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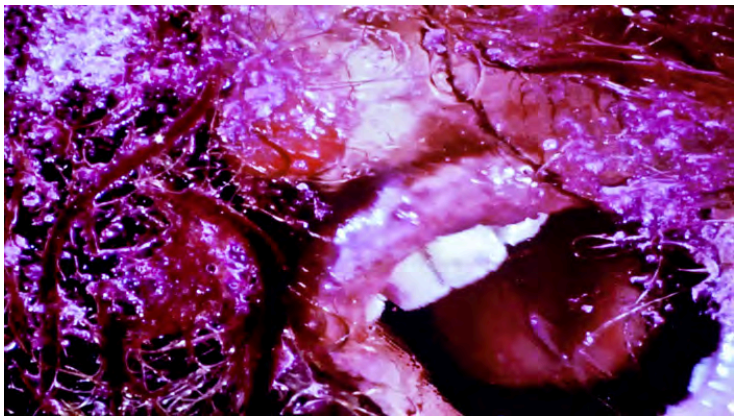
'I WANT WOMEN TO LOOK LIKE THEY CAN'T GET THROWN AWAY': MARILYN MINTER ON HER RETROSPECTIVE, 'PRETTY/DIRTY'

by Hannah Ghorashi



Marilyn Minter, Green Pink Caviar (still), 2009, HD digital video.
COURTESY THE ARTIST, SALON 94, NEW YORK, AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

When I walked into Marilyn Minter's studio late one afternoon last fall, she and her assistants had just completed a painting—a foggy, steamy image streaming with water droplets, behind which you could see the misty blur of pink lips seemingly post-exhale, with two gleaming white front teeth visible that were doll-like, but also vampiric. Like all of Minter's more recent enamel paintings, it's difficult to believe that they aren't the original photographs upon which the works are based. "Everything you see is behind glass," Minter told me, as we watched her assistant add painstaking brushes of paint to another, similarly condensation-heavy painting.

Minter began her career as a photographer as a student at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where she created a black-and-white series of her drug-addicted mother under the mentorship of Diane Arbus, began collaborating with German Expressionist painter Christof Kohlhofer upon moving to New York in 1976. She earned notoriety in the late 1980s and 1990s with heavily excoriated porn paintings, a series of decidedly Pop art dot paintings depicting pornographic scenes embellished with pixelated streaks of paint that foreshadow her signature fluid aesthetic. Around this time, in 1990, Minter also became the first artist to eschew traditional print advertising for her exhibition at Simon Watson Gallery in favor of buying a television ad—$1,800 for 30 seconds—during The Late Show With David Letterman, a video titled 100 Food Porn.

Since then, Minter has become synonymous with her slick, hedonistic, instantly recognizable enamel works—ones that drip with pearls, glitter, paint, sweat, and dirt—which she bases on hyperrealist photos taken on a macro lens and later Photoshops together. In these works, the images are seemingly captured in medias res of erotic motion, a voluptuously suspended moment in time.

Currently, Minter is the subject of her first major museum retrospective, a traveling exhibition perfectly titled "Pretty/Dirty," which began at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, and just finished its stand at the

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Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. It will open at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, California, on April 2, before it reaches the Brooklyn Museum in the fall.

Marilyn Minter in her studio.
NADYA WASYLKO

In her studio, Minter and I sat down with a book of photos from Gordon Parks's "Segregation Story" show, which she saw at the High Museum in Atlanta in 2014. In late 2015, she co-curated an iteration of the show at Salon 94, the gallery that represents her in New York. Our interview, which has been lightly edited and condensed, follows below.

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Marilyn Minter: I saw this show in Atlanta, and I came back and said, "These pictures will just rip the back of your head off. They're so powerful." And everyone went, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And then all these people started getting shot. Ferguson happened, and then I think the most recent incident was [Sandra Bland] in Dallas, who went to jail and died.

ARTnews: What do you think happened in Sandra's case?

I don't know. It's always so complicated. Maybe she committed suicide, but she never should have been put in jail. She never should have been arrested. And then there was the police officer who slammed a student's head against a desk…

I grew up in Louisiana, and this was my life. I saw all of these things. It was so painful. Virtually, I was the eight-

year-old white child in the playground and these kids would be watching us. This scene [in Gordon Parks' photo] never happened to me but the scene just tears my heart out, [flips the page] and this one, [flips the page] and look at this one! It kills me.

I was a little girl when I saw the white entrances and the black entrances. When I went to school up north—at Syracuse University—people would say it's just as racist up here. And I would say, "No, it's not!" [laughs] Nothing looked like that.

Everyone's all like, "Kumbayah, there's no racism anymore" but I say, "Well, all of this was only 60 years ago. You can't just pave over this as if this didn't happen." Those days are over, but I wonder how much they're over?

Do you think they can ever really be over?

Yeah, for your kids. My assistant Johann has kids who go to school with all races and all colors and Muslim kids and a little girl who used to be a little boy, and it's no big deal.

What was your childhood like?

Well, my mother had a nervous breakdown. My father always cheated on her, and he was a compulsive gambler and an alcoholic.

What did he do for a living?

As far as I know, nothing. He was very good at it, though. He was to the manor born, and he was a really good golfer. All I know is that he played 18 or 36 holes of golf a day at country clubs. They split when I was eight and he left my mother for a friend of hers. It really did my mother in, and she became a drug addict.

What was she addicted to?

Pharmaceuticals. Opiates and uppers, but I really don't know exactly because I didn't even know she was a drug addict. She was in bed all the time, fucked up, so I basically grew myself up.

How did you finagle the technicalities?

Oh, I would just go into her wallet and take the money.

So, your mother had a nervous breakdown, and then what happened? Did she have to go to a mental health facility?

She never did. She had a nurse come and stay at our house for awhile. My brothers left for college when I was really young, and then it was just me. I had to figure everything out for myself.

Then you went to college—

Yeah, in Florida.

And that was fine?

Never came back.

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Marilyn Minter, Big Breath, 2016, enamel on metal.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SALON 94, NEW YORK

You never saw her after that?

Well, I saw her, but it wasn't fun.

Beauty was her thing, right?

She was a beautiful woman. She was always grooming herself. She had me late, at 40. By the time I was paying attention, everything was all wrong, off somehow. She would wear these acrylic nails and there would be fungi underneath….So it's not a big surprise, the tangential threads you see in my work, but I never think of it as "off" beauty. I just think of it as, "That looks interesting to me."

Did you start to develop an interest in beauty as a result?

A 14-year-old never wore so much makeup. I had it all in a trowel. Turquoise eyeshadow, turquoise mascara.

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That's great. Why don't you wear those colors now?

Oh, I hate makeup.

But you're wearing [red] lipstick.

Well, if you wear lipstick, you don't have to wear makeup. If you put lipstick on, you look like you're wearing a ton of makeup.

That's true! [laughs] There's definitely a sense of humor that comes through in your work.

I hope so!

Do you feel like you developed a sense of humor when you were younger, as a child?

I've always been sort of goofy. As a child, I always had this idea that there was something wrong with the whole picture. I just didn't see things the way other people saw things.

My brothers and I are really radical liberals in a really racist family. We don't know how that happened. [Our parents] were anti-Semitic, racist….They weren't homophobic, though, because they were genteel. My mother knew decorators; she liked gay people.

Where did you move to in Florida?

We went from Louisiana to Fort Lauderdale. Fort Lauderdale was the land of no parents. We were just a bunch of kids that ran wild.

Speaking of which, your work is very hallucinatory.

My paintings are so pleasurable, but that's just a picture of the time we live in. There's multiple levels: the glamour is infused with knowing you're never going to look like that, infused with the shame of even wanting to look. We're supposed to be reading Proust, you know.

It does [give me pleasure], but I don't feel guilty about it.

Now, it doesn't. I remember back in the '80s, my friends who were writers for Artforum would hide their Vogues and put their Octobers out on the coffee table, and all the dealers would dress in head-to-toe Prada, but nobody would talk about fashion. I've always been interested in elements of our culture that are considered shallow and debased and uninteresting, because they really are the engines of our whole culture.

People forget that, for a long time, these "shallow" interests were the only ones women were allowed. Why shouldn't we be proud of our varied talents?

Exactly. I've been saying that all along, but look how they shame young girls if they work with any kind of sexuality. [Women] already have so much sexual power that if we actually start owning it, my god, we're ferocious. [to an assistant] Put her on the list!

What list?

We're having a networking party. We're going to get all the young girls who think like this—we know tons of them, and they're from different stratums and don't know each other: the Bruce High Quality girls, the Minerva

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cult, the Adult girls…It's all about getting the young power-mover girls to know one another, because your age group is the first I've ever seen where the girls aren't trying to kill each other. I mean, we need to work to build each other up and then kill each other off.

And then, men are just as fucked up as we are. They have to worry about being the breadwinners and/or not being weak, and then there's the whole thing of girls not liking guys who are like them. I don't know how your age group feels about this, but there's always that primitive thing of liking the caveman, the bad boy. The guy that's going to treat you like shit. Or the one who can bring back the most buffalo. [laughs]

I've seen people change, though. I saw my first husband turn into a feminist.

Marilyn Minter, Thigh Gap, 2016, enamel on metal.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SALON 94, NEW YORK

How did that happen?

Well, [our situation] didn't make sense. Back in the '70s, I was working and I came home and made dinner and did the dishes. And he couldn't get a job, so he said, "Let me do the dishes." Then he said, "Well, I should probably do the laundry too," because I was working—I worked as a display girl at a department store.

This is what someone told me about how racism changes: White people have to feel the same agony looking at these [Parks] pictures, for example, as black people have to feel.

And that's how people change. You don't yell at them; you don't shame them. You have a conversation in a really calm way. This is what I do with my own husband, who is a super-liberal. Well, I'm much more of an aggressive liberal than he is, but he went on equal rights for women marches with me in Washington [D.C.].

Do you think you've changed?

No, I haven't really. The difference is that people can hear me now. I've been communicating my whole life but no one could hear me until recently. I've never had any trouble communicating with your age group.

I have a more difficult time talking to older people.

I know, me too! [laughs] They're my age group, but they say things like, "Remember the good old days?" And I'm

like, "Not really, they weren't good!" [laughs]

I have to force myself to be kind, to not challenge them. One of the few women who didn't get old in their head was Mary Heilmann. I'm actually going to her opening tonight. She's one of the few that aren't "old school." I can't stand that. It's so much better now!

It's always better now!

Always! It's called progress. It's always two steps forward, one step back. Well, I think it's this: Yeah, you have these, like, urges, but you just have to rewind them. You can have terrible thoughts—everyone has terrible thoughts—but you don't have to act on them. Then you're the best person you can be.

Marilyn Minter, Smash (still), 2014, HD digital video.
COURTESY THE ARTIST, SALON 94, NEW YORK, AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

Why do you think people were so upset with your work earlier in your career? Do you think you hit a nerve, secret urge-wise?

The fact that I even used sexual imagery was itself just so threatening. I scared people and I think the fear came from repurposing images from an abusive history. They didn't know if that could be done. And then, I was asking questions without having any answers myself.

How upset were you at the time?

I was devastated. I had my best friends turn on me. I had artist friends….Well, I'm not going to name names because they feel bad now. A critic who was one of my biggest supporters came into my studio and said, "You really can't show this, you'll ruin your career."

He was trying to protect me. Other artists that I respected got it, and that's why I was able to keep going.

Are people still saying things like this to you?

Always. When a work of art upsets you, it's probably good. These young girls I'm so supportive of right now—Sandy Kim and Petra Collins—they're reacting to robotic, Photoshopped perfection. They're working with the feminist grotesque.

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What do you think caused the reception to change?

I don't know. I think the Internet, maybe. I also think that my work isn't as challenging to younger people. My husband and I talk about this a lot. I would always say, "Well, all my friends talk like this," and my husband would say, "All your friends are isolated in SoHo. They never go out. They're in their studios all day long by themselves. Except for a handful who were pro-sex feminists, they don't know what sexual images even look like." I thought, for some reason, that because I had this handful of pro-sex feminist friends, that everyone was a pro-sex feminist. I thought everybody felt like I did, and it was a big shock to me.

Marilyn Minter, Torrent, 2013, enamel on metal.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SALON 94, NEW YORK

Right, you think your world is the whole world. A lot of your images aren't technically sexual, though.

If I paint a glass of water, people are going to say it's sexual, just because I made sexual imagery back in 1989. And then, I guess since I made the Bush Plush series last year, everything I do is considered sexual! [laughs]

I recently discovered that you came up with the term "food porn."

I did. I've [done] a few things like that, pop culture-wise. Nobody used to shoot freckles, for example. They didn't shoot dirt or sweat or water either.

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What caused your style to change throughout your career?

I've always had a skill level where I could copy anything. I used to be in this collaboration team with Christof Kolhofer, back when we were druggies back in the East Village. That's the way he works, so when I went to rehab and started working again on my own I wanted to make something that looked nothing like what we did. So, I went to enamel paint. Once I started doing drugs, I just fucked up. I made all of these black-and-white photos which are in [the retrospective] and there are actually a lot more of them because we keep adding them in because every time there's another iteration [of the show]. At that time, all imagery was a dot screen, and I made the hard-core porn that got me into so much trouble. Eventually, I started not putting in the dots at all, only putting them in the metal. But I was getting beat up [by the critics], so I started beating up the paintings. I started taking a belt sander to the paintings because I was getting beat up and that just happens to be there, but it morphed into what I'm doing now.

Were you always attracted to a wet aesthetic?

Yeah, always wet things. I don't know why.

Wetness is the essence of beauty.

Exactly. [laughs] I make everything wet and I've always done it. There's no rhyme or reason. There are some [works] that are dry, but I don't want them to be.

How quickly do you shoot these?

Well, when I do photos, I'm always shooting to make a painting, and I don't even really remember shooting them. I'm in the zone. I don't even think about it. [Flips to a photo of Wangechi Mutu] That's a photo I took when she was pregnant, and the one next to it became a painting. She styled herself. I got five paintings out of it, and six photos.

You've said that because people were rejecting your painting work, you began to explore photography.

That's when I was an undergraduate. Everyone in my school was painting Abstract Expressionism, because that was the thing at the time. I was doing Pop, and they hated it, so I got a C in painting, but I got an A in photography.

Even though Andy Warhol was blowing up at that time?

But I was in Florida! I was in Nowheresville. We got the art magazines and I was reading them voraciously, but no one else really was. I mean, this was the same school that told us women that there weren't any good women artists, telling us women. I was one of 17 men when I went to graduate school, and about the same when I went to undergraduate. By the time I was a senior there weren't any girls. I don't know what they thought I was.

What's your relationship to Photoshop like, by the way?

I love it, but I don't like Photoshop as popular press. I think that's terrible. I hate that they make everybody thinner. It makes them look robotic and not real and not human. I don't give a shit about "aspirational." I don't care about taking pores out and I don't like taking wrinkles out. I want women to look like they can't get thrown away. We've got to be able to look at people with wrinkles. That's why I started doing my wrinkle paintings. What are we doing to 12-year-old girls? I really do think we're in such a sick place right now. Like, how little can [women] eat? And how high can their shoes be? Why do we have to torture ourselves?

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Marilyn Minter, Big Breath, 2016, enamel on metal.
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And bras.

Yeah. I didn't start to wear one until I turned 50, because I didn't need to. [laughs] I had no boobs, and I really hated to wear bras. It was a feminist statement when I was a kid, and I stopped wearing them in college. But your boobs get bigger as you get older. At least, mine did. I also started getting shorter.

This is what I have noticed: I've always been tall and thin. I've been a size 12 since I was in 8th grade, but the sizes that are getting bigger, because now I'm still a 10 or a 12. I remember trying to get into clothes that were a size 12 in the '60s, which would be a 0 or a 2 now. Women are so much bigger now; nobody was fat when I was growing up.

When I was at the School of Visual Arts in the '80s, a neighbor brought in a book of Truffaut photos—of his actresses—and they all looked fat to me. I thought, "There must be something wrong because these are beautiful women." Why did I suddenly perceive them as being overweight when they were actually the epitome of great beauty in the '60s? Twenty years later they looked overweight, which is impossible.

Are you content making art? I'm thinking of your mentor, Diane Arbus, who unfortunately killed herself…

She was one of my teachers. Well, not really, but I met her. She was unlucky in love, though; she was in love with a married man. She was on hardcore [antidepressants]. Her biography is really interesting. She's one of the great artists of our time.

But you've never been depressed?

I don't have depression.

That's good. It seems like most people do…

Or they have an addiction. To drugs and alcohol. [laughs] I don't know anymore, though, it's been so long. I'm not without my demons, though! I drink coffee the way I used to do coke. I can't operate without it. But I feel like because I abused everything for so long that it's like, so what if I drink coffee. I like sugar too!

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Do your photos mean something beyond their aesthetic?

I like to make things that nobody else makes. And I want [the viewer] to be surprised, so I never do fashion. I've never shot a whole person, only parts. No one ever asks me to do anything but makeup [editorials] once in awhile, like I just shot for W—I put [the model] behind frozen glass, and I didn't know what was going to happen. It was fun. I just did it for fun.

Marilyn Minter, Deep Frost, 2016, enamel on metal.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SALON 94, NEW YORK

Where do you think you fall in the annals of art history?

Sometimes I'm considered a Pop painter, but I'm so untidy next to the cleaned-up versions like Lichtenstein or Rosenquist or Warhol did. I'm way more untidy, because that's where I see the human element—where I sweat it up or make it messy.

And yet, they look perfect.

Yeah, well, my theory is that you can make pictures of anything as long as you make them beautiful. You've just got to take out the narrative and let people hear you. I'm making images of things that might be disgusting even, like strings of spit, but I'm trying to make them gorgeous. It's also sort of a way to be able to have a fiery red bush painting of mine in your living room.
But I do like disturbing imagery, but I also like things to be fresh. Like Sandy Kim [who is known for, among other things, photographing her period stains —Ed.]. I've been begging her to make prints of her images for me. Anyway, that's what I'm interested in, so when I do commercial jobs for magazines, I always hope that all the other photos in the magazine will look sort of the same, but then there's my page. I'm always looking for my page, but they always end up picking my boring photos. Now I've gotten to the point where I'm not going to give them choices anymore.