

New York Times, November 10, 2016

The New York Times

A 'Nasty Woman' of Contemporary Art Fearlessly Renders the Body

By Roberta Smith



After a presidential campaign that underscored various women's rights issues, what better art exhibition to review than one devoted to provocative images of female independence at its most intimate, centering explicitly on the body.

"Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty" is part of "A Year of Yes," a series of exhibitions on trailblazing female artists at the Brooklyn Museum. Ms. Minter, 68, has been exhibiting in New York since the early 1980s, and is increasingly admired by younger generations for her fearless renderings of both the mechanisms of beauty and its dark underbelly.

Over the last three decades, Ms. Minter has operated in the gap defined by feminism, painting and popular culture, carving out a place as one of contemporary art's bad girls. There aren't many, and she is one of the few who are primarily painters. Along with Joan Semmel and Betty Tompkins, she appropriated for painting the provocative use of the female body that is usually limited to performance artists, including Carolee Schneemann and Valie Export in the late 1960s, and Vanessa Beecroft in more recent times.

New York Times, November 10, 2016



While pushing the often denigrated 1960s style of Photo Realism to new extremes, Ms. Minter's paintings invite us to consider the ways women do and do not own their bodies. They contrast their private ideas of pleasure with the external cues — played out in fashion, advertising, burlesque or pornography — that set stereotypes of beauty, behavior and sexuality.

Originated by the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, this show contains 44 paintings on canvas or metal, four stunning videos and sundry occasionally interesting photographs — all spanning peripatetically from 1969 to the present. It regularly fulfills its contradictory "Pretty/Dirty" subtitle, sometimes within the same work. Many efforts are ravishingly, if confusingly, beautiful. A few are definitely for adult audiences, which is why you'll find a parental warning at the show's entrance.

In Ms. Minter's best-known works, images are rendered in extreme close-up, embedded in lush surfaces that border on abstract and establish a winking, parodistic relationship with formalist painting. They are usually flooded with ambiguity, leaving us to our own devices, juggling not always pleasant meanings. A painting of a tightly framed, gaudily made-up eye has an undeniable reptilian mien in its carefully detailed sheen and wrinkles. In a mesmerizing billboard-size video, a pair of ruby red lips and tongue twist and turn through a scarlet sludge; we might be watching a deep-sea creature sopping up dinner.

New York Times, November 10, 2016



Back on canvas, a seemingly bejeweled orb pushes forward, evoking ancient treasure in Hollywood Technicolor (“Raiders of the Lost Ark” crossed my mind); actually, it is a glittering glob of gold liquid being expelled by a mouth edged in blue lipstick. Ms. Minter’s images possess a disorienting doubleness that forces you to examine them with extra care; they put you on intimate terms with the motif, the painted surface and your own suggestibility.

Ms. Minter was born in Shreveport, La., in 1948 and grew up in South Florida. Her childhood seems to have been challenging. She remembers her parents, who divorced when she was 8, as glamorous and unreliable. Her mother vacillated between drugs and alcohol; her father was a drinker, a gambler and a womanizer. Part of their legacy to their daughter would be later problems with drugs and alcohol (since overcome), and perhaps an enduring attraction to glamour as a female preoccupation that is part curse, part pleasure, part impossible fantasy. The show opens with a series of hazy black-and-white photographs from 1969 that capture the artist’s reclusive mother in a frothy negligee, moving about a dim, somewhat bedraggled bedroom, curling her hair; putting on makeup; posing before a mirror. Silent, atmospheric, these images attest to the hypnotic pull that mothers can exert on daughters, portraying their subject as both powerful and passive.

Throughout her childhood, Ms. Minter had one guiding light. She knew early on that she possessed an unusual skill for copying images, which coalesced into the ambition to be an artist. She left home at 16 to study art at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and went on to Syracuse University for her graduate degree. By 1972, she was in New York City, initially eking out a living as a plumber’s assistant.

New York Times, November 10, 2016

By the mid-1970s, Ms. Minter was deep into Photo Realism, converting photographs into paintings. She followed in the footsteps of other female artists like Vija Celmins and Sylvia Plimack Mangold, who were among the first to suggest that, contrary to the work of its flashier male adherents, Photo Realism had a striking potential for quiet, deadpan enumerations of the everyday. (Old art movements never die; with luck, they fall into more talented hands.) The first group of paintings here are wonderfully restrained little canvases whose subjects include frozen peas defrosting in a kitchen sink, or curls of paper scattered on a linoleum floor whose generic pattern is depicted in quick smears of paint. They could be said to describe the domestic realm, while other paintings of photographs on the same linoleum conjure a working studio.

Ms. Minter came of age in the East Village of the 1980s, when misbehavior was the norm, and she wanted to be part of it. In an interview in the show's catalog, she recalls asking herself, "What is the subject matter that women never do?" Her answer: pornography. One result was "Porn Grid" of 1989, four small paintings whose images are lifted from men's magazines, aided, abetted and partly obscured by salacious drips of paint. Ms. Minter first showed these in 1990 at Simon Watson's gallery in SoHo, her second solo in New York, to harsh criticism from anti-pornography feminists.

This is not a conventional, step-by-step retrospective, so it is a little hard to see how Ms. Minter progressed from her rawer, pornographic paintings to those of this century, which trade on suggestion more than on sex and are more imposing in terms of size and color. By the late 1990s, she had a studio of assistants trained in her technique, which included finishing her enamel surfaces with soft pats of the fingers, not the brush.

Although it's from 2007, "Blue Poles" seems to exemplify the transition. First, the title, after one of Pollock's masterpieces, indicates a greater attention to abstraction. It is an exacting image of the eyes (roughly shadowed with sparkling blue) of a young person, including straggly eyebrows and a prominent pimple. Does this depict a bit of human reality behind the beauty, of, say, a stage show, or is the subject too young to be doing this?

In the show's final gallery, a complex blur descends. Ms. Minter paints sheets of glass between her subject and us. Sometimes the glass is cracked, dripping with steam or liquid or scrawled with graffiti. These layers further complicate the reading of the images while visually punning on painting. The glass becomes a sarcastic evocation of the cherished "picture plane" of formalist abstraction, while the watery drips refer to the painting process of an artist whose technique is all but invisible. It is as if we were seeing how advertisements fare out in the city, vulnerable to taggers. Welcome to the real world, they say. Don't let it stop you.