

# *Women's Work: Marilyn Minter Brings Her Stilettos and Infants to Salon 94*

You've come a long way, babies

By [Sarah Douglas](#) 10/25 6:47pm



"Deluge" by Marilyn Minter. (Courtesy the artist and Salon 94)

Marilyn Minter is larger than life. Not because she works on a large scale—she's made wall-spanning paintings and shown a five-minute video on a huge screen in Times Square—or because she's tall, towering over many men when she's in heels, and having to bend her head, with its electric-red pageboy, to talk with them at parties. She wears shiny dresses; she speaks loudly, and laughs loudly, and punctuates her conversation with wide gesticulations, as though swatting away a large insect. Her expansive personality, perhaps a holdover from her Louisiana childhood, is something of an anomaly in the New York art world, where people tend to hold their cards close to their chest.

On a Thursday evening a few weeks ago, *The Observer* paid a visit to Ms. Minter's studio on the second floor of a nondescript building on West 36th Street. At our knock, her voice rang from within. "I'll get it!" She ushered us into a large, high-

ceilinged room, around the perimeter of which a handful of assistants were meticulously daubing paint onto metal supports. She sat us down at a computer monitor and we watched a new video, of silver letters spelling out the word “Me,” landing in extreme slow motion in a puddle of paint. Its title is *I’m not much, but I’m all I think about*. In a charming bit of understatement, a Post-it note bearing the scribbled words “mm @ salon 94 Oct. 28-Dec 4” dangled from a bookshelf above the computer, as though Ms. Minter’s latest exhibition, which opens at the Lower East Side branch of the Salon 94 gallery this Friday, were no more than a reminder to buy milk or printer paper.

Ms. Minter, 62, makes paintings, photographs and videos that deal predominantly in glamorous images of women glimpsed through a pane of glass beaded with water. The paintings—the mainstay of her practice—come from photographs Ms. Minter takes that are then subjected to some 80 rounds of photoshop distortion. They end up depicting high fashion that is fashionably flawed, or taken to extremes. They’re at once sweet and toxic, sugar highs laced with cyanide. A woman’s heel, snug in a stiletto, may be perfectly formed, but it’s speckled with mud. There are close-ups of mouths either ingesting or barfing up a strings of pearls; mouths disgorging streams of gold paint. (One of this latter type was in the studio. It’s called *Cheshire Wangechi*, after artist Wangechi Mutu, who posed for the source photograph.)

People have referred to Ms. Minter’s pieces as grotesque; she calls them “beautiful.”

A year and a half ago, when a book on Ms. Minter’s work was published and a museum show opened in Cleveland, Guy Trebay profiled her studio practice in *The New York Times*. He wrote about the whopping \$400,000 price tags on her paintings; the client list that includes Madonna and Tom Ford. But mostly he wrote about the team of studio assistants who build up her paintings layer by meticulous layer. (She stays a year ahead of her assistants, making new source images; a batch of five paintings takes a year to complete.) He quoted her studio manager, Johan Olander, a children’s book illustrator who has been with her for 14 years, calling the operation “the closest thing there is to a Renaissance workshop.”

He also wrote of the leaner times—Ms. Minter’s descent into drugs and alcohol in the 1980s; and, after that, her critical evisceration by the art world establishment (and feminists) for her hard-core-porn-inspired paintings. After a long absence from the scene, inclusion in the 2006 Whitney Biennial put her back in the spotlight.

*The Observer* asked Ms. Minter how she survived those lean years. She pointed to the support of artist friends like Mary Heilmann and Jack Pierson.

And Jessica Stockholder. “She called me out of the blue when I was just getting excoriated,” Ms. Minter said. “I was depressed. It was when my dealer shut down my

show a week early. I'd had this burgeoning career—me, her, Cady Noland. I thought she was a great artist. Jessica came to my opening, a group show, and said, 'I'd like to have lunch with you.' And I thought, she wants me to get her a job at S.V.A., because I was teaching undergraduates then. At the end of lunch, she said, 'You know I'm a real prude and your work is really difficult for me but I think it's really important work and I'm glad you're doing it. And I want to do something to help. What can I do?' I said, 'Want to trade? I love your work.' She took one of the nastiest pieces I ever did."

Ms. Stockholder's long-ago generosity may have something to do with the attitude Ms. Minter now takes.

"When I see an artist whose work I like at a party—I'm old now, so I can do this—I go right over and tell them how much I like their work," she said. "Instantly I'm on their side. The act of saying it takes away the competition. The act of saying it makes me not hate them anymore, because they're good."

In *The Times*, Mr. Trebay contrasted Ms. Minter's studio system with the much more elaborate one of Jeff Koons, pointing out that Ms. Minter's "amounts to a cottage industry. Like the owner of a mom-and-pop deli, she lives above the store, or rather, behind it, her domestic life wedged into the perimeter of a loft she has occupied since the bicentennial."

Not anymore. A year ago, she moved her studio out of the Mercer Street loft she shares with her husband and into the 36th Street space. It may not be a factory, but it's no longer exactly a cottage industry. She's also building a second studio upstate.

And last spring, as though to remind the art world of her perseverance, Team Gallery took her '80s work out of the vault, to rave reviews. She's a defender of fashion, from which she derives a lot of her imagery—"I feed off the fashion world like a parasite," she once said—and, still, of porn. "That's also vapid, shallow, degrading. But there wouldn't be an Internet without it."

Despite her recent success, she's resourceful in her work habits, using one project to finance another. When the Whitney Museum commissioned her to create a video to be projected on huge screens during its annual gala earlier this month, she asked the museum to finance her other videos. "I said, if you pay for mine, I'll shoot yours," she recalled. "I do it all the time. When I made *Green Pink Caviar*"—a five-minute film that the nonprofit Creative Time showed on a huge screen at Times Square and that

caught Madonna's eye—"I piggybacked it on top of a Mac makeup shoot. It paid for the whole shoot."

The Whitney didn't get just an entertaining video, it got illumination. "I said, 'You won't need lights, just get big screens.'" Ms. Minter chuckles. "There's the old artist ego."

Perhaps to keep that ego in check, she still teaches—graduate art students at the School of Visual Arts—and regularly takes them around to galleries; it's her excuse for seeing the work of her peers. (It's a habit that began when she moved to New York at 27, after grad school, and began teaching at a Ramazz Yeshiva, then at a Catholic boys school, dragging the kids to the Met. "I got to see a lot.")

"We'll go to see a gallery show of a certifiable art star, and my students will ask me, 'Why is this an important artist?' And I'll tell them why, but what I learn is, that artist isn't communicating anymore. They're painting money now."

For her part, Ms. Minter tries to keep things in perspective—call it a defensive move.

"Success can be destructive to the creative process," she said. "I say it all the time, success is as dangerous as total failure. There's a handful of artists who seem to overcome the white heat." She paused. "Women artists are never in the white heat."

Last fall, this writer moderated a panel discussion about women artists and the art market. Ms. Minter was one of two artists on the panel. We tossed around some statistics: record for a living male artist at auction, Lucian Freud at \$33 million; record for a living female artist, Yayoi Kusama at \$5 million.

Ms. Minter told a story about a collector who once balked at her prices. "Women don't make that kind of money," she remembered him saying.

"People of my generation are used to collecting the heroic boys," she said in her studio. "And they're used to paying a lot of money for heroic boys. I don't make a third of what a guy would make."

Lately, she's been working more with babies. (She's made paintings of them since the '80s. "I've painted so many of them, my gallery laughs about it.") The Salon 94

show has a painting of a baby splashing around in nontoxic metallic paint and a video of multiple babies doing the same. We asked about her models. “My criteria was, they’re good looking babies,” she said. Her artist friend David Hammons’s daughter Carmen brought over her son. “He was one of my stars,” Ms. Minter said. “He’s been here many times. And he got scared and started crying and wouldn’t do it.”

She never wanted a baby of her own. “People always ask me that,” she said. “I like shooting them. I like using them as a metaphor.”

Most of Ms. Minter’s assistants are women. On the panel, she’d said that was important to her; that and character. One of them, Michelle Matson, a genial blonde, is a contestant on the Bravo reality show *Work of Art*. The show is airing now, and Ms. Matson’s having been sworn to secrecy by Bravo about its outcome is a subject of good-natured ribbing and speculation around the studio. When *The Observer* visited, the show was about to premier; Ms. Minter and her assistants said they would watch it together.

“The show has nothing to do with the creative process,” Ms. Minter says. “We all know that. But we’re going to root Michelle on.”

Two weeks after *The Observer*’s visit, Ms. Matson made runner-up on an episode with her semi-abstract wooden sculpture of a man whose testicles you can tug to give the piece a sculptural erection. Watching the show, we pictured the scene at Atelier Minter: a group of women art workers huddled around a computer monitor, laughing their asses off.

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