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Review Marilyn Minter's 'Pretty/Dirty' show allures and repulses all at the same time



Marilyn Minter's "Pop Rocks," enamel on metal, 108 x 180 inches. 2009. 2009. Collection of Danielle and David Ganek. (Orange County Museum of Art)

By **Christopher Knight**

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Marilyn Minter's paintings are famously nauseating.

"Orange Crush," 9 feet tall, 15 feet wide and painted in garish, glossy enamels on a billboard-size metal panel, blows up to monumental scale a still from her high-definition video projection "Green Pink Caviar." The slow-motion video is focused on a woman's probing tongue.

Backed by a sonically sliding soundtrack of languid chimes, the tongue licks up liquid candy and gooey cake decoration smeared on a sheet of glass. The woman is mostly faceless. Instead, anonymous wet lips yawn wide as they slurp, the monstrous orifice and looming nose sometimes flattening into deformity against the glass.

The painting is at the Orange County Museum of Art in "Pretty/Dirty," the New York-based Minter's aptly titled retrospective exhibition, which spans more than 40 years. The wall-size video projection plays on a loop in a nearby gallery.

They're among 32 paintings, a selection of photographs, three videos, a variety of small works on canvas (stretched and unstretched) and aluminum, plus ephemera — sketches, magazines, snapshots, etc. The traveling show was jointly organized by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver.

As revolting as the painting and video are, Minter's art is just as famously alluring.

Drawing on devices familiar from Pop art, Photorealism and commercial graphics, her work shamelessly captivates. Witnessing their clashing spectacle of attraction and repulsion upsets and confuses, like slowing to rubberneck an awful three-car smash-up on the Hollywood Freeway.

Her art's general style screams fashion-magazine cosmetics ad — Maybelline on steroids, L'Oréal gone wild. In all the laboriously painted glory of "Orange Crush," the action being depicted does look like it was a whole lot of fun — a Wham-O Slip 'N Slide for adults.

It looks like something else too. Shot by a camera facing up from beneath the glass, "Green Pink Caviar" recalls Hans Namuth's short film, "[Jackson Pollock 51](#)."

In 1951, Pollock let Namuth film him making a drip painting on glass, a support the artist had never before used, to get a new angle on his radical work. While the painting evolved, Namuth shot through the glass from below. As the drips and splashes of paint piled up, Pollock's own image first merged with and finally was obliterated by his art.

Pollock found the whole experience unnerving.

That night he broke his already wobbly sobriety, beginning the process of emotional and psychological unraveling that would lead to his untimely death at 44 just five years later. Drunk and with a girlfriend and her pal in tow, he smashed his convertible head-on into a tree. In the mythic narrative that has come to surround the artist, the filming represents the beginning of the end.

A still from the famous film graces the catalog cover for the Museum of Modern Art's 1998 Pollock retrospective. Minter's painting of course chronicles none of the specific events but just as clearly references the episode — as both banal history and burnished legend.

Pollock also turns up elsewhere. Another painting zooms in as a close-up on the freckled skin across the bridge of a woman's nose and between her closed eyes, which are ringed with glittery blue eye-shadow.

Titled "Blue Poles," it is pointedly named after Pollock's final, monumental drip-painting.

The glamour-girl picture is at once surprising and disturbing, beautifully painted and viscerally off-putting. (Is that a pimple by her eyebrow or a sexy bead of sweat?) Minter shoots her freckled subject right between the eyes. The photo-based composition melds sex and death in ways sophisticated and discomfiting.

The male-dominated mythologizing that has animated American painting since the end of World War II moves front and center as a subject. It's no wonder that her own work crystallized in the 1980s. That's the decade when the macho heroics of '50s Abstract Expressionism were replayed in figurative Neo-Expressionist art.

The show opens earlier, with Minter's frank, 1969 photographs of her rather dissolute mother in Coral Gables, Fla. Black-and-white portraits often show her out of focus from behind but crisply reflected in a mirror.

Through the looking glass — also a metaphor for the camera lens — things seem just fine.

It then moves to her wry Photorealist paintings — a block of frozen peas and a broken egg circling the drain of a kitchen sink, a sheet of plywood juxtaposed with a linoleum floor, a puddle of Tab diet cola spilled on it. (The linoleum pattern is faux marble.) Giant half-tone dots emerge in a tabloid-themed painting of [Jayne Mansfield](#) and Sophia Loren.

Pornography enters the picture — first in lascivious paintings of food, where a filleted fish or a buttery ear of corn is suggestively displayed. Then come graphic pictures clipped from dirty magazines as models for paintings in runny pigment. Ew.

Artists as diverse as painter Betty Tompkins and photographer Robert Mapplethorpe had been merging art and pornography since the '70s. But these last works, made in 1989, caused a local firestorm in New York (plus a few groves of academe), where arguments over women's subjugation were fierce.

Minter's work absorbs a glut of lessons from a variety of artists. There are the Photorealist fingerprint works of Chuck Close, Minimalist conundrums within Sylvia Plimack Mangold's figurative images, Bruce Nauman's video-clown having a temper tantrum, Sigmar Polke's half-tone hysteria, the hyper-realist razzle-dazzle of Janet Fish's still lifes, the feminine sentimentality of Mike Kelley's stuffed animal sculptures, Jeff Koons' cheerful vulgarity and more.

Andy Warhol of course lurks, most directly in Minter's virtual fetishizing of women's shoes. (From 1955 to 1960, Warhol was an award-winning designer of I. Miller shoe ads.) The show's last room features the nearly eight-minute recent video "Smash," in which a woman's feet shod in banged heels stomps around

in puddles of silver paint.

Finally she kicks and shatters the previously invisible glass parallel to the screen's surface, like the one in Namuth's Pollock film. For me, the breakage speaks to the dismantling of an entire postwar American aesthetic. She may be the first New York-based painter to have fully transformed Hans Hofmann's thinking, a generation after the fabled teacher's death, into an inescapably American idiom.

Hofmann, a German-born expatriate, was the only New York School painter whose work developed within the crucible of early 20th century European Modernism. He taught first in San Francisco and L.A. and then, starting in 1933, for a couple of decades in Manhattan. A generation of American artists took his teaching to heart.

His work elaborates what he called art's "push and pull." Hofmann's abstract paintings celebrate the vibrant tensions possible between color and form. Attention to that duality is how an artist could breathe the living magic of space into the flat, inert surface of an abstract canvas.

Minter, meanwhile, celebrates the figurative tensions between craving and base indifference. Her paintings shuttle between lusty human appetites and inevitable loss. "Push and pull" goes from being a formal property within a painting to a discombobulated emotional experience within a viewer.

"Orange Crush," "Green Pink Caviar," "Blue Poles," "Smash" — her best work pumps up the volume of glossy commercial advertisements to billboard dimensions. The colors are lush, the tactile surfaces shiny and the swirl of moist, organic forms orgiastic.

Visually they're exhausting. That's a benefit. When you slow down to catch your breath, you begin to see a lot.

'Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty'

Where: Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach

When: Through July 10. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

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