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Snapshot of Femininity: Marilyn Minter retrospective examines society's standards for women

by Amanda Moutinho



A detailed close-up reveals a freckled girl covered in blue glitter with a pimple peaking out above her left eye. Titled "Blue Poles," this was the first painting I saw by artist Marilyn Minter.

The painting shook my inner girl and reminded me of the goopy glitter jelly that came in childhood makeup training kits; the agony a blemish could cause in adolescence, and drunkenly navigating my bathroom counter in my current twentysomething-hood looking for the makeup remover to wipe off the mask I painted on before going out.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one with a visceral reaction to the painting.

"That collector [who bought it] used to have it at her house in London," Minter says. "And when her kid hit puberty, she said, 'Mom, you gotta get rid of that. I can't stand to see that pimple.'"

Luckily, the piece came out of storage for Minter's retrospective *Pretty/Dirty*, now at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Denver through Jan. 31. The exhibit chronicles Minter's work from the last 45 years and provides a closer look at an artist with a diverse catalogue yet clear vision, which was not and is not always well-received by art critics or fans.

Whether you embrace the feminine stereotype or completely reject it,

I believe it's nearly impossible for a woman not to relate to Minter's work. In myriad ways, Minter has deconstructed the feminine experience through beauty, sexuality, presentation and consumption by challenging



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the way we look and morphing the image we see. While the feelings and concepts Minter explores are not unique to the female experience, she uses women and props of femininity to focus on perception.

Minter critiques, what she calls, “the bombardment of images” seen through fashion ads and social media, which seem inescapable in today’s world. But the artist goes beyond these “perfect” images to show the truth: dirty feet, sweat, hair, faded makeup.

Minter’s work mirrors the same sensation we get when looking at fashion ads. A part of us rejects the standard being thrust upon us, but that is coupled with undeniable desire to fit into the mold that is regarded as culturally superior. And those who do subscribe to that perfect image are told it’s shallow, debased and fleeting. Her work confronts, yet also acknowledges, the strength of these ideals.

“I’m seeing academics do nothing but criticize the [fashion/beauty] industry, even though it’s this billion dollar industry. It gives so much pleasure, and at the very same time it gives us so much shame, and the knowledge that you’re never gonna look like that,” Minter says. “I think all of the work is trying to capture all that paradox. Both the hatred of yourself of wanting to even look, and also the pleasure you get at the same time, and denying that it has power.”

Pretty/Dirty covers the entirety of Minter’s career, and while there are variations with her style and aesthetic, her main themes remain throughout the exhibit.

But even before the start of her art career, Minter challenged the norms she grew up with. She was born in Louisiana in 1948 to an anti-feminist, pill-popping Southern belle mother in an environment that, Minter says, didn’t encourage intellectual thought. And though Minter showed a knack for art early on, she was encouraged to marry well, not become an artist.

“I rebelled against all the values that I was brought up with, which were typical Southern values that made me ill. My brothers [were] too,” she says.

“We were brought up in this genteel, racist culture, and we rebelled against it. We didn’t have a lot of people who agreed with us. My brothers kept their mouths shut. I was a big-mouth troublemaker, and they were very successful,” she adds with a chuckle.

This cultural environment sparked a defiance that Minter would continue to work with throughout her career. Pretty/Dirty starts with Minter’s “Coral Ridge Towers” photo series from 1969. The photos were done while Minter was an undergraduate at the University of Florida and feature pictures of her mother.

“I had a very beautiful, glamorous mother who was a drug addict,” Minter says. “So it was this constant beauty that was off. She had acrylic nails with fungus growing underneath because she didn’t bother to take care of them.”

The series features Minter’s mother doing various activities, including dyeing her eyebrows or putting on makeup. There’s a distance and bleakness that envelops each frame — a dark sentimentality that frequently shows up in Minter’s work. Minter’s mother presents herself with an air of Hollywood glamour, yet in Minter’s photographs she stands in the mirror alone or smokes a cigarette slouched over in bed wearing a frumpy nightgown. It’s a strange dichotomy that places Minter’s mother out of context, which offers a critique on the way women present themselves and the pressure to stay young forever.

“It feels like there is this entropy of beauty — the decay and the fact that it just melts eventually. You can’t hold on to it. It’s elusive,” Minter says.

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In the '80s, Minter painted "Big Girls," a reinterpretation of the infamous photo of Sophia Loren side-eyeing Jayne Mansfield's bosom, and "Little Girls #1," a picture of a young girl looking at her reflection in a fun house mirror. Both pieces engage with the idea of the female gaze. It shows the power it can hold as we stare at others or ourselves. No one is safe from a critical look, even if you're a big-time movie star or an impressionable child. The paintings also belabor the idea of distorted personal perspectives and constant comparison that plague society.

In the late '80s, Minter shifted her depictions to food. In 100 Food Porn, she made several up-close paintings of food preparations including fish, artichokes, corn, lobster and oranges. Most feature women's hands, with striking red nail polish, pulling, chopping, squeezing and touching. The nature of these paintings is gritty and intimate. With an inherent sexual nature to otherwise neutral activities, Minter's paintings evoke a provocative undercurrent that leads to her future work, which is far from subtle.

In her next series, Minter exchanged food for phallus. "Porn Grid" uses the same visual technique, but now with up-close sex acts, including a foursome, foreplay, gay and straight oral sex. Pushing past the initial surprise, which is barely shocking to today's media-drenched audience, the paintings are radiant. Minter's technique of dripping paint elicits passion and carnal desire that is ingrained in humanity.

She gleaned inspiration from Mark Kelly's work where he repurposed items like stuffed animals, afghans, candles and more into a project called Half a Man. The work was highly regarded for a man reclaiming things seen as delicate, feminine and juvenile. Minter wondered what the equivalent would be for a female artist and decided on graphic sexual imagery. At the time, she was reading queer and feminist theory, which she found sex positive and transgressive.

"I was just trying to show people having a good time," she says. "This is where the gay community was my support system because they believed that women should make images for their own pleasure. That didn't exist, unless it was underground, until the '80s."

However, not everyone thought like Minter and her LGBT friends, and the collection was received poorly by the art world, which said it was vulgar and exploitative. This also polarized female artists into separate battlefields: the good feminist versus the bad feminist. Minter was in the latter camp with her sex positive approach that allowed women to enjoy sexual freedom. She was pitted against artists like the equally progressive Cindy Sherman, who critiqued sexuality and how women were portrayed. When in reality, neither Sherman nor Minter provided an all-purpose prescription for female sexuality.

Regardless of the clear slut shaming, Minter continued to push the boundaries further.

"I was so stunned by the reaction," she says. "But I didn't have a choice in the matter, because I felt like I couldn't stop myself from doing it. When I got terrible reviews, and nothing sold — well, instead of thinking, 'I'm just not communicating [my point],' I thought, 'Well, fuck you. If you thought that was bad, wait until you see this.'"

She followed up with darker, raw paintings like "Juicier" of a large breast, "White Cotton Panties" of female genitalia and "Chiaroscuro" of a woman masturbating. These paintings are remarkable for their defiance — yes women have sex, and they enjoy it. Minter spent a career spotlighting these truths that "shouldn't" be talked about, let alone hung in a museum.

This would set the stage for Minter's next body of work, which encapsulates the last 15 years of her career. Stepping away from genitalia (not forever, but more on that later), Minter turned her attention from "naughty" to "dirty:" armpit hair, grimy feet, lipstick on teeth, smeared glitter, the leftover indents of constrictive clothing. Here lies the amalgamation of the themes seen in her previous work — the underbelly of beauty.

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"It all gets messed up. That's where I really go to, it doesn't last ... the sweat does start happening and you get greasy after a while," she says. "And your mascara gets clumpy ... and if you live in New York City you're gonna get dirty feet, no matter how expensive your shoes are, if it's raining."

Minter's work captures these snapshots of femininity, sans the glossy ideal of fashion ads. She challenges these preconceived notions and forces the viewer to confront their culturally imposed standards. "Why does a picture of armpit hair make me uneasy when it's natural?" she asks. "Because women aren't 'supposed' to have armpit hair."

She dives deeper with electrifying pieces like "Gasp" and "Vampire," which feature lipsticked mouths overflowing with jewels, or "Wangechi Gold," a glitter-covered face drooling gold paint. Disturbing yet devilishly delicious, these works comment on consumption and the never-ending hunger for beauty so strong we might choke on it.

Like the porn paintings, all these pieces question the definition of womanhood and the pressures and insecurities women face. The paintings are beautiful to look at, but also uncomfortable.

With "Blue Poles," the glitter draws us in, yet the pimple distances us. It's that distance that is so critical to Minter's work because therein lies the cultural confrontation. It grounds us in reality and pulls back the curtain on the glamour sold to us through the Kardashians or Dolce & Gabbana or Facebook.

While relatable, Minter's work tells no story, and Minter says the lack of narrative is intentional. Is she taking down the patriarchy with a hairy pit? Maybe. But that's not necessarily what she was thinking when she made it.

"In my case, my art is so intuitive," she says. "I don't have any intellectual grounding until after I made it, and then it all makes sense and someone writes words, and that's so much better. [During the creation process], it's in the ocean of my brain."

But Minter's work isn't decisive, one way or the other. She isn't making a choice or telling the audience to make one either.

"I'm always dealing with both — the love and the hate," she says. "There's never one or the other. When I get criticized, it's because I don't criticize. And that's because I think the paradox is what's interesting."

That relationship is clear with Minter's intermingling with pop culture and fashion icons. She's done ads for former Gucci Director Tom Ford, and Madonna featured Minter's short video "Green Pink Caviar" on her Sticky & Sweet tour in 2009. The video features mouths licking, sliding and spitting of colored goops on a glass surface. For modern-day pop fans, the video might seem eerily familiar with Miley Cyrus' video for "Do It," released in October. The similarity was not lost on Minter.

"I know, what a rip off, huh? ... I'm so used to it. I don't care. They're never going to do what I do. She should have hired me. I would have made it a lot better!" she says with a laugh.

Recently, Playboy commissioned Minter to do some work for their 60th anniversary issue. Minter came up with the PLUSH collection, a series countering the porn-influenced trend of female pubic hair removal. The pictures show painted fingernails grazing long pubic hairs; some feature pantyhose, thigh high stockings, tattoos and chainmail; and some are so abstract, it's hard to immediately decipher them.

But in the end, Playboy wasn't interested in her contribution, entitled "Bring Back the Bush," and instead ran only one small photo of her work. Again, Minter butts heads with patriarchal imposed standards. Naked ladies: OK! Natural naked ladies: Not OK.



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Minter did receive positive feedback from the public and her limited-release PLUSH book sold quickly. The paintings weren't as desirable, but luckily, Minter's good humored about it.

"I keep making them because I love them. Yeah, but they don't sell," she says. "There was a guy about to buy one... and he didn't know what it was, and I said, 'Oh, you bought the pubic hair! And he goes, 'That's pubic hair?' And that killed the sale!"

Minter doesn't pretend to know why her work negatively affects people. She continues to work and she loves her life as an artist. Her work stirs the pot and serves up contemplation, not explanations or solutions.

"I don't understand it; who would?" she says. "I think most things are nuanced without answers. That is where I get in trouble because I constantly say that. ... People want black and white answers, but they don't exist."