

Linder Sterling is a British artist and performer whose career spans the 1970s Manchester punk scene to her current collaborations with Tate St. Ives and The Hepworth Centre in north-west England.

She has worked in a variety of mediums – from music (as singer/songwriter/guitarist for post-punk band Ludus) and collage (using a steady scalpel to splice pornographic images into feminist statements), to her current durational works.

WORDS BY
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEVIN BLAIR
at the Barbara Hepworth Museum in Tate St. Ives

These include her 13-hour improvised dance performance piece *Darktown Cakewalk* and her most recent work, *The Ultimate Form*, a 'performance ballet' inspired by Barbara Hepworth, featuring dancers from Northern Ballet and costumes by Pam Hogg.

We met at the The Barbican Centre in London on a crisp March morning, just days after the opening of her first big retrospective at Le Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris.

Linder



Nicole Emmenegger: First off, thank you for sending through the preparatory text about you and your work. It ended up being ten pages in 10-point font!

Linder: How strange, I don't even enjoy writing!

That's so surprising because you write so well and you mention language and etymology quite a bit.

Oh, I LOVE language but I never felt that I had that mastery of it. When I was younger, I was always surrounded by people who had such amazing writing dexterity. In the time it took me to write a shopping list, they'd have written enough songs for a double album. As a child I loved reading but found writing difficult. I would spend each night drawing, it was my form of writing. Rather than shaping letters with a pen, I shaped bodies and landscapes instead. There weren't many distractions in 1968 – two channels on the TV and not many books in the house – so I would draw all the time. Then after about the third year of being at art school, I thought enough is enough. After 18 years I was bored by my own mark-making and I looked for a new visual language. I found out that you could use a scalpel like a pencil; that something similar happens physically. Except one is making a visible mark and the other has more to do with subtraction; cutting way to reveal something else.

Have you ever used words in your work?

No, I did when I was younger obviously – in the mid-seventies when I used some advertising copy – and then when I began to sing in Ludus, of course. But no, I haven't used any text... although I am sort of circling back to it.

Do you ever listen to your old Ludus records anymore?

Yes. Sporadically. I sit and *really* listen to them – almost forensically. When I hear my younger self, a part of me remembers that at the time, culture moved so fast. It was all so cheaply done and maybe we could have done a better job. But it wasn't about doing it better; it was just about *doing* it. I have to learn to be kind to my younger self.

What do you remember of that time and the feeling of what made it all happen?

There were a lot of people around me making very intelligent music and so it seemed quite natural that, at some point, I would try too. It seemed almost *unnatural* not to make music and it was easy to find musicians to play with. A small group of us – Pete Shelley, Howard Devoto, Morrissey, Barry Adamson – found ourselves in the right place at the right time. Picking up a guitar became a sort of National Service if you lived in Manchester then; it was almost compulsory for a while.

Being born in 1976, I have such a fascination with that era; something I will never get to experience. That DIY punk attitude spurred so much greatness.

Yes, I used to have this fascination for the mid-fifties. People I know at every age seem to have this fascination about the culture that you were born into, climbed into. It's your own personal etymology and you have to go back and work it out. It's good detective work. It makes sense and how lucky for you that 1976 was such a great year. Whereas 1954...

Where did you grow up and spend your childhood?

I lived in Liverpool until I was about nine or 10, then we moved 20 miles to Wigan, which was a huge culture shock. It's a mining town in the middle of nowhere, yet at the same time it was at the heart of the Northern Soul scene: Wigan Casino was infamous even then. Before we moved to Wigan, my family was living on a council estate in Liverpool and as it became more and more overcrowded and more and more rundown, new towns began to emerge around Liverpool and many other British cities. So we all migrated from the council estates to the new estates. My parents thought that it was a big deal to be able to buy their own house in 1962 – and it was, despite taking 25 years to pay off the mortgage. I moved to Manchester in 1972, when I was 18. I didn't move very far – Liverpool, Wigan, Manchester; people didn't stray too far from home then. I stayed in Manchester for almost 15 years. I travelled in and out of the city, but always keep a bolt-hole there.

How does it compare to where you live now?

I now live in a tiny village on the Northwest coast of England. I am the baby of the village – everybody else is 90+. People vaguely know I'm an artist and say to me *I also do watercolours, dear* – to which I vaguely shrug my shoulders. I like it there because it's very isolated – there aren't any centres of cultural production and I don't have to talk about art. I can be a part-time hermit too. A lot of people from my generation have drifted out to the coast now. It's as if we're literalising our marginalised position – finding out how far can we go before we fall off the land and off the radar. The village itself is quite an everyday place but it has its own unique charge too; the local vicar described it as a 'thin place', and people make pilgrimages to the Celtic gravestones there. I decided that I wanted to live by the sea in 2002; to explore the parts of the north-west coast that I'd known as a child. It was marketed as the Sunset Coast in the 1930s and the sunsets are Pre-Raphaelite in hue, with crazy light oscillating between sea and sky.

Looking at the development of your work – from the immediate, sharp collages you created while part of the punk scene in Manchester compared to your work now that is more durational – do you see a connection between the shift in your surrounding landscape and the work you produce?

Time fascinates me more and more. Perhaps as I grow older, I have a keen awareness that my time is finite and will one day run out altogether. I do a lot of meditational practice and I'm interested in how playful one can be with

ALL IMAGES OF LINDER STERLING'S WORK COURTESY
Stuart Shave / Modern Art, London & Blum and Poe, Los Angeles





the concept of time. Whilst meditating, you sometimes don't know if you've been sitting still for three minutes or three hours. Long sustained periods of meditation over the last decade have altered my sense of time, coupled with my move to the coast and the tidal nature of the landscape there.

In 1976 we had to make things quickly and cheaply in order to be seen and heard. Everything was 'spikey' in our attempts to puncture the culture that we found ourselves in – spikey hair, guitar solos and shoes. Now in the second decade of the 21st century, art – especially performance art – can utilise boredom and longevity, and that sense of boredom can work in different ways. In 1976 we were all so bored that interesting things had to happen. Now all we're so terrified of being bored that interesting things don't happen.

I decided that *The Darktown Cakewalk: Celebrated from the House of FAME* (2010) had to be 13-hours long. It offered boredom and spectacle in equal measure. People planned to visit for only an hour or so but then stayed eight hours and afterwards said it felt like only an hour had passed. My sense of time was skewed for months afterwards, I couldn't estimate time accurately. I was slightly disturbed but in a good way.

When you started your art practice, how did you describe what you did?

Well, that's where language failed me. I couldn't find the words to describe what I did then, I just did it. Thankfully I was surrounded by people who could describe me far better than I could and who obviously could see me more clearly than I could. I rarely had a defined sense of what I was doing when young. At the time, it was very difficult to find role models of other women artists because the history books were still waiting to be rewritten. I subscribed to magazines like *Spare Rib* which were so important in the mid-seventies. Without that magazine I would be dead by now. I mean it was *that* important. I think Morrissey has all my back issues; I must get them back from him!

When you work, do you have a routine that you follow?

I have a daily schedule of meditation and the study of Indian classical music; they are my two tethers for each day. As for the rest, no, not really. However, I have been caring for my elderly mother for the last two years and she has her own routine that I then try to fit my creativity around. It's a good challenge because the Muse isn't necessarily always available in the two hours I have before making my mother's lunch!

A good friend of mine was caring for her father for many years before he died and she ended up turning it into an art project, photographing their life together.

Yes, you have to have that kind of creative trick to survive; so that caring becomes a different sort of engagement on both sides. Finding that trick is healthy. It

preserves your sanity. My father had a stroke and I was taking care of him, which was so difficult. The work I made at the time reflects that; the *Splash* series where I am covered in custard and rice pudding. It's very sexual and very messy. My father had always been really strong before his stroke: half-Irish, indestructible, and physically very large and strong – even at 86. Then overnight he couldn't talk or walk and I had to feed him every day, being careful not to drop anything. I was also repeating experiments from 1976, going into local newsagents buying men's and women's magazines and noticing this new fetishisation around baking: *The Great British Bake-Off* and whatnot. Then I discovered *Splash!*, which is this fetish of young women covered head-to-toe in the contents of their food cupboard. It's very slapstick and pantomime; you see how it fits into the British psyche. So I saw these images and I knew I had to splash! In the Musée in Paris there are huge splash photographs, but unless you know that you're looking at rice pudding and custard you can't quite tell what is going on.

Does your mum engage with your art practice?
Does she understand what you do?

I'm the cuckoo in the nest. When she left hospital in 1954 she was obviously given the *wrong* little carry cot with the *wrong* little baby inside and obviously I should have left with that bohemian family who lived down the road. My mother has zero understanding of me as a person and zero interest in my work.

Has she seen any of your work or been to any of your performances?

No, it would be like asking her if she wants to go to Mars – she'd probably say: *I'd rather not, thank you.*

In general do you think people understand what you do?

People often look at my use of pornographic imagery and go no further – or they start to make pronouncements about the work without spending time getting underneath the surface of the half-tone dot. Pornography is my deflector shield; the glitter at the foot of the ladder. If you become distracted by the shimmer, then you never ascend. This stuff – the static of pornography – crackles all around us, whether we are aware of it or not. Not looking at pornography doesn't make it go away. Holding oppositional banners against it hardly dents the industry, otherwise I'd be first in the queue with mine. I work with stealth, interrupting the glamour and the grammar in all those magazines, like a very determined Mary Shelley sending out her monsters into the world. That's why the retrospective in Paris has been so valuable. The French have the audacity to take this artist that no one quite understands and make her more legible to everyone. In the past, it's been difficult because I couldn't be neatly labelled as this or that. Even now that I fall between certain worlds or appear in worlds that you shouldn't be seen to exist in simultaneously. Many people know me for nothing more than the collage for the Buzzcocks



Beware of your false true lovers, 2012, 118.9 x 84.1 cm, duratrans on lightbox

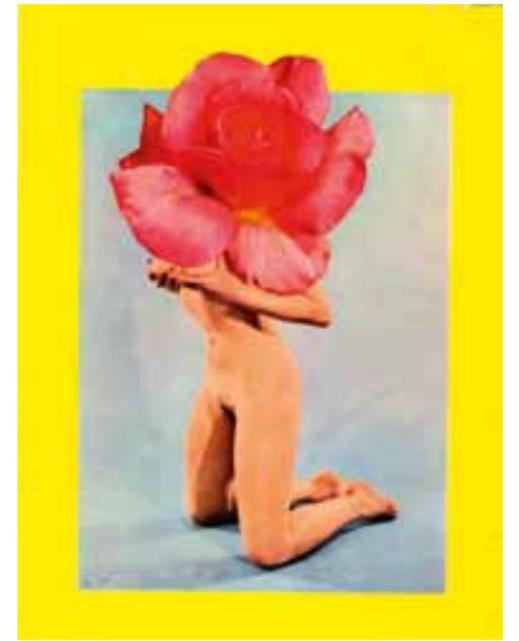
Orgasm Addict single cover – and that's fine. Sometimes over the years though, a fragmented public persona can create a splintering within. Over the last 10 years or so I have been able to stop that splintering. I've glued myself together with the same tenacity that I glue my collages together.

Tell me about your relationship to Barbara Hepworth.

For most of my life, Barbara Hepworth stayed firmly in my blind spot. I didn't know about her and I had zero interest in her practice. Hepworth was always there as one of the giants of British Modernism, but she was too close to my generation, hidden in our contemporary blindspot and I overlooked her. Through reading *Spare Rib*, I probably knew more about the practice of female artists in Pakistan in 1973 than I did about Hepworth in St Ives. Then in 2009, I made a performance piece at Tate St Ives. I was very tired afterwards but I'd been invited



Against Interpretation, 2012, 168.8 x 125.8 cm, duratrans on lightbox



Star Series No. 1: Pink Supreme, 2007, 35 x 28 x 4 cm, collage

to an evening at Hepworth's Trewyn studio and garden by Young Tate, to which I felt I had to go along to after their support of my work earlier in the day. I was in a peculiar post-performance, dreamy state that evening and suddenly I found myself in a tropical garden in St Ives on Halloween, in the dark, with soft rain falling – and there were Hepworth's pierced-form sculptures waiting to be discovered. There and then, in the dark leafy moistness, I suddenly got Hepworth. It was like falling in love. At the moment I'm working with Northern Ballet on *The Ultimate Form* and I'm cutting myself out of the picture. It's very liberating. It's collage at one remove and it's also an homage to Barbara Hepworth. So it's an act of ventriloquism – an artist talking through another artist, then in turn through ballet dancers. It takes as its starting point Barbara Hepworth's *The Family of Man* sculpture from 1970. I've taken Hepworth's figures as tabula rasa, in order to say what I believe about my life, instead of what I've always been told to say.



Love imposes impossible tasks, 2013, 118.9 x 84.1 cm, duratrans on lightbox





I'm curious about your preoccupation with perfume and scents.

I've always been fascinated by perfume. When I was a young child – even though my mother and father were quite poor – my mother had a small bottle of Goya's *Love Affair*. Every time she opened the bottle, I experienced the profound change that perfume could affect in all around me. I couldn't describe it but I knew that I loved it. The last few years have been quite demanding. My father had a stroke in 2011 and then passed away months later. In the midst of this, I had to take care of my mother and complete several solo shows. At times, the personal and professional pressures were immense, and I discovered that the two senses that would immediately pacify me were stimulated using perfume and sound. The right sounds and perfumes are like benign black holes that you can fall into and lose yourself for a while.

Does that tie in with your meditation practice?

Yes, I use mantra and I play the *dilruba*, a 25-stringed Indian instrument. In 1977, I began to practice yoga but nobody else that I knew would come along with me. When I went to my first yoga class, the other students were in their late 50s and early 60s; their doctors had told them to study yoga to help with their arthritis. These women who were at least three decades older than I, had the most amazingly flexible bodies and even at 22, I couldn't do half of what they were doing. Ten years ago I started studying Kundalini yoga and then three years ago, I decided to study Naad Yoga at the Raj Academy of Asian Music. Naad Yoga is a science of sound that the yogis in India worked out many years ago when we Celts were still painting our faces blue with wode.

Are you still doing body building?

I'm quite good now at knowing what my body needs at any given time. I have a palette of survival techniques that I use, whether it's a certain essential oil, a dumbbell squat, or perfecting The Plank. I just do whatever I need to do to stay healthy and sane. One of the requisites of practicing Naad Yoga is to never cut your hair. The theory being that the sacred sound current – the Naad – produces vast amounts of pranic heat that can only be contained by the body if every hair is kept intact. I last cut my hair when my father died, two years ago, and I have a feeling that I'll never cut it again. That said, I sometimes have dreams that I've had a short crop and I'm always very happy in that shorn dreamworld. Hair has always been an issue in my life – whether it had to do with my mother trying to pin-curl my hair when I was a child, or as a young feminist at 16 refusing to remove my body hair, or the later delights of body building and shaving off all

my hair, or now practising Sikhism and Naad Yoga which prescribes not removing a single hair from your body. As a woman, the less you do with the hair on your body, the greatest fuss you can still create.

How else has your relationship to your body changed over the years?

When I was young, I sang on stage with Ludus – *I am unhealthy and fragile* – but in my sixth decade I now feel far more resilient. Health itself can be a form of collage: you cut out the nasties and you stick the good stuff together. If you're lucky, it's 'job done' and you live a long life. Some people do all of the above and still die young; there's no telling. We're all born not knowing – and that's tough. Some of us make art to deal with that anxiety and some of us get wasted at weekends. Some people do both. At the end of the day, it's just whatever it takes to stay sane.

PREVIOUS SPREAD
Action Rituelle des Anctères, 2011 & Glorification de Èlue, 2011,
155 x 121,6 cm, C-type print