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Marilyn Minter
Salon 94

By Jeffrey Kastner



Marilyn Minter, *Thigh Gap*, 2016, enamel on metal, 72 x 86 1/2".

Anyone with even a passing acquaintance with pornography—which, given its utter digital ubiquity, is pretty much anybody who’s ever turned on a computer—will know that the contemporary taste in female pubic hair (certainly, at least, among the largely male producers and consumers of erotica) has for some time been decidedly on the side of less is more. And so it probably shouldn’t come as a surprise that a few years ago, when Marilyn Minter was commissioned by *Playboy*’s creative director, curator Neville Wakefield, to produce a project for a special issue of the magazine, her photographs focusing on a range of women in their naturally undepilated state were not particularly well received. Of course, the images were Minter at her thorny best: complicating simple narratives of seduction and revulsion, and provocatively against the grain, they worked to make the private as starkly public as possible in their depictions of a variety of montes in tightly focused Technicolor close-up. Minter’s photos—rejected by the magazine, they were later published instead as a limited-edition book—were designed not only as unruly troublings of the now-familiar media images of tidy manicuring, but also, the artist has said, as “promotional” images of a sort, intended to give women “more choices” in how they decide to present themselves, sexually and otherwise.

Minter’s new suite of paintings—seven of which were on view here, in a show that coincided with the Brooklyn Museum’s presentation of her traveling retrospective “Pretty/Dirty”—

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descend directly from those images. For these new works, the artist rephotographed her models, this time situating them behind gently obscuring panes of steamed glass. Then she used the pictures to produce some of the most technically accomplished paintings of her career: large-scale, enamel-on-metal works whose luscious surfaces oscillate almost magically between abstraction and figuration, between an atomized, vaguely pointillist micro-level pictorial environment and a brand of macro-scale representational lucidity that, from a few steps back, suddenly resolves into knockout Photorealism. The figures in works (all 2016) such as *Thigh Gap*, *Ginger*, and *Tender* most literally recall the original photographic project, their pubic areas isolated, but now behind sweating glass, the entire compositions seeming to literally drip with humidity. Though in some ways the most “explicit” of the works on view—insofar, at least, as they depict a usually taboo zone of female anatomy—these paintings for the most part refuse an erotic stance. Instead, in their plain frontality, they look to reclaim, and in some sense neutralize, the physical and psychospacial tropes with which they engage: the nude woman in the shower. A scenario long familiar as a precinct in which to stage female physical vulnerability and sexual availability, here it refuses to signal either.

While works such as these eschew the mainstream language of the erotic, others in the show would seem to embrace it. The focus of *Big Breath*, *Deep Frost*, and *Fatter Lip*—moist mouths pressed up to moist glass fogged with both environmental and bodily condensation—plays off of familiar images of female orgasmic ecstasy, but does so in a way that would seem to not so much detour as imbibe the language of carnal affect familiar from an image-world structured by *Playboy* and its more explicit kin. There’s no question that the paintings are brilliantly executed, but whether they are designed to overturn the slightly predictable soft-focus romantic sensuality with which they flirt or fall in line with it is less clear. Unlike the bold and unapologetic naturalism of the photographs that inspired them, these works exhibit choices for feminine presentation that might seem to be more or less standard-issue. Of course, Minter has, as much as any artist of her generation, found a way to provocatively reorder conventional formulas of desire in order to puncture the sterile idealizations of sexual commodification, so what might seem at first glance to be a kind of capitulation to such formulas is presumably done in the strategic service of coopting and then finally owning them. But it’s a tightrope act, and even for an artist as comfortable as Minter is treading fine lines of distinction, one whose final effect is ambivalent.