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The Road to Harburg

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Mom Smoking, C-Print, 30' x 40', 1969. Courtesy of Marilyn Minter.

The passenger looked down at the map in his hands, printed on the back of an exhibition invitation. “I haven’t seen her in more than ten years,” he said, referring to the artist Marilyn Minter.

“That’s really nice of her to invite you,” I replied while downshifting and turning off the autobahn.

“She didn’t.”

We’re thirty minutes late, driving to Minter’s first exhibition in Germany, an ambitious survey of her work over the past two decades, as well as early photographs she took—while still an undergraduate art student—of her mother, a drug addict. (These photographs caught the eye of Diane Arbus when she visited the class.) Their portrayal of Minter’s mother, surrounded by instruments of vanity, would set the precedent for the artist’s critique of glamour, artifice, and the cult of beauty.

I first saw Minter’s work on billboards around Manhattan in 2006, when Creative Time commissioned the campaign. The painting *Stepping Up* (2005), a close-up of a woman’s dirty ankle and blackened sole, balancing on a bejeweled Dior heel, was among the most memorable for me: it was a feminist hijacking of high-fashion marketing and lifestyle propaganda. That same year, a work by Minter was selected as the coveted cover image for the [Whitney Biennial](#) catalogue. Minter’s art, both glamorous and gruesome, portrays the trappings of a particular elite milieu. It’s both seductive and self-destructive, decadent and voracious—a mix of high society, profane beauty, and eroticism in today’s culture of consumption.

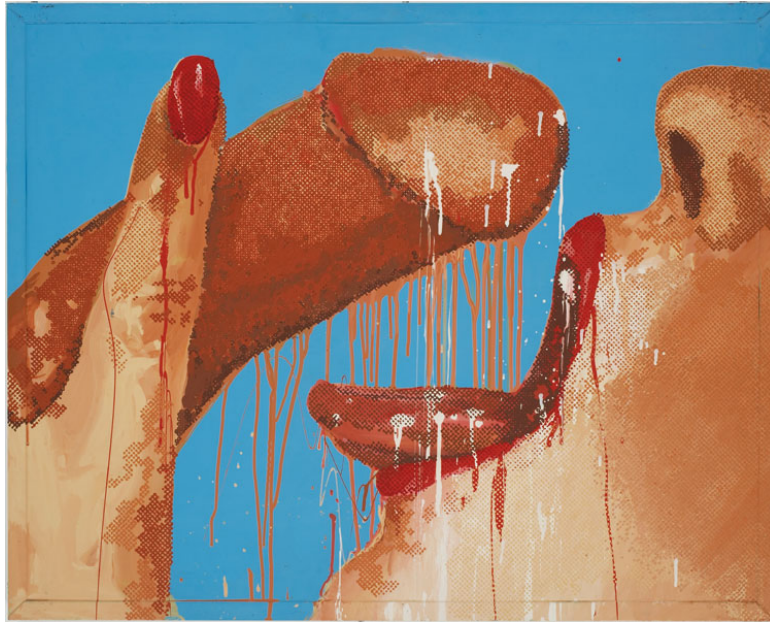


Spiked, 8' x 5', enamel on metal, 2008. Courtesy of Marilyn Minter.

Minter's paintings are created with layers of enamel paint, applied directly to aluminum. Cold and crystalline, the resulting images are part Impressionist, part photo-realist: they beckon to the viewer, drawing you in until what is recognizable collapses—what was a lipsticked mouth at ten feet away blurs into a shiny, slippery mess of abstraction.

"Marilyn's work," said Dr. Dirk Luckow, director of the Deichtorhallen Museum, "is not speculative. It comes from real-life experience. And you feel it." Born in Louisiana and raised in Florida, Minter arrived in New York in 1976. In the late seventies and early eighties, she was a fixture in the New York City nightclub scene. Her work during this time was infused with a pop-art sensibility and brazen sexuality, both still indicative of her prevailing aesthetic. By the end of the eighties, she had begun appropriating pornography; in 1989, she ran her own television ads, titled *100 Food Porn*. "The most debased imagery around is pornography and fashion," Minter [told the *New York Times*](#) last year. "The problem was, in the beginning I was touching on things that were way too loaded and it almost killed my career."

Across the uncertain terrain of the art world there exist unforeseen obstacles—one false step and you can disappear completely. The going is treacherous, to say the least. Wearing heels makes it decidedly more so. That Minter, who was once considered a critical flop, is celebrated as an artist today for her still-provocative work attests to her resilience and faith in her creative impulse. She has since collaborated with Madonna and Pamela Anderson and has joined the faculty at the School of Visual Arts in New York.



Porn Grid No. 3, 24" x 30", enamel on metal, 1989. Courtesy of Marilyn Minter.

The opening is the same day as the royal wedding, and, while driving the three-hour stretch between Berlin and Hamburg, I am reminded of the nuptials ad nauseam by German disc jockeys. What a fitting parallel event to Minter's show: the ultimate display of consciously crafted sophistication, a plebeian becoming a princess, a fairy-tale smoke screen of pomp and decorum. The wedding was so demur it felt impotent. Minter's work is precisely the opposite.

When I arrive in Hamburg, something is wrong. Why is no one at the Deichtorhallen? I panic. Surveying the museum's surroundings, I spot a trim, well-dressed man holding an invitation to the Minter show, looking equally bewildered. I call out to him and ask if he knows where we're supposed to go, having neglected to print out my own invite. His has a map. We quickly realize that the show is actually twenty minutes away at the Sammlung Falckenberg, a partner museum of the Deichtorhallen that's located in a suburb named Harburg. I offer the man a ride, as he has no means of transport and we are already thirty minutes late. The road to Harburg, I quickly find out, is paved with good intentions.

And so here I am, driving as quickly as I can to Harburg with my passenger, who I now learn is an art dealer. He is turning over the invitation in his hands. He tells me that he and Marilyn once worked together early in her career. He tells me the working relationship ended abruptly and that they haven't spoken in over a decade—over what, I never learn, and I decide not to press the issue. She does not know that he is coming. His invitation came via Falkenberg, a collector he's known for years.

The art world is a "gentleman's industry." Contracts are scarce and most deals are confirmed with a handshake, ensuring a considerable margin for conflict. When relationships end the emotional and financial toll can be debilitating, even disastrous.

I begin to wonder if offering this ride was a good idea.

We finally arrive at the opening. The postindustrial brick building is draped with ivy, making it seem more romantic, more feminine than it should. Inside, the passenger sees someone he knows. They make terse small talk. I am not introduced. I find out later that the man is Marilyn's husband, William. When I finally introduce myself, his mood brightens and he immediately brings me to meet the artist.

Marilyn casts a commanding presence; she's easily over six feet tall in heels. Her auburn hair is cut short, her lips painted a deep merlot. I notice a tattoo on her forearm of two M&M's, one red, one green. "Our twentieth-wedding-anniversary present," she tells me. William has the same tattoo. The green M&M is upside down, so it appears as a *W*.

"We've been married for twenty-five years and our families have never met," William says. He looks like a bohemian banker, tall and lean with an air of easy defiance. We take a seat next to Minter's current New York dealers, two stylish and beautiful women with French accents. William points out that, in an act of solidarity, the gallery owner has painted her toenails green: they peek out flirtatiously from strappy python-skin stilettos. The color, he tells me, is in reference to one of Minter's photographs, a portrait of dirty bare feet and toenails polished with lime green.

William speaks of Minter's gallerist, whose exhibition space is the first floor of her home, with utter admiration. "The gallery used to be an orphanage," he says, clearly attuned to the symbolism. These women are Minter's adopted family, her protectors from the art world's many predators.

I show Marilyn my passenger's business card and give her fair warning of his presence, a futile attempt to compensate for bringing him in the first place, however inadvertently. When he finally approaches her, she is prepared. This is, after all, her night. Her success. Her vindication.

"Darling," he gushes, "You haven't changed a bit! You look fabulous!"

"You look shorter," she replies.

In this gentleman's industry, almost no one is a gentleman, but that doesn't excuse bad behavior. Marilyn patiently listens as the passenger grovels, but she stands her ground. His efforts are eventually crowded out by a string of giddy German admirers, lining up for autographs. Marilyn signs their catalogues, smiling with knowing self-assurance, thanking them for their support.

Emilie Trice is a writer, translator, and curator based in Berlin.

TACS art, feminism, Germany, Harburg, Marilyn Minter, mother, New York, painting, photography, pornography, sex