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The Non-Nurturing Approach to Children's Art

By MICHAEL TORTORELLO

WHAT if we threw it all away? Let's say that instead of nurturing our children's creativity, we deprived them of paper and crayons, and told them their art was worthless.

Few parents would sign up for such a monstrous experiment. But the New York artist Marilyn Minter, 62, can recount how it turned out in her experience.

Ms. Minter's large-scale images of women's mouths and heels make the sexy look revolting. Or maybe it's the converse. In any event, her videos, photographs and photorealistic paintings are shown in major museums and sell for six-figure sums. A solo exhibition of Ms. Minter's early work opens March 31 at the Team Gallery, in SoHo.

But most of her really early work — the art she made as a rebellious child in Shreveport, La., and as a young woman in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. — is gone for good.

"I just loved to draw," Ms. Minter said. "I could draw for hours and hours and hours. But I wasn't provided paper. I drew on the flyleaves of books." Encyclopedias, fairy tale anthologies — any blank page was a boon.

Ms. Minter would draw when she was punished and sent to her room. Which, from the sound of it, was often.

"My mother's idea of a successful child," Ms. Minter said, was one who managed "to marry rich." Her mother, she added, "was well read, but a product of her culture. She was injected with vanity at birth."

So while Ms. Minter's mother, who has since died, sent her for drawing lessons, art was merely for dabbling. Ms. Minter was the thing being cultivated, not her talent.

As a teenager, Ms. Minter found an appreciative audience for her work. Friends would ask her to backdate the birthdays on their driver's licenses — to "turn a 6 into a 3," she said. And her brother's chums would pay \$100 for facsimiles of Vargas pinup girls. "I guess I've been making

the same picture since I was 12 years old,” Ms. Minter said.

In high school and college, Ms. Minter could already imagine a career as an artist. Her mother, meanwhile, urged her to study for the secretarial pool. “I was told by my parents to just forget it,” she said. “I got letters saying what a terrible idea it was to be an artist — vitriolic letters.”

Would it have made any difference if her parents had acknowledged her talent and embraced it?

“I wonder that all the time when I see my friends who encourage their children,” Ms. Minter said. But “it’s not like I could decide between being a doctor, a lawyer and a nurse. I had no other accomplishments. I wasn’t gifted anywhere else.”

On reflection, she said, “I was going to be what I am.”

Eventually, Ms. Minter’s father, now deceased, recognized that her art held some value. When she moved to Syracuse for a master’s program, she recalled, he sold off the canvases she had painted as an undergraduate and stored at his house. She suspects her father was having an affair with an art dealer he had met at the Jockey Club in Miami. But Ms. Minter is sure of one thing: he kept the cash for himself.