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ART F CITY

Marilyn Minter is the Windowlicker of Representation

by Paddy Johnson

Last week I had the good fortune of missing my plane out of Denver. The next available flight wasn't until the following morning, which gave me the extra time to check out the Marilyn Minter retrospective *Pretty/Dirty*, currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art. It's four floors and over three decades (1976 through 2013), of juicy painting, photography and video, the most well-known of which depict fetishized bejeweled body parts in provocative poses. Usually, they are anonymous and focused on a single area of the body; tongue, feet, teeth, dick etc.

The show is the visual equivalent of "Windowlicker" an album by the electronic musician Aphex Twin that Pitchfork describes as oscillating between "harsh, uncompromising noise and remarkably warm ambient texture." (The Aphex Twin video works off a similar contrast, but stands in opposition to Minter for its deeply misogynist bent.) In both cases, we are repelled by what we are drawn to—a tension that ensures you never forget the work. The term Windowlicker also evokes Minter's later work with glass, which includes a near 8 minute video of female mouths licking, spitting and swallowing goo off a sheet of glass.

Co-curated by Bill Arning, the director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and Elissa Auther, the curator for the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, the exhibition offers a not-quite chronological look at Minter's work, which is a 30 year plus study of the sexually aggressive female. Works range from a wall long photorealistic paintings of a jeweled tongue and heels with swirls painted over them to a suite of photographs in which women finger their wet pussy hair. That's just the recent work. The oldest stuff, a 1969 photo series titled "Coral Ridge Towers", pictures her drug-addicted mother. Her face looks hardened by age and suffering and often she is photographed while applying make up in her nightgown. The series kicks off the show.

The grittiness of that story sticks to the earlier work—black and white enamel dot paintings depicting girls, and the drippy explicit sex paintings made between the mid to late 80's. As I walked through this section, I wondered whether the techniques Minter used had a bigger impact on the viewer at the time they were made—were dots and drips more fashionable then? A grid of blow jobs and tit fucking drawn from magazines drove home this question. Rendered in thin dissolving sepia paint that gave the paintings an aged look, only the red nails and lips hinted at any glamor. The bodies looked like they had been soaked in cigarette juice for a couple years.



Marilyn Minter, "Blue Poles", 2007

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It's good, difficult painting, and hints at the kind of gripping imagery that will come to define her later work. By the time 2000 hits on the upstairs floor, we're full into spectacle-glam. Gone are the personal references, replaced entirely by the influence of commercial photography and fashion advertising. We see a photograph of apple green nail polish on soiled toes, a glowing enamel painting of freckled girl wearing blue eye shadow and a pimple, and a video capturing lots of liquid spitting and glass licking. They're like staring into the sun: You can't look away.

These paintings are nothing short of incredible and with only one or two exceptions create a body of work no one is likely to forget anytime soon. Oddly enough, it's the image most widely circulated in connection with this show, "Pop Rocks", that suffers from stiffness. The painting depicts a woman, tongue out and fully bedazzled with pearls, and unlike much of her other work, maintains no illusion of the possible. The pose is too extreme to hold. I thought of nothing more than how long it took to paint.



Marilyn Minter, "Pop Rocks", 2013

As I write this, though, I wonder if I'm being too harsh. Is it possible "Pop Rocks" is a good work that's simply overshadowed by better pieces, such as her 8 minute tour de force video, "Smash" (2014)? The show's curators smartly separated this work from the show by giving it its own floor downstairs—it would have taken over the show. In it, the feet of a women in silver bejeweled heels, move in slow motion as silver mud splashes over her shoes. What begins as gentle feet shuffling becomes jumping and finally a full smashing of glass.

I could have watched that video for hours, and not just for its lush colors and hypnotic movement. The video perfectly captures what aggressive, powerful female sexuality looks like. It's seductive and beautiful. As I stared at the video, I found myself taken by how in control this woman was, and how rarely that's ever depicted.