

From Medusa to Janet Jackson: Lindsey Mendick tackles two millennia of shaming women in audacious Margate exhibition

Louisa Buck

28 July 2022



A projection of the artist Lindsey Mendick appears behind fiery curtains as part of her new solo show at Carl Freedman Gallery
Copyright of Lindsey Mendick, Courtesy of Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate. Photo: Ollie Harrop

Lindsey Mendick has never shied away from grappling with uncomfortable subjects that rarely get much of an airing in life, let alone art. Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, mental health, female sexuality and vampiric relationships have all featured in memorable bodies of work, in which searing honesty blends with full-throttle humour and a hefty dose of *grand guignol* horror to maximum, maximalist effect.

Mendick first attracted attention with her striking ceramic works exuberantly laden with all manner of meticulously-rendered scary stuff. Flailing tentacles, bared claws, genital fissures and infinite varieties of flotsam and creepy crawlies were lovingly modelled and lushly glazed with consummate skill.

But in recent years her ceramics have increasingly been forced into unholy alliances with works in a variety of media—paintings, film, furniture and found objects—to form elaborate mises en scène that mash up the personal and the fantastical to dramatic effect.

Off with Her Head, Mendick’s current solo exhibition at Carl Freedman Gallery is her most full-on and provocative yet. In this three-room multimedia sound-and-vision *gesamtkunstwerk* she takes on the wholesale shaming and persecution of women throughout history and pulls no punches. Medusa, Salome, Meghan Markle, Yoko Ono, Lady Jane Grey, Britney Spears and Mendick’s friend and fellow Margate resident Tracey Emin are just some of the illustrious and often infamous line-up of females commemorated and celebrated in a century-spanning extravaganza devoted to the mistreatment of women from ancient myth to contemporary social media.



Installation view of *Off With Her Head*, Carl Freedman Gallery.
Copyright of Lindsey Mendick, Courtesy of Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate. Photo: Ollie Harrop

But it is Mendick herself that we encounter first. Clad in a modest bonnet and Tudoresque gown, *The Sinner* is a lifesized figure kneeling on a drift of straw in a dimly lit dungeon-like space. Mendick’s filmed face, projected Tony Oursler-style, loudly intones a personal litany of confessions, each one beginning with: “Bless me Father, for I have sinned”. The misdemeanours range from smelling the gussets of her knickers and eating cold pasta from the dustbin to stealing a MAC tester lipstick and watching her father’s porn video aged 7.

All around stained glass window lightboxes present fellow females who also paid the price for supposed wrongdoings, whether Cleopatra and her asp, the beheaded Anne Boleyn, a clutch of Christian martyr-saints and their severed organs, or Janet Jackson, ridiculed for her malfunctioning stagewear at the 2004 Superbowl halftime show.

Comical, sad and sometimes gross, Mendick’s outpourings and the overseeing female witnesses also make a serious point about the entrenched tradition of guilt and misdemeanour that continues to stalk the lives of women, whatever the era or cultural context. Much of this guilt revolves around the female body and so the ways in which women’s bodies are ogled, mutilated and commodified dominate every element of *Off with Her Head*—including its title.



Installation view of *Off With Her Head*, Carl Freedman Gallery.
 Copyright of Lindsey Mendick, Courtesy of Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate. Photo: Ollie Harrop

The show’s second room takes the form of a gloomy green lit anteroom to the grimly gothic Off With Her Head pub and is adorned with ceramic sconces in the form of vagina-baring Sheela Na Gig fertility symbols. These in turn are hung over William Morris-like wallpaper in which instruments of torture—scold’s bridles, pincers, chastity belts - are elegantly intertwined with the curling flowers and foliage.

In this faux pub and especially in the third space, hung with flame-printed drapes and containing the bar and a pole dancing stage—every fixture and fitting seems to tell a grim tale. Scold’s Bridle lanterns hang from the ceiling and Mendick has rendered a proliferation of frequently unpleasant bodily encounters in sculptural ceramic lampstands, vessels and assorted knickknacks arranged on shelves, dressers and beer barrel plinths.

One lamp depicts Europa being ravaged by Zeus the bull, another is dedicated to witches burnt at the stake, while a central candelabra sprouting breasts and bugs pays homage to Medusa and Salome. Outside the pub walls mini-ceramic tableaux celebrate more iconic females, from Artemisia Gentileschi’s Judith gorily decapitating Holofernes to Lady Jane Grey about to lose her own head and a naked Tracey Emin in 1996 enacting the *Exorcism of the Last Painting I Ever Made*.

What gives this show much of its impact is Mendick’s audacious ability to merge the serious with the ridiculous, resulting in some fabulously funny moments. Who else would have thought to represent Pandora’s fateful casket as a series of ceramic tissue boxes, boiling with scary bugs and dispensing their contents through vagina-shaped apertures? And has anyone ever before made a sculpture honouring the (here rather cute) boiled bunny from the 1987 film Fatal Attraction?



Copyright of Lindsey Mendick, Courtesy of Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate. Photo: Ollie Harrop

Then there’s also Mendick’s wry take on Allen Jones’s fetishistic female body furniture, notoriously copied by Stanley Kubrick for the milk bar in *Clockwork Orange*. In *Off with Her Head*, Jones’ leather clad mannequins are reinterpreted as six female shaped table-sculptures whose prone bodies double up as snack dispensers. Rendered in a mixture of ceramic and jesmonite, these headless women bare their brutally hollowed-out belly cavities which have been filled to the brim with peanuts and Cheesy Wotsits crisps. The overall effect is rather more Abigail’s Party than *Clockwork Orange*, but along with the ridiculousness and kitsch, there also a pathos, a vulnerability as well as an unexpected perkiness to these mutilated domestic goddesses.

On the opening night, Mendick also put her own body on display in a highly exacting artist performance. As if it wasn’t enough to take on the historical subjugation of females over innumerable millennia, she also harnessed her considerable skill as orator, singer and pole dancer to further address the historical injustices and contemporary prejudices experienced by women past and present. In this action-packed event, any simple, single interpretation was again deliberately wrong-footed as the power dynamic between Mendick and her co-performers shifted and the mood ranged between anger, humour, seriousness and bawdy comedy.



From left to right: Tolu Oshodi, Lindsey Mendick and Ted Rogers
Photo: Louisa Buck

Mendick started out by assuming the role of The Sinner. Dragged up on stage with her face covered by a scold’s bridle and sporting a Tudor gown identical to that of her sculptural counterpart (its fabric printed with the same torture-implement pattern as the pub wallpaper) she appeared the epitome of cowed abjection. But not for long. The tone soon radically altered as Mendick’s jailers (the artists Ted Rogers and Tolu Oshodi) were transformed from captors into acolytes, subserviently removing the artist’s modest dress to reveal a body-clinging all in one bodice. The threesome then strutted their considerable stuff in a suggestive and intensely athletic pole dance routine, which was then followed by a now very much in command Mendick belting out Nancy’s torch song lament from the classic Oliver Twist musical and movie, If Only He Needs Me.

Nancy’s doomed love for the abusive Bill Sykes and her time-honoured reputation as the original “tart with a heart” formed a starting point for the seemingly indefatigable Mendick to then deliver a coruscating twenty minute commentary on the sexualisation, shaming, marginalisation and disempowering of women, which she finally rounded off with a cathartic (for me at least) singalong of another Nancy number from Oliver, the more cheerily raunchy Oom- Pah-Pah.



Lindsey Mendick's performance at the opening of *Off With Her Head*
Photo: Louisa Buck

For those not present at the exhibition opening or unable to get tickets for her two additional personal performances on 6 August and 27 August (which immediately sold out), Mendick still has a strong presence in the last room of this show, courtesy of a film shot during the dress rehearsal of the first performance. This plays on a large screen behind the now empty pole dancing stage, framed by the vivid flame-printed drapes, and mainly comprises a closeup of Mendick's face, as she delivers her speech inspired by the fate and treatment of Nancy, Dickens's murdered Victorian sex worker.

So throughout this immensely ambitious, generous and thought-provoking show it is the words and the actions of the artist herself that permeate its unfolding, engulfing sequence of historical references and theatrically rendered environments. By integrating her powerful physical presence and own lived experiences both trivial and profound, into this rich landscape Mendick renders its politics intensely personal both to herself, and also by extension to all of us.

- Lindsey Anne Mendick: *Off with Her Head*, *Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate*, until 28 August