

***The House of Fame: An Exhibition Convened by Linder, Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, UK,
24 March–24 June 2018***

Reviewed by Rebecca Binns, London College of Communication

Fig.01 Exterior installation view of *The House of Fame: an exhibition convened by Linder*, March-June 2018, Nottingham Contemporary. Photography by Stuart Whipps.

The House of Fame exhibition was conceived by the artist and musician Linder Sterling. The exhibition centres on a retrospective of this artist's work in the mediums of photomontage, graphics, costume and performance. She dedicates the remainder of the show to two hundred items produced in a variety of media by a range of artists and photographers that have sparked her interest. The exhibition succeeds in unifying a disparate series of art objects and artefacts from a huge range of sources due to the inspired vision of this idiosyncratic artist.

The exhibition is partly informed by local history, in particular lace production in Nottingham. A series of antique samples and photographs of lace run through the exhibition, including intricate works by local designer William Hallam Pegg (1864-1946). In addition, a range of antique objects, costume and artefacts have been donated from the nearby Chatsworth Estate in Derbyshire. Linder's choice of inspiring objects therefore highlights the distinctiveness of this location. This emphasis echoes Linder's influential role in developing a northern punk and post-punk scene centred on Manchester in the late seventies. That scene was distinct from the London-centric one that dominated the media and was centred on the Sex Pistols and Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's shop, SEX, on the King's Road, London.

Linder contributed designs for the Mancunian punk bands Buzzcocks and Magazine (together with graphic designer and typographer Malcolm Garrett), then Factory Records and the Hacienda nightclub. She is best known for her iconic photomontage that featured the oiled torso of a woman with an iron for its head and smiling mouths for nipples that graced the cover of Buzzcocks' second single, 'Orgasm Addict', in October 1977 (co-designed with Malcolm Garrett). This image is blown up, displayed as dura-trans on a light box that greets the visitor on entrance to the show (Fig.02).

Linder is also known for her distinctive collages and photomontages in punk fanzine *The Secret Public* (1978), which she co-produced with Jon Savage. These images similarly feature female bodies juxtaposed with domestic appliances taken from men and women's magazines respectively.

In doing so she critiqued the circumscribed roles promoted for women in the media and brought a radical feminist perspective into punk.

Her *Pretty Girls* series (1977), included in the exhibition, works along similar lines by juxtaposing images of female pinups with those of household objects sold to women via lifestyle magazines (Fig.03 and Fig.04). Whether such works function as a straight critique of demeaning media representations of women is questionable: their bodies are still presented as pinups. The obliteration of their faces via domestic appliances is an exaggerated depersonalisation of women that already occurs via pornography. As such these images parody rather than condemn such portrayals.

Her later work continues this focus on the construction of identity via the media with signifiers of masculinity coming under scrutiny. One example on display here is her photomontage series *Magnitudes of Performance* (VI, I, XIV and XI, all 2012), which positions images from gay pornography that idolise virility alongside stereotypical markers of male identity including an ash tray and clock.

It is interesting to see how disparate influences have played into Linder's punk collage and montage work. Included in the first gallery is *Fashion Plate* (1969-70) by the British Pop Artist and member of the Independent Group, Richard Hamilton. Hamilton's work (mixed media) utilises images of female facial features and hair, taken from women's magazines and assembled to represent a mock fashion shoot. It provides a clear precedent for Linder's later punk montage work.

In her self-portrait photomontage, *What I Do to Please You I Do*, 1981, Linder holds a torn out magazine image of a female face from the nose down, against her own (Fig.05). Here she plays with the signifiers of being female that are emblazoned in magazines by inserting herself into the frame. This approach is evident in her other self-portraits on show, including *Hiding But Still Not Knowing* and *You Search But Do Not See* (both 1981) (Fig.06). In these images (taken by her friend, the 'Lee Miller of her time' Christine Birrer) Linder undermines the traditional male gaze through her own arresting stare. These portraits mix traditional codes of masculinity and femininity through Linder's fierce expression and cropped hair together with high glamour makeup and antique, feminine clothing and accessories. The incorporation of elements such as over made-up eyebrows and cling film covering her face give an unsettling feel to the images.

The creation of jarring visual juxtapositions seen in Linder's punk montage work was common to punk design more widely, and it continues avant-garde strategies such as *détournement* that were

used to undermine or subvert received meaning. This approach is also seen in a range of unsettling and/or gaudy sound and film installations chosen by Linder to accompany her works. *Goodbye Marilyn* (1971) is a film produced by Keichi Tanami, who witnessed the US bombing of his birthplace Tokyo as a child in 1942-45. His film provides a gently satirical take on US culture, with a focus on Marilyn Monroe. It highlights Monroe's glamour, using tongue in cheek wit and hallucinatory visuals that were typical of that era.

The film *The Living Need Light, the Dead Need Music* (2014) by The Propeller Group, an artistic trio who live between Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and LA in the US is screened in pitch black darkness. Its eerie soundscape on a loop permeates the gallery space outside. This film features rituals such as sword swallowing and dance that accompany funeral processions in South Vietnam. The footage is partly documentary and partly dramatic re-enactment.

The exhibition is split into four galleries with distinct themes, but Linder's interest in death, mourning and ritual is evident throughout, and indeed forms the basis for one of the galleries (entitled *A Spectral Display of Mourning and Melancholy*). Related to this is Linder's interest in spiritual transgression and esotericism. This is evident in Mark Kelly's (1954-2012) *Ectoplasm* photographs (1978), projected as slides, which depict the artist with cotton wool spilling from his nose and mouth, evoking spiritualist séances, which procured a trance-like state in participants. Continuing with this theme are documents relating to the mystic practices of Maud MacCarthy (real name J.H. Foulds, 1882-1967). This includes a poster sized flyer advertising her demonstrations entitled, *Towards the Revival of the Mysteries in Arts and Crafts* for the School of Mysteries (1920) and a reproduction of a press clipping on her use of sound for healing, *Queer Temple of Healing* (1933).

Linder includes a significant number of inspirational female (including specifically feminist) artists. A surrealist theme is evident in screenprints *Evening Twilight* (1956) and *A New Season* (1955) by Toshiko Okanoue and paintings, *Gorgon* and *Arbour* (both 1946) by the British painter and writer Ithell Colquhoun (1906-88), who had a profound interest in automatism and the occult. A surrealist painting, *Alter Ego* (1945) by Marion Adnams (1898-1995), depicting a ladylike figure made of paper and bird skeleton, set against the backdrop of a beach is included. This work also ties in with the theme of local history, as it was produced by a local artist who lived in Derby and studied at what is now the University of Nottingham. Her work, like several of the female artists and photographers Linder features in the show, was largely overlooked on account of her gender.

Linder also features surrealist collages by Penny Slinger: *Gnostic Entrance*, *Mountain of Mysteries*, *Alchemy and Ecstasy* and *Eastern Alchemy* (all 1976-77), which are concerned with the mystic and erotic, featuring an all-seeing, 'third' eye, posed female bodies with animal heads, Egyptian pharaohs, hybrid animals and male and female genitalia, all set within rocky landscapes. Linder's later photomontages *Untitled (Johnny Ray)* (Fig.07) and *Voided Patterning* (both 2017) evoke these earlier works. *Untitled (Johnny Ray)* features a pornographic magazine at its centre with an image of a couple suggesting an oral sex act. This montage features related imagery, such as the Adonis-like figure with a snake coiled around the lower half of his body and an image of the American singer, songwriter, pianist and fifties pin-up Johnny Ray, who hid his homosexuality. It also features seemingly unrelated elements, including an owl, snake, butterfly, roses and tulips. *Voided Patterning* echoes her earlier *Pretty Girls* series by featuring a bikini clad female model at its centre, but rather than using this to make an explicit and subversive gesture, this montage also incorporates objects including a snake, roses, butterfly, peacock, and an Egyptian pharaoh known for their aesthetic and mystic qualities against a backdrop of lace. Both images are devoid of the subversive and critical quality of her earlier punk photomontage work and constitute a more hallucinatory and ambiguous visual vocabulary.

Overall this is a powerful and coherent exhibition, shaped by the perspective of this thought provoking artist. It traces the evolution of Linder's work from her early punk aesthetic through to her more recent expansion into surreal and mystic imagery, and her corresponding embrace of colour. This exhibition also succeeds in introducing an audience drawn in by her punk photomontage to a diverse range of high-quality artworks by other practitioners that embody the themes and ideas that have informed her oeuvre.