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## Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty

By Parul Sehgal



Marilyn Minter is partial to spit, spatter and redheads. Hers is a “Black Mass brand of femininity,” in the words of the poet Eileen Myles, and she’s become best known for candy-colored shots of dirty feet in designer heels, puffy pubic hair; navels ringed with beads of sweat; paintings and photographs that blur high art and high fashion, photorealism and abstraction. It’s a body of work that’s playful and nasty and full of surprise.

“Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty” has been published in conjunction with her first major retrospective, now at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. It contains her work from 1969 on, and encomiums from the likes of Richard Hell (“She is a filthy sensualist, just like God”); and it marks a career pocked by notoriety and periods of paralysis — elevated, now, in her 60s, by sudden fame. Excommunicated from the art world in the early ’90s for her cheerful paintings of hard-core pornography — Minter said feminists accused her of sexism — today she shows her work at the Venice Biennale; she’s collected by the Guggenheim and Jay Z and is a godmother to a new generation of artists experimenting with what she calls “the feminine grotesque.”

Like her images, “Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty” is seductive and glittery, an object of desire. It highlights what appears to be almost innate talent (Diane Arbus was a fan of her student work) and an equally preternatural ability to attract censure — as well as some faithful obsessions.

Minter taught herself to draw by tracing princesses and the comic-strip heroine Brenda Starr, a well-upholstered “lady reporter” modeled on Rita Hayworth. She’s always been moved and amused by the trappings of gender, its rites and representations in pop culture. In her 20s, she began to tap the seam central to her work, what she calls “the pathology of glamour.” As a student at the University of Florida, she took the photographs that would become the “Coral Ridge Towers” series (1969), featuring her mother, a Southern belle gone to seed, posing stoned and imperious as she freshens her lipstick and dyes her eyebrows. Minter took just 12 shots, six of which are included in this book. It’s astonishing to see her themes emerge so fully formed: the eroticism of the beauty ritual, the armature of glamour, the pathos and delicious anarchy that ensue when the mask begins to slip.

Minter’s classmates, however, were less entranced; they found the photographs cruel and unfeeling. She dropped the project in favor of more conventional feminist images in the vein of Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman — critiques of domesticity and consumerism, pointillist paintings of housework, a series of photographs of “female traces”: lipstick on cigarettes or napkins. To publicize an art show, she bought 30-second advertising spots during late-night television talk shows and produced a commercial called “100 Food Porn,” featuring her images of a woman’s hands suggestively fondling vegetables and cutting into meat.

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In 1989, Minter began her infamous pornography series, included in this book. The work seems surprisingly tame today, noteworthy only for the furor it once caused — and, oddly enough, for its humor. “Just people having a good time,” she would later wistfully recall.

A version of the feminist critique still dogs her. Many of her recent photographs of women could be advertisements or have been (she’s designed campaigns for Tom Ford, M.A.C. Cosmetics and Jimmy Choo). She’s frequently asked if she’s celebrating or condemning fashion, to stake her position more explicitly. She usually demurs. “I’m not trying to define or criticize culture,” she has said. “I’m trying to make you feel all these things when you look — the pleasure of looking but also the shame, because you want to look even though the images make you hate yourself.” She likes complicated ways of seeing, muddled messages. Her video “Smash” (2014) begins like a high-fashion commercial: A woman in stilettos poses for a moment in a silvery puddle of water — and then launches a terrific kick through the pane of glass separating her from the viewer. What seems coquettish at first turns into an athletic performance, full of fury. The model, the caged animal, strikes back.

Minter doesn’t denigrate fashion or porn; she harnesses their powers (just as she harnesses the powers of commercial mediums — television and print - advertisements, billboards). She’s interested, she says, in “debased” languages, in everything that excites the limbic system — shiny things, scary things, gold and babies and food and sex — and in confusing our networks of disgust and desire. She’s interested in the flinch; see “Green Pink Caviar” (2009), her funny and obscene eight-minute video (displayed, improbably, in the middle of Times Square), in which models smear candy and cake decorations with their mouths. Minter filmed them from beneath the glass on which the food was heaped; lips and tongues — so hugely magnified we can see every papilla — roving slowly, like dreamy, enormous eels. It triggers almost primal fascination, revulsion and laughter.

And multiple meanings and somatic responses are what Minter is after. Think of her photographs and paintings of women’s mouths, which make up the bulk of “Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty” (she rivals Francis Bacon in her fetishistic attention). She depicts her models at such close range we can’t read their expressions — are they baring their teeth in terror or delight? She shoots mouths dripping gold paint (“Cheshire”), stuffed with quail’s eggs (“Drool”) and gems (“Bullet,” “Deep Throat,” “Vampire”). In “Vomit” she plays with the fashion motif of having a model “kiss the jewelry very lightly” by having her subject gag on a string of pearls.

Bacon said he wanted “to paint the scream more than the horror.” Minter’s multivalent mouths manage to be both the scream and the horror; the laughter and the joke. “I’ve always been interested in things that drip, things that sweat, wet things,” she says. Her work celebrates this leakiness in self and sensibility, too, in pleasures that can’t be bound by ideology or taste. Everything runs in her work, everything runs free.

MARILYN MINTER

Pretty/Dirty

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