

Linder: Danger Came Smiling, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre (11 February - 5 May 2025)

Reviewed by Rebecca Binns of London College of Communication

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The exhibition, *Danger Comes Smiling*, hosted by The Hayward Gallery, provides the first major, London-based retrospective of the artist Linder's work. Linder is best known for her thought-provoking photomontages, which parody and critique representations of feminine and masculine identity circulating in visual culture, including those derived from pornography. She had a distinctive, feminist impact within the punk and post-punk scene centred on Manchester in the late 1970s-80s, and the exhibition opens with a section dedicated to this period.

Entitled Grammar (presumably a reference to her still having been in college at the time) it features a large selection of the photomontage experiments she created while studying Graphic Design at Manchester Polytechnic (1974-77). These works often juxtaposed female pinups found in men's magazines with domestic appliances promoted via women's magazines during the late 1970s, clearly embodied in her *Pretty Girls* (1977) photomontage series.

INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE

Linder then developed this method through the photomontages she created for the punk fanzine *The Secret Public* (1978), which she co-produced with Jon Savage, who contributed gritty monochrome montages featuring urban decline. While Linder's *Pretty Girls* series sent up the constrictive roles for women promoted in magazines, they consciously refrained from forming a directly confrontational critique that was deployed among feminist practitioners to undermine sexist stereotyping in visual culture. Instead, Linder's photomontages mimic and exaggerate the depersonalisation of women that occurs in pornography for parodic, often humorous, effect. There is an element of playfulness in the jarring juxtapositions she makes. In an untitled example from 1976, a representation of a heterosexual couple in love is disturbed by the insertion of a giant fork, which the female figure points towards her eye. The coexistence of the banal with the violent, symptomatic of the horizons opened by punk.

INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE

A theme of sexual, societal and spiritual transgression is present throughout Linder's oeuvre. Another early photomontage *Untitled* (1977) features a male and female figure, who have TVs for heads, masturbating one another. By merging banal electronic devices with sexual gratification, she seems to send up the mindless consumerism mediating human relationships, echoing a theme that became pronounced in the sentiments and lyrics of punk artists and musicians, for example Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex [in particular the tracks she wrote for the album, *Germfree Adolescence* (1978), including 'Art-i-ficial', 'Genetic Engineering', 'Germfree Adolescents', 'Identity' and 'Warrior in Woolworths.']

INSERT FIGURE THREE HERE

Towards the end of her time at Manchester Poly, Linder also became involved in the burgeoning local punk and post-punk scene, where she made a key contribution. She contributed designs for the bands Buzzcocks and Magazine (often together with Malcolm Garrett under the assumed name Anxious Images). Her most famous image, which graced the cover of the Buzzcocks single 'Orgasm Addict' (1977), featuring an oiled woman's body with an iron for a head and two mouths for nipples, is highlighted here. It's given due prominence by being internally lit and mounted on a support in the centre of the room.

IMAGE FIGURE FOUR HERE

The exhibition reveals the extent to which the lips motif is used in this early work. Another collage pairs an oversized mouth, with painted lips, with a poster featuring a woman's headshot used to promote hair products and services. The lips here render this pandering to women's insecurities and that of the beauty industry more widely, somewhat silly. Also prominently displayed is a series of portraits in which this woman's face is juxtaposed with differing mouth shapes. Warholesque in their repetition, they also resemble a kineograph as the changing mouth shifts the emotional tone of the image.

INSERT FIGURE FIVE HERE

The exhibition takes its name, *Danger Came Smiling*, from the album of the same name (1982), produced by Linder's post-punk band, Ludus. Her transgressive performances with the band are featured in two films running at the exhibition. One is from the Hacienda club (Manchester, 1982) and is notable as Linder is wearing the meat dress that she created, decades before Lady Gaga's notorious outing.

She wore the dress in protest at the club selling meat; an undertaking that must have been particularly odious given her vegetarianism. She also wore a giant dildo in protest at the club featuring pornography on its monitors. Linder has identified as a radical feminist, and her performances are both confrontational and transgressive. However much she's not easily pegged in terms of her positioning, non-heteronormative identity and sexuality feature strongly in her work.

Two glass boxes, termed Vitrines 1 and 2 display a fascinating selection of her work associated with this period. Vitrine 1 includes flyers and record covers, which she designed for Ludus. Her striking (preliminary) collages for their 7" single, 'My Cherry is in Sherry' (1980), features sketches of angular, nude figures, who are collaged with material for masks, gloves and capes. Shocks of red are inserted with the otherwise monochrome palette, for the collaged, signature Linder mouths, while the eyes of the figures glow a faint daemonic red. The figures are playing with revealing and disguising themselves, embodying a mystique that's reminiscent of Aubrey Beardsley's sketches.

INSERT FIGURE SIX HERE

Vitrine Two includes Linder's blown-up lino-print, featuring the iconic figure, Jordan (1977) [here also referred to as Punky Pam] delineated in black ink on white paper. In this powerful image Jordan confronts the viewer with racoon eyed nonchalance. Her upside-down cross earring further destabilises moral and feminine conventions. Also featured are her photographs of Sterling's friend and Buzzcocks founding member, Howard Devoto, wearing lingerie masks, which she designed in her last term at college (1977). They also make an appearance in an area cordoned off with lace, where polystyrene heads model the fetishy masks.

The Grammar section is followed by a section entitled Glamour, which also includes some early work. Four of her (untitled) photographs from this period, which document Manchester nightlife, centred on drag club performers are featured.

INSERT FIGURE SEVEN HERE

Her photography was partly inspired by the work of Shirley Baker, who had documented street scenes in Manchester in the 1960s. Unlike Baker's classic use of photojournalism techniques to document working class life, however, Linder's series emphasises the role that glamour has in free expression, transgression and escape for these men. The term also references the 'incredibly glamorous' women she observed growing up in Liverpool in the 1950s-60s, who used dress as a means of transcending social and gender limitations. Such a use of the term parallels Linder's own desire to escape the confines of her own upbringing in working-class Liverpool.

Glamour as a form of self-expression is evident in her series, *Sheshe* (1981), which features Sterling holding a ripped magazine photograph of a woman's face (minus the eyes) to her chin at an angle, thereby playing with the notion of the construction of feminine identity. This is from a series of fourteen black and white portraits of Sterling (nine of which, made together with Christine Birrer, who Linder has referred to as 'the 'Lee Miller' of her time', feature the artist wearing a lace dress and white pearls belonging to her mother). The other five photos feature song lyrics from Ludus. [The](#) images originally accompanied the cassette release of Ludus' EP *Pickpocket* (1981).

A vast blown-up portrait of Linder from the Birrer series, her face lightly covered with cling film, greets you at the entrance to the show. Her hair cropped short and prominent painted thick eyebrows accentuate her direct return of the viewer's gaze, providing a

stark contrast with the submissive female representations which formed such a staple for critique in her work in the late 1970s.

INSERT FIGURE EIGHT HERE

From this room onwards, the exhibition contains examples drawn from across the decades that illustrate the chosen theme. Her self-portrait series, *Oh Grateful Colours*, *Bright Looks I, III and V*, taken by Tim Walker (2009) provide a Cindy Sherman-like use of guise to play with feminine identity and gender politics. The images feature the artist in a range of domestic guises, referencing a bygone era of suburban conformity and tightly prescribed gender roles. They veer on the absurd, with one example featuring Linder attempting to Hoover the lawn.

INSERT FIGURE NINE HERE

This playful use of household appliances holds obvious references back to her formative works, and although they are produced with high colour saturation, the series bring in motifs, such as flowers, butterflies and painted mouths, familiar throughout her oeuvre. Classic Linder tropes are also evident in later photomontages such as *Latona* (2018), *Artemis* (2018) and *Pythia* (2017), along with *Oranur Experiment* (2009), which features the face of a model who dribbles, along with objects, such as lipstick, empty bowl and spoon, man's watch and a piece of cake. The content, finish and aspirational symbols give the appearance of an appealing image in a fashion magazine, albeit one that's infused with parodic humour.

INSERT FIGURE TEN HERE

The term glamour also obviously has connotations with the pornography industry. As with her early photomontages, which fused markers of domesticity with objectified female sexuality, her *Magnitudes of Performance* series' (XIV, IV and VI [all 2012]) features gay pornographic photographs spliced with aspirational hallmarks of masculine identity (an expensive watch, taps, coffee table), commonly marketed to men via advertising. The dark side to body idolisation is alluded to through the inclusion of Linder's series, *Art and Industry VI* and *Art and Industry IX* (both 2022), which portray idealised male and female bodies, which were produced in the context of Nazi Germany (1939). She interrupts these images by inserting designed objects (taken from art historian Herbert Read's book, *Art and Industry: The Principles of Industrial Design* [1934]).

INSERT FIGURE 11 HERE

The use of the term glamour also references its original 18th century meaning to cast a spell or enchantment. Linder's preoccupation with the mystical is evident in *Les chamans et leur créatures* (V, X, IX, XVI) [all 2012]. It features male and female figures wearing fetish attire, masks and capes, who are situated in a dark, confined space. A flower is strategically placed over the crotch of one figure, further evoking the peep show references. The images also reference pinup photography from the Victorian era,

in their content and in the monochrome, antiquated aesthetic. They're deliberately blurred; somewhat ambiguous and eerie.

INSERT FIGURE 12 HERE

The third section of the exhibition is entitled Seduction, although many, such as a series of pinups, combined with flowers, which enrich, obscure and lampoon the intention of the original imagery (2024), could just as easily have been situated in the 'Glamour' section. Seduction references the worlds Linder accessed through imagery, which allowed her to escape through her imagination from the abuse she experienced in her wider family. For her *Postmortam* series (2016-19), she has merged images taken from the book, *Baron at the Ballet* (1950) with photographs of shells, which form otherworldly, and unsettling juxtapositions.

INSERT FIGURE 13 HERE

Her series, *Superautomatisme Ballets Russes* (I, V, VI, VII and IV), takes pages featuring dancers from the famous, avant-garde ballet company, and disrupts them, using what appears to be a process of overexposure. The series was inspired by experiments with the Surrealist technique of 'automatism' (allowing the unconscious to inform creative experimentation) carried out by the British artist, writer and occultist, Ithell Colquhoun.

Her series, *Action Rituelle des Ancêtres (Ritual Action of the Ancestors)* [2011] features Linder and a friend naked, covered in luridly coloured liquids. Referencing excess, the work is experienced as alternately sensual and repulsive. It refers to the niche fetish practice of 'sploshing' in which people cover themselves in food and household substances. It also relates to Linder's experience of caring for her father through feeding him, in his later years, where she observed his previous strength reduced to dependence.

INSERT FIGURE 14 HERE

The section entitled Cut, riffs off Linder's early photomontage technique, in which she used a scalpel with medical precision to obtain her source material. Work is included here that references fairy tales and myths, to investigate female archetypes regarding their agency, and for how they produce meaning in culture. *The Bardo of Dharmata* (2024), uses another of her motifs, a brightly coloured, exotic bird, in this case parrot figurines, which obscure the face and shoulder of a female model, which is taken from a magazine in a bygone era.

INSERT FIGURE FIFTEEN HERE

An interesting recent work, *Linder, The Most Sacred Monster of Photomontage in Her Time* (2025), features a black and white headshot of Linder as a young woman, wearing a crown, adorned with scissors, a fork and jewellery, set against a bright orange background. Her face is placed atop a Playboy centrefold. The work refers to 'deepfaking' where an image of a young woman's face is taken from their social media profile and combined with the body of a pornographic model. Linder's sullen/angry

expression, combined with the sharp implements serves to highlight her feminist backlash to this misogynist practice. The title references Salvador Dali's *Shirley Temple: The Youngest, Most Sacred Monster of the Cinema in Her Time* (1939), in which he collaged the image of the child-actor with the body of a sphinx to highlight how the film industry sexualised children in film.

INSERT IMAGE SIXTEEN HERE

Seeing this vast assemblage of Linder's work really helps to underline her enduring preoccupations, and what is perhaps most overwhelming is the sensuousness of her aesthetic, something that can perhaps be lost when viewing her works in isolation, when the social critique can override this aspect. Perhaps inevitably, the less obvious themes of her work are to some extent subsumed by the predominant subject matter. This stands in contrast to a show Linder herself curated in 2018, *The House of Fame: An Exhibition Convened by Linder* (Nottingham Contemporary), in which she juxtaposed her work with that of some of her key influences. Her images featuring transvestites, for example, were shown with Shirley Baker's street-photography – revealing the social realist element behind the glamour. Conversely, the exhibition contained work from a bygone world of high fashion, including images by 'Madame' Yevonde (1893-1975), who produced intense colour spreads for high society magazines in the 1930s, revealing Linder's love of escapist glamour photography. The surrealist component of her work was really accentuated by her inclusion of works by Colquhoun (who was relatively ignored at the time, but who has her own first major exhibition at the Tate St Ives and then Tate Britain this year). Similarly, the psychedelic elements of her output were enhanced by comparison to those used by Penny Slinger in her mystical, erotic collages from the 1970s. While the Nottingham exhibition provided insight into Linder's influences and eclectic taste that was beyond the remit of the Hayward show, it was enjoyable to see all her work curated in a single space, and it is perhaps surprising that it's only now that she is having a first major London retrospective.

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