

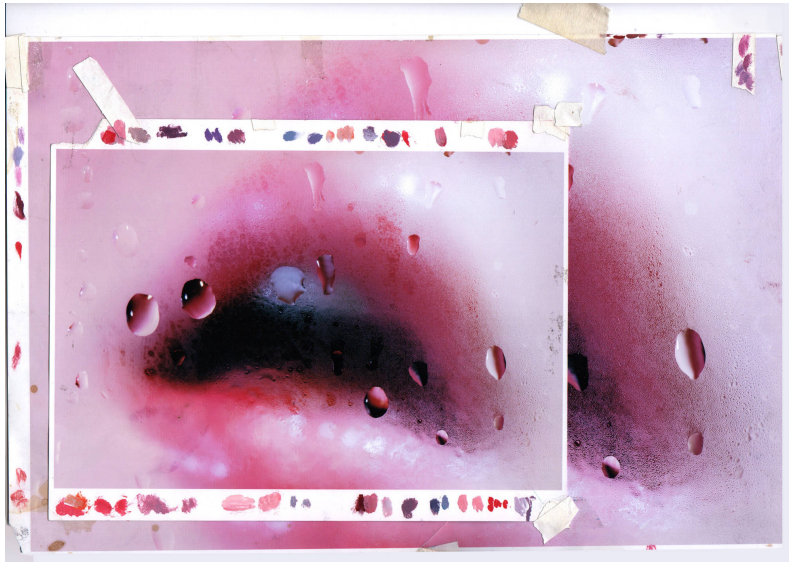
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Portrait

Marilyn Minter by Alex Bennett

Interview Alex Bennett

Artwork Marilyn Minter



Sheer Wetness

Frosted glass is warming, overwhelmed by condensation, a thickset tongue smears the surface. Plump lips pucker up, all breathy, all moist. Shower scenes are so often framed as the domestic arena of well-worn arousal, and in Marilyn Minter's most recent work, the figure of the bather is recast in her established style of magnified close-ups of the female body. In *Cornucopia* (2018) a hand, fresh with a lime manicure, lingers over plush, pubic hair; in *Nebulous* (2018), a gapping mouth appears engulfed with blurry ecstasy. The process of their construction is painstaking: layers of enamel paint are built up and finished with fingertip to eliminate the brushstroke, and it is this process that has become Minter's signature.

Often maximal, Minter's work is sopping with the most potent, heady version of desire: sweat profuse, expression indulgent, lips lacquered. Yet Minter first experimented with photography in her *Coral Ride Tower* series, a set of black-and-white images of her mother, a Southern Belle defined by both her liver spots and her pencilled eyebrows. Since then, Minter developed 100 *Food Porn* (1990), a cornucopia of swollen zucchinis, bursting melons, ravaged artichoke hearts and other phallic foodstuffs, elaborating a porn-positive feminism in-line with contemporaries such as Judith Bernstein and Joan Semmel. To her more recent work, Minter's photography and painting dutifully squares the viewer to survey the qualities that are so often assimilative to violent visual pleasure and established representation.

Throughout her career, Minter has maintained consistent political commitments, as a visible presence at a number of anti-Trump protests in New York and Washington D.C., and her work features prominently in fundraisers for Planned Parenthood. The following conversation considers Minter's life and work before and during such political turmoil.

It's somewhat predictable to begin at the beginning, but I think you have a very interesting background; can I get a sense of this? Did you grow up in Louisiana with your mother?

I was born in Louisiana; I actually grew up in Florida in the 1960s, it was like the Wild West back then.

And you were living with your mother at the time?

Right, my parents split up when I was eight, and my mother and I moved to Florida. She had a nervous breakdown and became a drug addict after the break-up.

And you had brothers as well?

I had two older brothers as well, they were in college, so it was my mother and I. One of my brothers went on to live with my father.

When you were growing up, what kinds of culture interested you as a child, what sort of things you were looking at? I read somewhere that you liked the comic strip icon Brenda Starr, for instance.

Yes, I taught myself how to draw from comic books. Most people don't know who she is but Brenda Starr was the intrepid girl reporter and I

basically learnt how to draw from comics. Art wasn't privileged at all in the culture I was in, in Miami and Fort Lauderdale. But I could draw anything, and I wasn't going to get taught any other way, so I learned from comic books.

Were they more narrativist, sketches and doodles?

I just copied them and try to figure out how to do foreshortening, I just thought 'how did they draw that' and then, that's how you do it. It was the only thing available at the time.

There might not be a significant moment for this, it's a process, but what drew you to consider studying art in Florida?

Well, I saw that I could draw, I learned right away, around 4 or 5, that I could draw better than my friends, and I was shocked that I could do something better than other people. So I just got into it, and I didn't mind going to my room, for punishment for instance, I could just go to my room and draw forever, I was lost in that world, I loved doing it. I just got better and better at it, as one of the art kids at school, I made the posters, sets for plays, stuff like that.

Around the time of studying at Florida you made your Coral Ridge Tower Series.

Yeah I was an undergraduate when Diane Arbus was a mentor. This is so interesting because I had no idea who she was as an undergraduate, a lowly undergraduate I might add, at the university of Florida. It was a very romantic school, and she hated everything she was looking at, and she was there for the grad students. I'm sure I wasn't even a blip on her screen, I went to get the negatives of my mother, and she loved them, and she hated everything else she was looking at because the school was super romantic and very technically proficient. It was just a brief moment, I wasn't allowed to be in her classes or anything, and I didn't know who she was until two years later when she killed herself and it was in *Life* magazine. Then I got into her work and looked at it and I thought how great she was, her biography, too. She fascinated me.

You mentioned the school being quite romantic; I imagine that was quite a hindrance in terms of the kind of work you were producing.

I was technically very good because I'm obsessive. I was pretty shamed by the school for my photos, everyone was going 'oh my god, that's your mother', they were horrified, so I never really printed them. I didn't really print them and look at them all until 1995.

Were you studying with many other women at the time?

None. I never had a woman teacher, and when I went to postgraduate school I was the only female.

I realised that since then you've gone on to teach at the School of Visual in New York.

Yeah, I've been teaching there since 1986.

Art education across the board has changed so much in terms of how it's become commodified, and the exorbitant debts that students amass. Where I teach it's not crazy like Columbia or Yale, it's much more affordable. Being in New York is like being in grad school anyway, because of all the museums, and galleries, and shows that are all available to you. There's a whole subculture of support by working in galleries, art moving or art handlers, so these students don't fall through the cracks, there's a real safety net in a way. You don't make a lot of money but it's a job.

It's also a way, particularly if you're working at an artist's studio, to have a much more personable mentorship that you might not otherwise have access to at college.

I think working for other artists is better than grad school for sure.

With the students that you mentor, does this context for learning shape their outlook, that postgraduate college functions much more as platform for yourself more than anything else?

I think the best thing about grad school is the other students. You form this bond with other students, but there are these students that do well for the academy, that will do well for certain aspects of the art world that don't serve you as an artist when you're outside of the academy. But I see the best part about grad school as the bond you make with the other students, these are the people you're going to know for the rest of your life. I see these kids get studios together and help each other, and hopefully this is how it's worked since I can remember. I went to Syracuse, but when I moved to my loft in New York there were a whole group of people from Cranbrook who moved next-door, and they all supported one another in so many ways. It's the friendships you make that sustain you. You can learn a lot from your teachers, but a lot of the time I just damage control.

So much of it is learning from your peers despite the cost.

Right, you're in debt for years. When I went to grad school, I got paid because I was a teacher; I learnt how to teach immediately, that's how I got through school.

The programme begins to be construed in a way in that it suggests that students can take an equal kind of ownership over their curriculum, which lends this gestural freedom...

In Columbia, they just had their grad students ask for refunds from every entire department. They have these teachers on the masthead but they never see them.

Did you coin the term 'food porn'?

I did, but I made the food porn to make a TV commercial. I wanted to make the TV commercial, and I made the paintings to support it because I didn't have any money. It was around \$1,800 to rent 30 seconds on David Letterman and nobody knows that, it was really cheap. I asked my galleries not to buy advertisements in art magazines, but to give me the money that they would spend on the adverts, to put towards this TV commercial.

What was the response when the advert came out?

I think it was mostly misunderstood, I would say. People seem to appreciate it now.

It's so prevalent now; it's interesting with technology because with the way food is reproduced, we begin to lose taste and material as the most important compositions of that image. We just understand it as an image.

When I did the *Food Porn* series, it was like if you didn't know what it was, you wouldn't know what it was – it wasn't buy one get one free. I bought adverts, and they ran, and I got calls from people saying 'Marilyn, I just saw you on TV'. I sent out postcards announcing the TV commercial. It was at a time when high and low culture had very distinct boundaries, and I was collapsing those boundaries. It's only been

more appreciated now.

It's interesting because the erotics of eating are so similar to the erotics of sex.

Yeah, with *Food Porn* it was mostly cutting food apart, cutting it up, it was metaphorical for sex and violence, which is constantly in the culture. I called it 100 *Food Porn* because that was late night TV that I watched all the time, I did it as a fairly young person, it was the time of the 800 numbers for escorts, late night TV, or *call me*, these dating services advertised on late night television; hence the 100 paintings.

In 1989 you started the Porn Grid, which had a very different response.

Yeah the *Food Porn* was largely ignored, a handful of people thought it was brilliant. But they did sell, they were very sellable, they were cheap and that was the good news. I saw Mike Kelley's show with these stuffed animal sculptures and these stuffed animal paintings, and I thought if a woman artist had made that exact work, no-one would pay attention to her. I thought that was kind of brilliant of him to mine that subculture of a teenage girl's bedroom. There was a bureau with eyes and lips, a picture of Mike Kelley as a teenager under glass; it was a 13 year-old girl's bedroom with these stuffed animal sculptures, candles, mall culture for females, basically. If a female artist had done the exact same thing, it would change the meaning; authorship changes the meaning. So I thought, what subject matter have women never touched? I thought, *porn*; I knew it couldn't be soft-core because I knew Judith Bernstein's work and Carolee Schneemann's, so I had to do hardcore, cumshots, so I started mining that at the time when it was important for women to explore their own sexual agency. I was a pro-sex feminist basically, thinking that women should make images for their own pleasure and the phrase I coined was that 'no-one has politically correct fantasies.'

Porn is strange because it's one of the few spaces where every kind of fetish and desire is catered to; so in at least one sense it can be read as quite liberating.

It's one of those subcultures, just like glamour, beauty, and porn. There's so much contempt for them and yet they're giant engines for culture. For some people, the only way they have any sexual outlet is through pornography. I was taking an abuse of history and repurposing it, and it was very fearful to the feminists of my age, the younger feminists don't even bat an eyelid at what I did. There's still a huge glass ceiling, now that I'm an old lady I can do what I like, but to be a young woman working with sexual imagery today is just terrifying to people.

It's very difficult because it seems like something that has repeated and reinforced itself, like the doll industry for example.

Yeah, I don't know what that's about. They want submission, but for a young woman to own sexual agency is frightening to them, but they have so much power over men anyway.

Thinking about the relationship of pornography to glamour and fashion, it's interesting how some individual works can have quite different lifespans, like the Green, Pink Caviar videos for instance; they have had quite an interesting transgression. Can you tell me about this?

I know, I've been totally ripped off, I don't care. I did *Green/Pink Caviar* as a giveaway practically, and Madonna bought it and used it as a backdrop for one of her songs, and the MoMA put it in their lobby for a year and a half, it had a life of its own. I do more of these now, I just exhibited one for my show at Regens Projects.

Can you tell me a little bit about the migration between photography and painting, I'm curious about the process with the painting because it's enamel of metal but it's finished with fingertip...

I shoot for paintings all the time, but if I get an image that I don't alter then it's really great. There may be three or four new photos a year, and they're images I haven't altered. Whereas the paintings are combinations of negatives that I work with in Photoshop. So I make these things called references, which take about a week to do, and they're combinations on Photoshop. The paintings are then projected, drawn out, and they take layers and layers, there is a kind of depth with these layers of enamel that I can't achieve with oil or acrylic. So I've invented this technique and I have painters that work the undercoats and myself and two other people finish the paintings.

Can you tell me about these recent paintings?

The last body of work is steam, so everything has been shot with this steaminess like in a shower scene, but I shoot frozen glass because it looks like steam but it lasts long enough to shoot so I create this illusion of steam and breathing on glass. That's where my interest has been lately, the 21st century bath. It's a trope throughout art history; but one constant of all the work is that they're images that everybody knows but no one's made a picture of yet. Previously, it's been returning blemishes to the culture; I was just making a picture that we don't see even though we know it's true.

It's interesting then that your paintings have been geared towards this more illusionist quality.

Yeah the paintings became a new kind of Pointillism, with this veneer of steam on top – it's very time consuming but rewarding for someone like me who has this obsessive-compulsive attention to surfaces. In general, I'm interested in other things people have contempt for. If you talk about glamour and fashion, you're still talking about one of the few places where women have any power. At the same time, it creates all kinds of body dysmorphia, constructing this aspiration that doesn't even exist in real life, yet at the same time it's a billion dollar industry and it gives people a lot of pleasure.

Movements such as Not Surprised have recently dismantled the power and leverage these industries rely on; it magnifies your point that this has always been the case.

It's the first time I've ever seen misogyny ever be called out, it's pretty marvellous for someone like me who was the only girl in the grad school, who was told that women could never be great artists. This is another layer being examined that we never looked at even though we all accepted it and knew it was constant. You raise consciousness this way, but I don't think a bad date constitutes a *#metoo* movement. I've never been a victim; I've always been a feminist. There are limits too, but I'm totally behind this.

You've also been very explicit about an all too typical trait in the artworld: though it congratulates itself for championing overlooked women, rarely, though, does this same world acknowledge the possibility that we may be complicit in a narrative type of abuse, in which the ideal woman artist is old. Critical attention still often comes far too late...

Well the art world loves young bad boys and old ladies. It was young women getting attention and then being forgotten, except for Cindy Sherman, she's the first that really broke that mould. So that's changing too, of course it will, but they were erased, it was the same for women in the 1800s – they were erased from art history. Though consciousness is being raised, it is sad to see so many old women and black artists only just getting significant attention as pioneers, but often too late.