of Trump, that horrible gurning."



Linder: 'My family didn't go to art galleries. We might have sheltered in one in the rain.' Photograph: Sarah Lee/The Guardian

The exhibition consists of four huge rooms filled with 50 years' worth of work. There are pictures by the photographer Birrer of Linder tying cellophane around her face, in pearls and dramatic makeup; many more collages, including old porno postcards with the heads of the models replaced with consumer durables like kettles and TVs; and masks made out of peephole bras and black lace knickers.

There is footage of Linder's notorious performance with Ludus in which she took to the stage in a bodice made of chicken carcasses (decades before Lady Gaga's meat dress) and then whipped out a strap-on dildo. She says it was inevitable, once punk hit [Manchester](#), that she would form a band: "It was like national service in Manchester, you had to pick up an instrument at some point. For a short while, the space between the audience and the stage just seemed to disappear. A lot of us were poor working class, we hadn't had music lessons as children. But extraordinary music was happening then."

There are dramatic images of the artist bodybuilding in 1983, in an otherwise all-male gym in Manchester's Moss Side; and a photograph of her tenderly painting the nails of her friend Morrissey on tour in the early 90s. Linder has known Morrissey since 1976; she is the pal he arranges to meet "at the cemetery gates" in the 1986 song by the Smiths. Linder confirms they are "still friends, obviously, for ever, for life", but is reluctant to discuss their friendship [with his least favourite news organisation](#). "I'm wary of clickbait," she explains.

As well as joyous – and funny, alarming, perceptive, uncanny and somehow deeply northern – the show is long overdue. Linder has never had a retrospective in London, let alone enjoyed art-world accolades like a Turner prize nomination. She is delighted she's finally making a splash in [London's Southbank Centre](#), contrasting its now celebrated brutalist concrete with the "soft, yielding and inviting architecture of women's bodies" depicted in a stash of Playboy magazines from 1968, the year the Hayward Gallery opened. Linder acquired the mags from her late uncle and has used them in the exhibition's two most recent works, collages partly inspired by deepfake porn, which feature her face on a porn star's body. "Pornography used to be print media," she says. "Whereas now it's quite aerosolic. You know, pornography is all about profit, so why print a magazine when you can just have a website?"

But Linder is wedded to print media, and few other artists wield a scalpel so effectively. Collage is the medium to which she keeps returning, most recently for the piece she has made for the Guardian. "That Roman sculpture of an unnamed emperor just seemed quite apt right now," she says of the work, adding that her selection of images is usually intuitive. There is a drawing of a baby in the womb – Linder has made a lot of work expressing her despair at the overturning of [Roe v Wade](#) in America – and a very explicit orchid. "Flowers are basically nature's pornography," she says. "It's like, come over here and be attracted to me."

Linder's work casts doubt on the idea that material comforts will make us happy. "In capitalism, you have this progress narrative, like: buy this, do this, and life will get better," she says. "Suddenly you think, 'It could get a hell of a lot worse, very quickly.'" At the moment, she says, "everything we fought for feels as fragile as a magazine from the 1950s. You put the blade into it and it just tears."

Linder discovered collage in 1976, when she was studying graphic design at Manchester Polytechnic; she saw the work of artists including Hannah Höch, Max Ernst and El Lissitzky in a book by Dawn Ades called *Photomontage*. Her initial collages were taken from magazines, which at that time were divided into “men’s” and “women’s” interest in newsagents. Women’s interests were confined to fashion, homemaking and cooking, but “in men’s interest you’d have pornography, music ... Music obviously wasn’t a woman’s interest,” she notes drily.

In splicing the two types of media together, her collages comment on the way women are objectified, stereotyped and pressed into domestic and sexual servitude, exposing the tension and aggression seething between the sexes and beneath the surface of family life. They seem to have extra resonance in the era of OnlyFans, when anyone can be a sex worker, broadcasting porn straight from your own home. “Pornography can be ethical,” says Linder. “But when you’ve made a product in your bedroom it needs to be distributed, and that’s when the tech companies take ownership of it. That’s when it gets very, very murky.”

Linder’s dad was a bricklayer, her mother a hospital cleaner. Born in 1954, she says her life has followed the trajectory of British pop music. “I grew up with Merseybeat and I remember that sense of excitement,” she says. “Harold Wilson was our local politician, and the people from my city were globally changing culture. Success could be local, it wasn’t something far away. As a small child, you just sense that.”

There was a much more malevolent influence in Linder’s young life: her step-grandfather, who would show her pornography when she was as young as three, and sexually assault her in the family home. Linder believes this trauma is responsible for her lifelong desire to take control of porn and turn it into a feminist statement – she has spent a lifetime looking at it, and using it in her work, joking that these days when she tries to buy an old porn mag, she finds that someone from the British Museum is also trying to acquire it. “I feel comfortable working with pornography,” she says. “It feels analytic – no, forensic. That’s the word.”



SheShe, 1981. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist Modern Art, London Blum, Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm, Paris and dépendance, Brussels



Linder's artwork created for the Guardian. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London

The abuse she suffered stayed with her. A couple of years ago, Linder had eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy. “A whole new swathe of imagery came up and it was very, very vivid,” she says. “I was somehow recalling the ballet books I used to have aged three. I think that kind of grooming begins with the handling of the child’s body in a certain way in domestic spaces. In my montages, I reverse-engineer what a paedophile spends their time engineering.”

At 10, Linder experienced the culture shock of moving from Liverpool to a small mining village near Wigan. “I’m still recovering from it,” she says. “Liverpool’s a port, so you’re importing goods but you’re also importing ideas. You have that sense of America ahead of you; it’s about reaching outwards. But in a mining village, the idea is boring down into the earth.” Gender roles were strictly enforced. “I was called a wench!” Linder remembers. “Maybe if I hadn’t have grown up there, I wouldn’t have identified as a feminist aged 16.”



Linder, untitled, 1979. Photograph: © Linder Sterling. Courtesy of the artist Modern Art, London Blum, Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm, Paris and dépendance, Brussels

Linder discovered Germaine Greer's galvanising second-wave feminist text, *The Female Eunuch*, in a bookshop in Wigan in 1970. She was inspired by the book's cover by the surrealist artist John Holmes, depicting a woman's torso as a neutered hot-water bottle, complete with handles. I suggest the image is quite Linder-esque, and she says: "It really is! It was very striking at the time – it sort of popped off when you saw it in a bookstore. I think that's why I was interested in doing graphic design rather than fine art. I really loved record sleeve and book cover design. My family didn't go to art galleries. We might have sheltered in one in the rain. I didn't even quite know what art was then, I guess."

She was delighted to get back to the big city to study, and her horizons expanded further on 20 July 1976, when she went to the second [Sex Pistols](#) concert at Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall after seeing it advertised on the side of a passing van. "I remember John Lydon taking my money on the ticket box and he looked quite extraordinary," she says. "He was wearing a sparkly jacket, almost like an Elvis jacket. I remember thinking, 'Oh, this is a good way in. I haven't seen anyone looking like that in Manchester before.' And it was all quite gloriously shambolic." Between bands, she got talking to a group called Buzzcocks, who at that point had only played one gig. They asked her what she did, and on telling them that she was a graphic design student, they invited her to design "posters and things. So it was all very casual."

Linder started dating Howard Devoto, Buzzcocks' frontman, who soon left the band to form another, Magazine. "We'd go to London, stay in Malcolm McLaren's flat, hang out in Sex" – McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's boutique, and the source of the Sex Pistols' stage wear. Nonetheless, as far as Linder is concerned, punk was over by April 1977. "I was about to hand in my end-of-year thesis about punk. And my mum's magazine had a big feature about how to make a bin-bag skirt for your daughter and how to knit her a mohair jumper. I remember thinking, 'Well, that's it, then.'"

Punk's premature demise didn't staunch her creativity, but Linder's desire to be a great urban photographer like Diane Arbus or Weegee ended in horrifying fashion when she was on her way home after photographing a gig by the Damned. A man followed her off the bus and down a shortcut home, then held a stiletto knife to her throat. "I said, 'Take my cameras, they're worth a fortune.' And I bluffed that my friends were coming, so he ran off with my cameras." When the police finally caught the man two years later, they discovered he had raped seven women, one of them on the night he attacked Linder. She didn't pick up a camera again until her son was born in 1990.

Linder says her retrospective feels "quite tender, because so many people haven't made it", although she admits that even as a girl, she "was always obsessed with death". One room features costumes for a ballet Linder created called The Ultimate Form, made by the fashion designer Richard Nicoll, who died suddenly aged 39. There's also an unusual (to put it mildly) tribute to Linder's late father – three huge pictures of Linder and her friend Maria Blum in ecstatic poses, covered in custard, cream and rice pudding. It's inspired by the niche sexual fetish splashing, in which people get aroused by having messy food dumped over them.

"He was an Irish builder, very strong even in his 80s, and then suddenly he had a severe stroke, so I and others would feed him, trying to maintain his dignity," says Linder. "He was in hospital, so it was rice pudding, custard, jellies, those kinds of soft and sugary foods. At the time, I was aware of the splosh fetish happening, and was collecting all the magazines. It felt really cathartic to have this extraordinary splosh session after feeding my father so carefully and so tenderly."

Danger Came Smiling is an object lesson in creating art out of even the most abject materials, and Linder is justifiably proud of the inspiration she has provided to others. "I'm on the school syllabus now," she says. "Sometimes people follow me on social media. I look at their profiles and they've been doing collage, photomontage, and that feels good in these cut up, fractured times. If you can find the psychological or the physical glue, it keeps you sane."

*Linder: Danger Came Smiling is at the Hayward Gallery, London, 11 February - 5 May*

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