

Artforum, April 17, 2015

ARTFORUM

Marilyn Minter

By Alex Fialho



Marilyn Minter is well known for her works that explore the intersections of desire, feminism, and representation. Her upcoming retrospective, "Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty," which is curated by Bill Arning and Elissa Auther, includes paintings, photography, and videos from the past forty years and will be on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston from April 18 to August 2, 2015, before travelling to the MCA Denver, the Orange County Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum.

I WANT TO SEDUCE MY VIEWER WITH PLEASURE. Art is most interesting when it's conceptually and visually provocative—disturbing, even! I experience a strong feeling of both pleasure and shame when I look at glamorous images in fashion magazines, and it's this contradictory moment that I find interesting. My work is invested in making an image of what all those different layers of reaction feel like. I'm interested in making the kinds of images that are sidelined or erased in our culture, and I like to push them a little further. When I'm shooting I look for that one errant hair; or the spit strands that form when you open your mouth, or hair on the top of your lip. I like freckles, sweat, pubic hair, pimples, and wrinkles, but these attributes are erased in magazines. We pay a lot of attention to the way we look and the way we present ourselves to others, and that's not a shallow endeavor. It's how we recognize each other. (Even not paying attention to these things is a way to show tribal belonging.) Fashion and beauty is a powerful, billion-dollar industry and we can't pretend it doesn't mean anything. Cocteau once said, "One must forgive fashion everything because it dies so young."

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When I made my “Porn Grid” series in 1989—for which I got half of my images from Bill Arning’s porn collection—we had been through the first and second waves of feminism, and I took for granted that women could embrace our own images for our own pleasure. I was shocked by the negative reaction to those works at the time. I was accused of being complicit in sexism and was stunned by the idea that a woman owning sexual imagery could be taken so negatively. For me it was a way of empowering myself. Nobody has politically correct fantasies. I was a pro-sex feminist, and I assumed everybody thought just like I did. I understand where the fearful reaction to the work came from, though, because I was trying to reclaim and repurpose these images from an abusive and exploitative history. There is a history of this: If you’re a young woman artist and you’re working with sexual imagery, it makes people crazy. But they’ll love it if you’re old. When Tracey Emin showed her early sexually provocative pieces, academics were repelled by the work. Now that she’s older, those same pieces are seen as powerful and she’s been embraced by the art world. Another example is the Mapplethorpe photograph of Louise Bourgeois holding the giant phallus. If she had been young, I bet the reaction wouldn’t have been so enthusiastic. Look at what happens when Miley Cyrus does that kind of stuff —she’s slut-shamed. The double standard makes me sick.

I’m supportive of young women working with any kind of sexual imagery. Women deserve images for their own pleasure, and they should manufacture them themselves. I think the work of Sandy Kim and Petra Collins, as well as anyone else whose work is involved in the feminine grotesque, is a backlash to the cultural ideal that is foisted on women, especially young women. The culture industry creates these impossible robotic ideals through Photoshop and editing the human body. Kim’s and Collins’s work is an important counterweight to the images we’re inundated with every day. It is a punk rebellion, and it’s about time.