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Linder in Cambridge

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Cover image:

# Linder in Cambridge

by James Cahill • 08.04.2020

A small photomontage from 1976 is the first work in *Linderism*, the current survey of the British artist Linder (formerly Linda Mulvey, aka Linder Sterling) at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge [FIG.1](#). Dating from the beginning of her career in the post-punk scene of 1970s Manchester, it shows a naked woman from a soft-porn magazine – skin oiled, arms raised – in a pose of sensual abandon not unlike that of Frederic Leighton's *Sluggard* (1885; Tate), or Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's bronze *Dancer* (1913), which gives its name to a room at Kettle's Yard. The woman's face has been occluded – replaced – by a photograph of a domestic iron, cut out from a magazine page. Her nipples have been appended with tiny smiling mouths – lines of perfect teeth framed by red lipstick.

This cyborg-like creation, which graced the cover of the Buzzcocks' album *Orgasm Addict* (1977), could be an emblem of Linder herself. The artist adopted her single-word moniker in the 1970s, in an act partly inspired by the German Dadaist John Heartfield, who anglicised his name from Helmut Herzfeld in 1916 in a reaction against anti-English sentiment and nascent fascism in Germany. This self-anonymising gesture throws attention back onto her work – onto the image. And yet, looking at the piece from 1976, it is clear how the work itself is an exercise in elegant, unending deflection. The nameless, strutting subject is (like porn itself) an artful composite of concealments and revelations.

Here and throughout the exhibition at Kettle's Yard, we encounter Linder's distinctive use of montage as masquerade. Out of surgically excised scraps of magazine page and other found imagery, she evokes (and often pastiches) the masks that constitute femininity, beauty and desire. Photomontage is her best-known medium, and yet her practice has spanned drawing, photography, performance, music and installation. The title of the exhibition aims to communicate something of the breadth and pluralism of that output, communicating – in the words of the show's organiser Amy Tobin – 'the shift from singular style to transformative moment'.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 1** Installation photograph of *Linderism* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, in 2020, showing *Untitled* (1976). (Photograph Matthew Booth).

Extending across two galleries and spilling into the conjoined eighteenth-century cottages of Kettle's Yard, the exhibition produces a sequence of transformative moments. Existing images or histories are teased apart and cross-contaminated – including the history of Kettle's Yard itself. Created and inhabited by Jim Ede and his wife, Helen, between 1958 and 1973, the house and its collections form a Modernist *Kunstkammer* – and an eloquent

setting for Linder's multiform, fragmentary work. Jim had been a curator at the Tate Gallery in the 1920s and 1930s, and his friends included Ben and Winifred Nicholson, Henry Moore, Constantin Brancusi and Naum Gabo. The couple's house grew into an extended experiment in assembly and arrangement, comprising not only avant-garde paintings and sculptures, but textiles, ceramics and natural objects that extended far beyond the bounds of 'fine art'.

In the bedroom of Helen Ede, who has often been relegated to the status of silent partner in the story of the museum, Linder has installed a number of works that echo and extend the house's eccentric, pluralistic sensibility. Installed in the skirting board is an audio work that faintly pervades both the bedroom and the rooms below. The artist created the piece in response to learning how Helen – sequestered in her bedroom – used to communicate with her husband through a hatch in the skirting board while he was entertaining guests (often students from the university) downstairs. Linder evokes something of Helen's absent presence through the ambient music that filters down, with fluctuating audibility, from the bedroom – a sonic collage of orchestral strings interspersed with slang and pet phrases for female sexual organs.



**Fig. 2** *Breast window*, by Linder. 2015. Photomontage. (© The artist; courtesy Modern Art, London; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

On the bedroom wall are photomontages that mirror – and literalise – the fragments of the soundtrack. Pages from fashion magazines – a wealthy American couple in late middle age, for instance, striding along in ‘his and hers’ power-suits – are combined with cut-out pictures of sofas. The blunt oblong form of the sofa in *Breast window* **FIG.2** severs the couple like a pillar or aperture. Linder was inspired in part by the pierced forms of Barbara Hepworth. As with Hepworth’s sensual interchanges of positive and negative space, the erotic and corporeal connotations of the collaged object – both a pillar and a slit – are inescapable. Linder has described her formative encounter with Hepworth’s work in tellingly sensual terms: ‘Through stroking her sculptures in the dark, I fell in love after a lifetime of complete indifference to her work’. Like Hepworth, Linder espouses a wry, symbolic mode of formalism. The act of montage is more than just a quirky,

surrealist disjunction. In *Breast window*, the upended sofa induces us to see the man and woman, too, as expensively tailored 'designs'. With their immaculate clothes and groomed countenances, they are cultural objects in their own way – the street furniture of the Upper East Side.



**Fig. 3** Installation photograph of *Linderism* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, in 2020. (Photograph Matthew Booth).

It is this double operation of the symbolic and the formalist (and moreover a refusal to privilege one over the other) that gives Linder's work its power and impetus. One of her early notebooks, displayed in the first gallery, contains a quotation from Dawn Ades's landmark book *Photomontage* (1976): 'We are still looking first at things and only afterwards at symbols'. That opening image of the iron-headed woman – an amalgam of elements that hint at symbolic meanings – captures the element of dual determination that has run through much of Linder's work. The first of the two main galleries, titled 'THE UNDERGROUND', showcases early work made at Manchester Polytechnic. The influence of Punk is palpable, as is that of Surrealism and Pop; but above all these first photomontages – shown alongside video and photographs from band performances – embody her offbeat, cutting humour and love of incongruity. The bondage masks, which look at first glance like standard fetish gear, contain elements of women's underwear, giving a subversive twist to the subversive macho subculture **FIG.3**.

In *Untitled (Denman)* (1977), another cut-out image of lipstick-framed teeth is pasted onto the head of a doll, which is itself overlaid on the photographed torso of a naked woman reclining on a sofa. The image distils the layers of artifice that constitute the beautiful female nude in art. Beside the composite figure is the giant maroon head of a lipstick – an absurd presence with multiple symbolic nuances, whether feminine or phallic – or both.

This and other montages stand as works of art in the age of consumerism – they achieve for the 1970s what John Berger observed of Renaissance and Dutch Golden Age paintings: ‘Oil paintings often depict things. Things which in reality are buyable. To have a thing painted and put on a canvas is not unlike buying it and putting it in your house’. In the work of Linder, heads, faces and personalities are very often overlaid – supplanted – by objects. People turn into objects of the kind that they buy and consume and worship. The point is succinctly made in a lyric from a song by the artist’s band, Ludus: ‘You abuse my sexuality / you take it and make it a commodity’.

Linder took a twenty-year break from photomontage after the decade of prolific activity documented in the first room. One of the few frustrations of the show is that it does not explain or contextualise this long intermission, although the result is a display that falls into neat halves. Her return to photomontage in 2006 marks a new breadth and eclecticism in her source materials. Historic publications (for instance, rose directories and ballet annuals) are spliced together with Vogue pattern books, vintage porn and other cultural flotsam [FIG.4](#).

The same wry substitutions and ironic clichés that animated her early practice are still at work across this expanded field. *Untitled* (2012) consists of vintage copy of the soft-porn magazine *Escort*, in which the cover girl’s breasts have been covered by two orbs of pink sorbet in a white dish. In *Magnitudes of performance XVI* [FIG.5](#), a vintage gay porn photograph is overlaid (and partly censored) by a giant cup of tea, a collocation that calls to mind Boy George’s famous quip – in the years of Culture Club – that ‘I’d rather have a cup of tea than sex’, and years before that, Noel Coward’s claimed preference for retiring to bed early with ‘a little “eggy” something on a tray’. Linder’s image captures the coyness (even the self-protective insincerity) of such statements – the reversion from the potentially taboo to the safe and cheery.

The combination of lifestyle magazines and pornography is one that Linder has returned to often – mixing registers of domestic perfection and sexual exposure that are perhaps, at some level, mutually defining. She has characterised her process as ‘a mouthpiece for all the feminist literature I had read voraciously [. . .] the Brontë sisters were able to guide my scalpel<sup>2</sup> – and yet the mordant humour in her work holds back from dogma or explicit critique. As the exhibition’s title affirms, the artist stands apart from creeds and isms – or rather, she is her own ism. Far from advancing a rigid belief system, the medium of montage effects a splitting of meaning – an opening up. Nowhere is this more effective than in the multiple images in which the artist deals with sexuality – whether in explicit or sublimated forms, or both, as in the many images where pornographic bodies are garlanded with garish flowers [FIG.6](#).

*In Parenthesis* (1937) is one of several books on the shelves at Kettle's Yard relating to David Jones, an important if niche figure in Modernist art and literature. Jones's epic poem epitomised the Modernist love of fragmentation, subsuming voices and genres – Cockney dialect, military slang, streams of consciousness – into a complex, layered aggregate. The work of Linder shares something with Jones's Modernist method, in particular the creation of an impersonal, split voice – poised between fracture and cohesion.



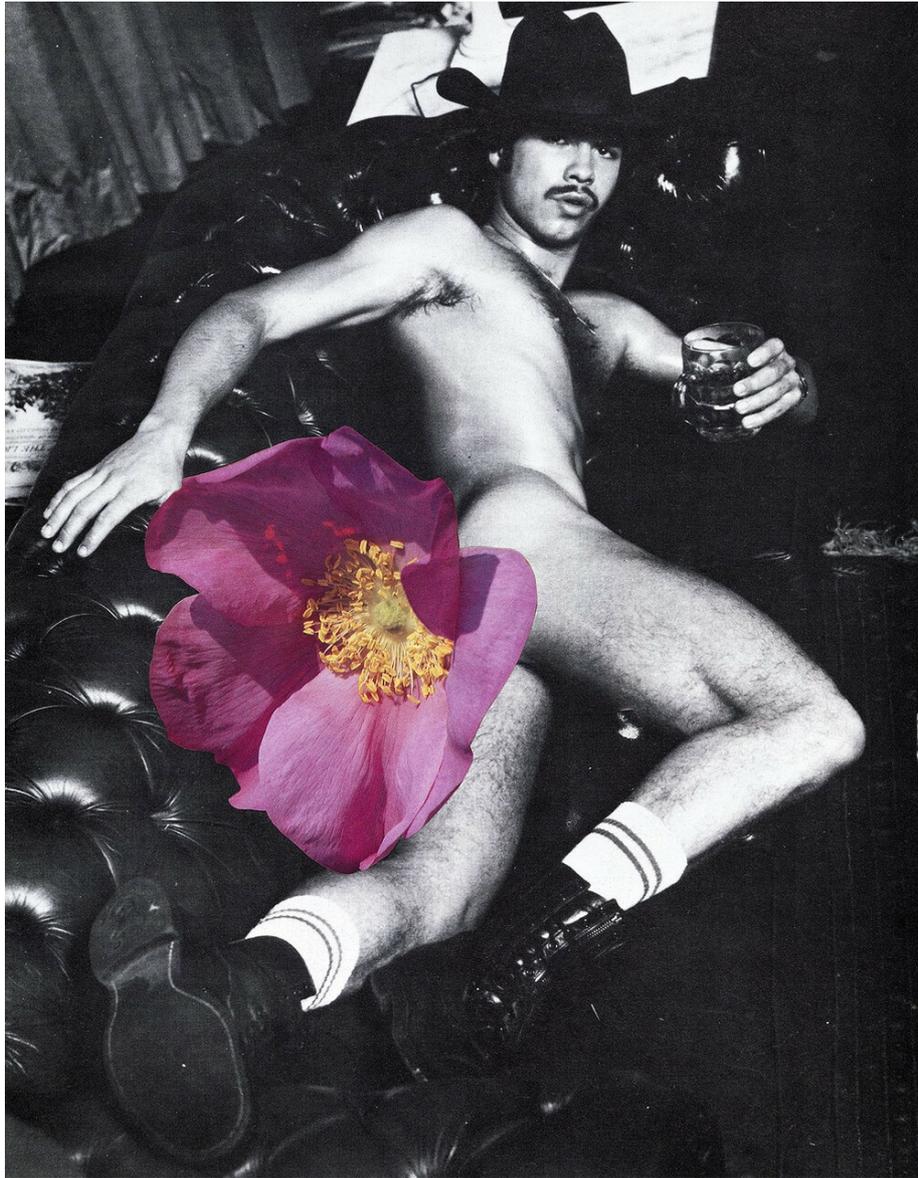
Fig. 4 *Untitled*, by Linder. 2015. Photomontage, 27.7 by 20.6 cm. (© The artist; courtesy Modern Art, London; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

Linder's self-portraits – and her work at large – are displacements of self as much as self-revelations. Inside the house at Kettle's Yard, she has installed a doctored copy of the poster for Ken Russell's *Savage Messiah*, a film itself based on Jim Ede's biography of Gaudier-Brzeska [Fig.7](#). To the poster's black-and-

white montage of characters she has added nude women of colour and a beefcake hunk. The original legend 'All art is sex!' becomes a maxim, both throwaway and forcefully resonant, that encompasses Linder's entire practice. The nature of sexual desire – its power, absurdity, inevitability and the endless euphemisms and masks that express and conceal it – is everywhere in her work.



**Fig. 5** *Magnitudes of performance XVI*, by Linder. 2012. Photomontage. (© The artist; courtesy Modern Art, London; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).



**Fig. 6** *The myth of the birth of the hero IV*, by Linder. 2012. Photomontage, 26.8 by 20.7 cm. (© The artist; courtesy Modern Art, London; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).



Fig. 7 Installation photograph of *Linderism* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, in 2020. (Photograph Matthew Booth).

**Exhibition details**

Linderism  
 Kettle's Yard, Cambridge  
 15th February–26th April 2020

**About this book**



*Linderism*  
 With contributions by Amy Tobin, James Boaden, Alyce Mahon and Sarah Victoria Turner, and a preface by Andrew Nairne  
 Koenig Books, Cologne, 2020  
 ISBN 978-3-96098-768-0

**Footnotes**

**1** A. Tobin: 'Linderism: The Red Period', in *idem*, ed.: *Linderism*, exh. cat. Cambridge (Kettle's Yard) 2020, p.30

- 2** Linder quoted in 'Linder in conversation with Dawn Ades', in D. Globus, ed.: *Linder*, Manchester 2014, p.12.

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