

The Creators Project, September 24, 2015

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Marilyn Minter and Betty Tompkins on Censorship, Art, and Being Embraced by Millennials

By Kate Messinger



Marilyn Minter and Betty Tompkins at FUG. Photos courtesy of Bruce High Quality Foundation University

“Your work has been rejected for so many years!” Marilyn Minter exclaims, throwing up her arms next to her friend and fellow feminist art icon Betty Tompkins. “But now, these millennials, they are embracing it! You’re finally understood!”

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The two women sit in front of a crowd of mostly twentysomethings in the East Village basement gallery run by The Bruce High Quality Foundation University, surrounded by Tompkins' solo show *Real Ersatz*, a series of blown-up, zoomed-in paintings and prints of sexual intercourse appropriated from pornography. Tompkins' work has always been controversial, highlighting graphic sexuality and femininity long before society had been saturated with porographic images. Her work was banned in Japan and Paris in the 70s, and rejected by the art world numerous times during her 40-year career. Like Tompkins, Minter's hyper-realistic paintings and surreally sensual photography of sexualized women have had their fair share of rejection and censorship, but in the past few years, both these artists have seen an acceptance, and attention, from a younger generation. With the onslaught of millennials taking over the art world, starting spaces, publications, and projects with a new eye (and perhaps a higher shock tolerance), artists like Minter and Tompkins have not only made a resurgence—they're finally being celebrated.



Betty Tompkins at FUG gallery

Long-time New York residents, Tompkins and Minter have seen the New York art world change, from the increases in rent to the expansion of female artists being more accepted into the boys' club that is the art world. They've watched trends and artists come and go, their own careers surge and linger at times. However, during their discussion at the FUG Gallery this week which covered everything from New York nostalgia to stories of censorship, the two painters did not speak of their careers as a past event. Thriving now, the artists are thrilled to be working with people in their 20s and 30s who are not afraid of their controversial themes and graphic imagery. Minter gushed over the ability for the younger set to work together, especially women, something that was rare during a time when only few women were allowed in the art world and competition turned artists against each other: "Whoever taught you guys teamwork did a great job!"

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Tompkins says of the millennial audience in front of her: We, a generation of artists accustomed to being told we take too much from our parents and text too much to our friends, could not help but beam back. Maybe the understanding is mutual.

A powerhouse of feminist energy, watching these two artists in conversation makes anyone, despite their age, feel an urge to work hard, push through and join together. The Creators Project attended the event this past Tuesday. Here are some of our favorite quotes from Minter and Tompkins' discussion on art, feminism, censorship, and millennials—because we all need to be appreciated, sometimes.



Marilyn Minter, Scrumptious, 2004.

On New York's art world in the late 60s:

Betty Tompkins (BT): The whole art world was 57th street for three blocks and the upper east side. That was it. There was nothing in the Lower East Side. So you could see everything in one Saturday afternoon a month.

On trying to sell work as a young female painter:

BT: I would go around to galleries and every dealer would say: "Come back in ten years, we are not interested in artists that are so close to having been in school." And 50% of those would say: "Don't even come back in ten years, we don't show women."

On rent in New York:

Marilyn Minter (MM): Tell them, how much did you pay in rent for your Soho apartment. Tell them, they won't like it.

BT: Well, I bought.

MM: You smart cookie! How much?

BT: Well, since you're all sitting down, I bought my first place on Spring street for \$7,500.

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On working with porn images:

BT: My husband at time had this stack of porn in our apartment from the 50s. But at that time when he got them, it was illegal to transport porn through the U.S. mail. He was living in Washington, so he had a P.O. Box in Vancouver where he sent his porn, and every couple weeks he would drive past the border to get his illegal package.

So when we got together his porn came with him, and one day I was shuffling through. And I thought: If you take away all this uninteresting part, and just get down to the money shot, this is formally beautiful. Abstractly, formally, it knocked me off my feet! There was this punch that I wasn't used to seeing.

On relationships in the art world:

BT: It was a time where there was so little entre on women in the art world. The times did not allow many women in so the few women who did get in, they shut everyone one else out. They got defensive.

MM: It was a different time. I love the millennials because they really know how to work together.

BT: It's great! Whoever taught you guys teamwork did a great job!

MM: It's the first time I've ever seen it. I've been fighting for this my whole life, and it's a new phenomenon. It's a new language, almost.

On female artists working together:

MM: This is most important thing that young women can do—Work as a team, and when you get to the top, then try to kill each other off.

That's what the boys do! You have to do it! You have to support each other, even if you don't want to. You think I want to retweet Betty everyday?

On being censored:

BT: I was censored in two countries! In Paris in 1973 and in Japan. Two governments threw me out. Apple Books refused to do something that Kinko's had no problem with! I don't have a problem with corporations because they can self govern however they want, but governments are supposed to represent a bigger population, and I have a problem with them telling people what they can see.

On female artists finding success later in life:

MM: I think if you have something to say, I really believe that it will be seen. You may not be alive but the body of work that you make, the zeitgeist, will hit it. That happens with a lot of old ladies like us. We're marginalized so we are still really hungry.

On being accepted by the millennial generation:

BT: I read this article by Calvin Tomkins on Lichtenstein talking about how he became important was through repeated exposure. That each exposure made the following exposure easier; and easier for people to see what the work actually was. That's what I feel that is starting to happen. I get shown often enough, so people are starting to get it. It's wonderful. You are all so supportive.

MM: Do you feel you were ahead of your time?

BT: Yes.

MM: Finally, you said it!

BT: I am ahead of my time. I have no problem with that. I guess it depends on what your goals are. My goal was never to fit in. I don't care in that sense. I look around and I am so happy to have worked with so many great people but I don't care in the sense that I'm driven to have this big career and I'll do anything to get it. That I'll do what what looks trendy or hot. I just don't give a shit.

Listen to Betty Tompkins in conversation with Marilyn Minter at BHQFUG in full, [here](#).