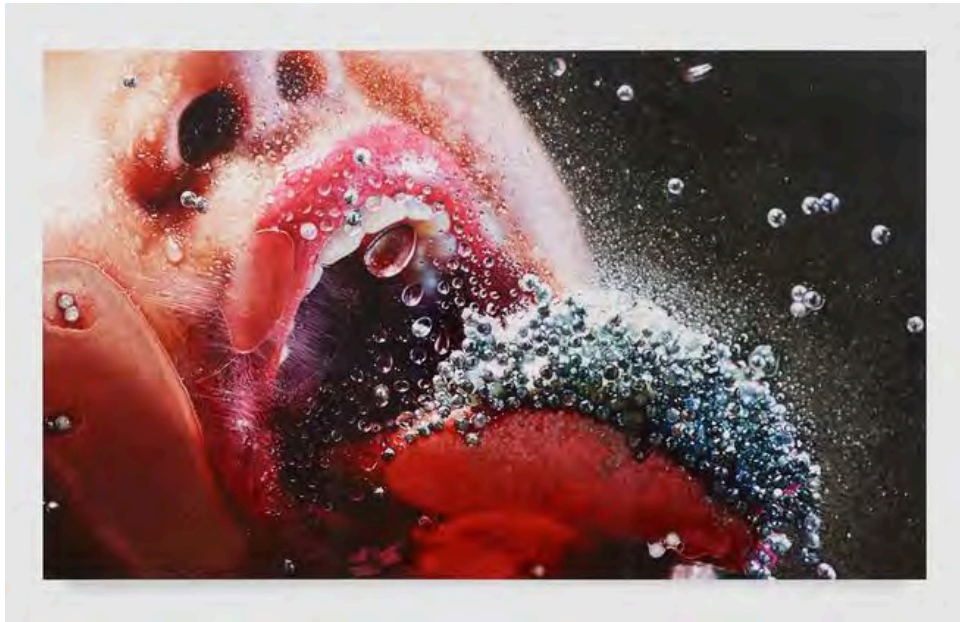


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MCA: Marilyn Minter's beastly take on our beautiful world

By Ray Mark Rinaldi



Marilyn Minter's "Pop Rocks." (Images provided by MCA Denver)

Marilyn Minter understands the things that pull us in, take us over, turn us on. Then she turns them against us.

In her photos and videos, and especially in her glammed-up paintings of female bodies, lip gloss swallows you whole, and freckles are frightening. A high heel could batter your skull.

The work flirts and arouses, because it starts with the tools of mass media seduction, skin and wetness, youth and wistfulness, those images that drive high-fashion magazine ads and X-rated films.

But there's no getting off here. Minter's work, layered with questions and keen observations, stops just short of sexy, aiming higher, toward the head. We might think of her as a pornographer, except that her images, up so close, of nostrils and teeth and underarm stubble, are more likely to produce performance anxiety than actual pleasure.

She's been at it for a long time, working in New York since the 1980s, questioning concepts of beauty, commercialism and gender; with great respect from her peers, if not curators and dealers, She was long a sideways mention in the critical literature, just never quite the star of the show.

That's changed today. In her 60s, Minter is an art-world pet, although not the cuddly kind. Her mix of intellect and edge is just right for the times, and the gallerists and collectors have caught up.

There's a huge body of her work amassed by now and that certainly helps to convey its aims. "Pretty/Dirty," a retrospective currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, not only covers the important parts but links them together into a narrative of her career.

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Minter focuses her lens on the things that detract from beauty.

Curators Bill Arning and Elissa Auther start at the beginning, with Minter's series of photos of her mother taken in 1969. They're a pathetic lot of black-and-white scenes, capturing a fading, age-spotted beauty in bath robes and nightgowns. It's all gone to hell, really, but she keeps on trying, applying makeup, dyeing her eyebrows, kicking back on the sofa, smoking cigarettes.

With her lifetime theme intact, we watch as Minter hones her eye and her painting skills, taking a series of photographs in the 1970s — bits of foil, linoleum floor tiles, a cracked egg — and rendering them in oil.



Marilyn Minter's "Blue Poles." (Images provided by MCA Denver)

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From there, it's about experimenting and refining. Exploring feminine images in the 1980s and '90s, getting increasing raw with enamel paintings of "Food Porn," embracing the inner-sensuality of corn cobs, artichokes and cucumbers. Going beyond raw with "Porn Grid," a series of paintings of sex scenes of all configurations.

It might seem gratuitous, or exploitative, and it did to many at the time, except it all leads up to what comes next in the show: two decades of well-honed photos, videos and paintings that knock at the center of how we define beauty and crudeness. Minter drives us into a world where sexy makes a few bad turns.

We get magnified, photorealistic paintings of a "Dirty Heel," and "Soiled" toes, decorated with chartreuse polish. A print titled "Sock" emphasizes the marks on skin left by elastic sweat socks. "Blue Poles" zeroes in on eyebrows growing back from a plucking.

The final series of works, titled "Wet," and "Glazed" turns her images more abstract, and more intimidating. Models choke on glitzy jewelry, faces drown in water, mouths drip in murky metals. There's a shine to the pictures, a glistening clarity that mirrors haute couture billboards, but everything is mucked up, blurred, horrified.

It's not just Minter's eye that wows (and repulses) us, but her unusual techniques, which are well-documented in display cases in "Pretty/Dirty."



Minter's early photo portrait of her mother.

The "Wet" series happens this way: Minter starts by taking a photo of a model then alters the image on a computer screen. She prints that out and hangs it on the wall under glass, douses the glass with water and shoots again.

That secondary photo is the basis for her painting. Layer upon layer of enamel paint is brushed on a metal canvas in Minter's studio, often by a team of assistants, as the piece is enlarged and brought into shape

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with some liberal, visual additions. The final enamel layer is dotted on with the finger tips to avoid brush strokes.

A single work can take months to produce, and the result is a product that is full of depth like a painting but flat and finished like a photograph. In fact, it can be difficult to tell photos from paintings in this show, a tactic that keeps Minter's commentary on fashion merchandizing in the forefront.

In a sense it also keeps it from being too heavy-handed, or oblivious. While Minter's ugly twists can feel like a condemnation, her mimicry of fashion's gloss and style come off as a compliment. In interviews, she denies being a critic of polished ads and avoids the label of feminist.

She's just making observations, she says, although they're sharp, and powerful. "Pretty/Dirty" comes to a climax in the MCA basement, where Minter's recent video "Smash" runs in repeat. The movie features a dancer, from the calve down, dressed in ankle jewels and silver high heels, sloshing about in a puddle of what looks to be liquid mercury. At some point, as the music pulses and the pace increases, she kicks her left foot forward smashing through a pane of clear glass, and sending shards flying through the air.

It's a metaphor, of course, a delicate, female foot, somehow empowered and crashing through an established barrier, and it borders on being too conspicuous. But Minter's visuals give it amazing pull, and "Pretty Dirty" gives it a muscular, attractive context. The video is mesmerizing and best saved for last.

This is Minter's might on full display, refined over a career, to seduce you with eye candy and to make the journey, no matter where it ends, a blast. She turns simple things complicated, empty things compelling, pretty things very, very dirty.

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"PRETTY/DIRTY"

The Museum of Contemporary Art Denver presents a retrospective of work by Marilyn Minter, assembled in partnership with the Contemporary Art Museum Houston. Through Jan.31. MCA, 1485 Delgany St. 303-298-7554 or mcadenver.org.



A frozen moment from Minter's video "Smash."