

IN THE  
STUDIO



An eye for an eye: Marilyn Minter, seen here in her New York studio with *Purple Haze*, says she was once regarded as a "traitor to feminism." Opposite: *Chewy*, a 2005 enamel-on-aluminum painting.



# MARILYN MINTER

DELICIOUS OR DISTURBING? MINTER SERVES UP BOTH SIDES OF GLAMOUR ON ONE CAPTIVATING, COLOR-DRENCHED PLATE. BY CAROL KINO PORTRAITS BY EVAN KAFKA

## IN THE STUDIO

SHE'S TALKING ABOUT HER METHOD OF COPING with success, but Marilyn Minter might as well be describing the ideas that drive her paintings and photographs, which present the inglorious side of glamour: a mascara-encrusted eye, a hairy armpit or a Dior-shod, mud-splattered foot. "People like to put you on that pedestal," she says. "You just have to get back down."

Minter's vision—combined with a luscious painting technique—has propelled her to a new level of fame in the past two years. Although Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, says that Minter has long been considered a "painter's painter," the artist, now 58, has never before enjoyed this kind of sizzling attention. In 2005 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art held a retrospective of her work. And earlier this year, Iles included her in the 2006 Whitney Biennial, where, as Minter says, "I won the trifecta: catalogue cover, all the ads and all the invitations." Concurrently the New York public art group Creative Time presented three of her photographs as billboards in Chelsea.

On a balmy afternoon in August, Minter is toiling away in her SoHo studio, producing the paintings and photographs that will be featured in her latest lineup of exhibitions: her first at Salon 94 in New York (November 12 through December 20), followed by shows at Gavlak in West Palm Beach, Florida (November 25 through January 6), and Baldwin Gallery in Aspen, Colorado (December 26 through January 31). In March 2007 the art press Gregory R. Miller will publish her first monograph.

Minter's enamel-on-aluminum paintings—often grandly scaled—require months to complete, and only one of the three that will be shown at Salon 94 is finished. Titled *Crystal Swallow*, it's a monumentally sized close-up of the lower half of a woman's face, apparently drenched with drops of water, or perhaps sweat. Her open mouth looms at the center of the painting like a bull's-eye,

and a crystal necklace dangles from her red-lacquered lips.

When Minter started working in this mode about 10 years ago, her intention was "to take tropes of fashion, even clichés, and see if I could reinvigorate them," she says. One of her methods is to inject reality into fantasy, as in the painting *Mudbath*, which presents one of the images that graced a Creative Time billboard: a woman's foot teetering on a spike-heeled, blue reptile-skin sandal, liberally splashed with mud.

Each painting starts with months of careful underpainting, using layer upon layer of enamel to build up the surface, a process Minter carries out with three assistants ("one of the benefits of success," she says), using brushes to put down the color and fingertips to blend. Minter says, "I don't mean to sound pretentious, but nobody's ever done this with enamel." Quickly, though, she qualifies the statement: "Well, there are probably people doing it in motorcycle shops."

Usually she paints the final, increasingly photorealist layers herself, and sometimes she also goes solo with the underpainting. Last summer she built up a painting on her own at her house in Cold Spring, New York, where she and her husband, Bill Miller, a financial adviser, live part-time.

Initially Minter based these paintings on fashion photographs that she had manipulated on a computer. But since 1997 she has been staging and taking her own photographs, using a 35mm Nikon camera. "Everyone thinks my technique is high-tech, but it's very primitive," she says. "I still have to use film. Digital doesn't have the resolution or the complexity of color—it flattens everything out." At first she photographed such friends as Simone Humphrey, the then preteen daughter of the painter David Humphrey, wearing lipstick and braces, and the artist

Robert Melee, whom she dressed up in lingerie. In 2001, after she was hired to shoot a makeup campaign for Versace, Minter added professional models to the mix. >>

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(1) *Stepping Up*, 2005, enamel on metal; (2) *Runs and Splash-Splash*, two photographs presented as billboards in New York City; (3) *Glazed*, a work in progress at the artist's studio; (4) *Speckled*, a 2006 photograph; and (5) a detail from *Porn Grid*, 1989, from a series that nearly destroyed Minter's career.



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"I JUST GET IDEAS— I WANT MUDDY SHOES, KITTENS AGAINST A FRECKLED CHEST."



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For her most recent shoot, Minter spent years searching for the right, heavily freckled woman. "I just get ideas," she says. "I want jewelry in the mouth, muddy shoes, kittens against a freckled chest." Although the kittens didn't pan out—"they just didn't do anything new"—the model did. Fortuitously, perhaps, her freckles suggest splatters of mud.

In many ways, Minter has been exploring glamour gone awry since the start. At 20, while studying painting and photography at the University of Florida in Gainesville, she shot a single roll of black-and-white photographs of her mother, a drug addict and faded beauty who lounged around the house in a negligee. When she showed them at school, her classmates were shocked, so she put them aside and, for a time, followed a somewhat different path.

In the 1970s Minter made fairly deadpan oil paintings: a coffee spill on a Formica floor or frozen peas defrosting in the sink, all depicted with exacting realism. "People thought I was a photo-realist but a really boring one," she says. In the 1980s she joined forces with Christoff Kohlhoffer, a German artist, and began making more expressionistic paintings, full of appropriated photographic imagery and blown-up Benday dots. "I wanted to be part of the dialogue," she says. "I didn't know about waiting it out."

By 1986 she was working solo again, employing enamel to create illusionistic space. She started using this technique with "Food Porn Paintings," a series begun in 1989 that features food-stuffs like chickens, raw eggs and lobsters being torn apart and prepared by male and female hands. Eager to up the ante by addressing a subject then taboo for women, she started her "Porn Paintings" around the same time, depicting graphic sex scenes appropriated from porn magazines. Her dealer at the time, Max Protetch in New York, exhibited the series in 1992.

Careerwise the move was devastating. "It was just before the pro-sex movement," Minter says. "I was seen as a traitor to feminism." The outcry was so extreme that Protetch "couldn't

wait to get the thing down," she says. Minter retreated to her studio to rethink her work.

Her current dealer, Jeanne Greenberg of Salon 94, characterizes this moment as a "very abrupt trauma in her career. It hurt her not only critically but in her sales as well. But it forced her to come up with her own images, rather than using appropriated ones, and what happened is the ones she generated had even more heat." It seems no accident that Minter began homing in on her current subject matter in 1995, the year she again showed those long-ago photographs of her mother.

In 2003 Joshua Shirkey, the curator who organized the show at SFMOMA, discovered Minter's new paintings and was struck "by the fact that they felt so sexy and so dangerous." In part he conceived of his show as an "art historical correction," he says, adding that previously Minter was the "victim of the art market that she was often critiquing."

Philippe Vergne, cocurator of the Whitney Biennial and deputy director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, feels that Minter's work leaped forward when she began to depict what he calls the "structure of desire," instead of sex itself. "By hiding what people would like to see, she makes it more visible," he says. But another factor in her current success, he says, is that the "art world has liberated itself." Not only is the current climate more welcoming to photorealism, it is also friendlier to the notion of a woman critiquing pop-cultural depictions of women while also celebrating their deliciousness. Minter's work is "absolutely not moralistic," Vergne says, "and that's also maybe why she had difficulty in the past."

As for Minter, she seems capable of critiquing her newfound popularity even while reveling in it. "Success is dangerous," she says. "How do you survive it and still make the work you love?" But at this point in her long career, the chances of being thrown off

course seem minimal. "I've gotten really bad press, and I didn't believe it. So there's not really a problem getting too hooked on the good." ■

(6) *Cat's Cradle*, a 2006 photograph; (7) *Crystal Swallow*, 2006, enamel on metal; (8) the artist in her SoHo studio; (9) *Bottle Blonde* #3, 2006, enamel on aluminum; and (10) *100 Food Porn* #85, 1990, enamel on metal.

