

REGEN PROJECTS

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Art

Lush Morsels From an Erotic Imagination

Marilyn Minter, a risk-taker, revels in the range of desire.

By NANCY PRINCENTHAL

"If I paint a glass of water, people think it's erotic," the artist Marilyn Minter said during a recent visit to her studio in New York's Garment District. She laughed ruefully, but they'd have reason. Outrageously beautiful and irresistibly disturbing, Ms. Minter's increasingly monumental paintings invoke a spectrum of human desires: for sex, food, affection and, hardly least, for being seen.

Tall and stylish, with a ready wit and an open manner, Ms. Minter works from photographs reconfigured in Photoshop, creating illusionistic canvases of body fragments awash in bling. Jewels and liquid gold spill out of open mouths. Lips and tongues press against image surfaces. Silver beads morph into droplets of water that are sprayed across paintings as big as billboards — a format she has used twice. Upping the game, a fragment of a 2009 Minter video, "Green Pink Caviar," will soon light up the Jumbotron screen on the interior facade of the Barclays Center in Brooklyn. It focuses on an enormous, disembodied mouth slurping up variously colored goo. Eros is definitely on hand.

Although she has said that she is in many ways an abstractionist, and insisted to me, "I never tell people what to think," the pleasures of Ms. Minter's work are grounded in the bodies of women. And many in pop culture are cheering her on. Madonna used "Green Pink Caviar" for a projection in her recent concert tour. When the survey exhibition now at the Brooklyn Museum opened in Houston, Beyoncé tweeted about it.

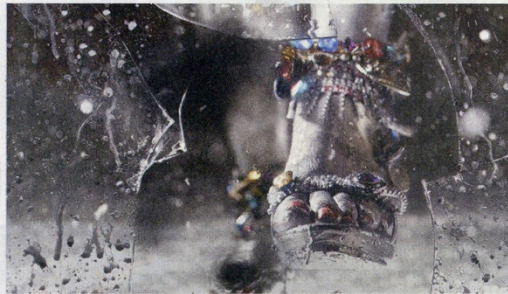
The attention is reciprocal, if wary. Earlier in her career, Ms. Minter drew from commercial print sources, including pornography, and some of her work has gone back into the mass media. She produced a 30-second television ad for a 1990 gallery exhibition (it ran on "Nightline" and the David Letterman and the Arsenio Hall shows), and, more recently, she accepted commissions from *Playboy* magazine and the fashion designer Tom Ford. The last two didn't really work out; as much as she is interested in such crossovers, her purposes are those of an artist. She likes things that are disfavored. (Ms. Minter, 68, said she took on the *Playboy* project as an opportunity to celebrate pubic hair, which, she was disheartened to learn, a number of young women were lasering away. Her enthusiasm wasn't fully shared by the editors.)

Although she treats some of her photographs as free-standing artworks, Ms. Minter's primary mode, and strength, is painting. Working with a half-dozen assistants, she applies layer upon layer of thinned enamel paint, which is daintily swept with brushes and patted with fingertips onto metal support surfaces using the



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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MARILYN MINTER, VIA SALON 94, NEW YORK

“cobbled” Photoshopped images as guides. It is a process that takes up to two years — and, she notes, involves no airbrushing. Bill Arning, the co-curator (with Elissa Auther) of the survey, is the director at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, where it originated, and recalled that during its run there, a Rubens exhibition was on view at a museum nearby. “If I wanted to explain Minter’s studio practice,” Mr. Arning said, “I could point across the street.”

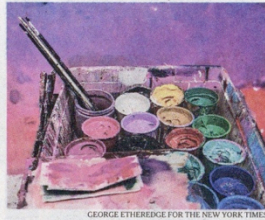
An early supporter of Ms. Minter’s work, he noted that a great deal had changed for gender politics since the show was conceived, when “young women thought the questions Minter’s work raises” — about women taking control of how their bodies are seen — “were academic, art-historical issues that had been worked out.”

The recent presidential campaign has helped move feminist concerns into mass culture — and, it seems, generated new enthusiasm for the license she takes.

The earliest works in the survey at the Brooklyn Museum are a series of noirish black-and-white photographs taken by Ms. Minter when she was still in school. They show her mother smoking in bed, or seated at a vanity applying makeup; in all, she either looks at herself in a mirror, or straight at the camera (and her daughter behind it). The artist, who was born in Shreveport, La., in 1948 and grew up in Louisiana and Florida, describes her mother as a drug-addicted Southern belle and her father, who left the family when she was 8, as a gambler and compulsive womanizer.

But she is leery of being seen in light of her background. “Everyone likes the idea of dysfunctional families,” she said, “especially for women artists.” She didn’t exhibit these photographs until 1995. Still, she said she accepts the enduring importance to her work of themes they introduce: grooming and preening, glamour and its fault lines.

From the late 1970s come photorealistic oil paintings of linoleum floors: chaste though they are, they, too, hint at things to come, with spilled fluids, shiny bits of foil, and canny alignments of subjects with the image surface. Other early paintings are



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based on photographs of young girls and starlets, seen through hand-painted dot-screens of the kind used in offset printing. Faux dot-screens also appear in the small enamel paintings of the “100 Food Porn” series (1989-90), which feature ostensibly aphrodisiac or otherwise suggestive foods — an artichoke, an ear of corn, the pink-fleshed belly of a gutted fish — being cracked open, knifed or peeled apart. The gestures, depicted and painterly, are aggressive: flesh is torn, drips happen. The only works in this exhibition based on hardcore pornography were made at roughly the same time, and are also small. A quartet of paintings mostly frame women’s brightly lip-sticked mouths and erect penises. Two paintings depict women’s genitals. In one, the subject touches herself.

Ms. Minter didn’t linger on this material. Shortly after, she began to shoot her own photographs. As her work’s size and degree of enlargement grew, the imagery slid past raw candor to the edgeless realm of libidinal imagination. Digital manipulation allowed for further departures from the real.

As before, only fragments of bodies are shown; Ms. Minter pointed out that she has never pictured a full figure, or a clothed one. Nor does she depict outright violence or abjection. Lipstick is vivid, eye shadow lavish and abundant. But so are blemishes; freckles, pimples, stray hairs. Armor-thick toenail polish is chipped; feet are wet and dirty. The way the models are staged and shot

Top, Marilyn Minter in her New York studio; above from left, “Orange Crush” (2009), a still from the video “Smash” (2014) and “Food Porn No. 35” (1989-90). Left, paints in Ms. Minter’s studio; right, “Big Breath” (2016).

A paragon for female artists intent on taking back women’s bodies.



challenged commercial photography and also circled back into it. “We didn’t know — this was back in 1993 — that the fashion industry would put jewels very delicately into the models’ mouths,” she said. “I would cram them in until they started gagging, and that’s when I started shooting.”

In the video “Smash” (2014), a pair of feet strapped into jeweled, silvery high-heeled sandals stomp their way through viscous silver liquid and shattered glass to a percussive soundtrack. This appalling, mesmerizing production required cutting-edge (and expensive) equipment, and it paid off. Mr. Arning explained, “She’s always aware of what time it is in the culture.”

A series of new paintings at Salon 94 is based on photographs of women behind steamed or frosted panes of glass, some beaded with water. You can practically feel them sweat. In bringing us close enough to see these details, she makes us engage inti-

mately — maybe uncomfortably so — with her subjects. It’s a lesson in private pleasure and public display.

In the 1970s, when Ms. Minter’s career began, a great many feminist artists were taking their clothes off — for photo-based activist and conceptual work, for performances and for paintings. When women got dressed again in the following decade and turned to the cooler modes of image appropriation and media critique, Ms. Minter instead raised the heat. In the splintering women’s movement of the 1980s, “sex-positive” feminists — those who believe that women’s sexual practices and fantasies, in all their variety, should be celebrated rather than policed — tangled with a wave of antipornography activists.

At the same time, as Mr. Arning noted, the culture was being ravaged by AIDS. “The question was,” he recalled, “how do you continue to have an erotic life during an epidemic and not die? Minter’s work offered a strong feminist voice leading the way.” But her work was polarizing. As Mr. Arning put it, “People in the art world she really cared about hated those paintings.”

Ms. Minter has become a paragon for younger artists who came up with internet pornography and naked selfies circulating on social media. They also have had the benefit of work by Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann and A. L. Steiner — all models for taking control over their bodies, and having pride in them.

Men come into this picture too, as Ms. Minter was quick to point out. She cited — perhaps surprisingly — Jeff Koons (“he’s a great artist!”) along with Robert Rauschenberg and Gerhard Richter, Mike Kelley and Richard Prince. “These are people that moved the dial,” she said.

But she also hastened to credit female peers: Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Rosemarie Trockel, Sarah Charlesworth, Louise Lawler. She might have added, for their gender-bending and boundary-crashing as much as their materials, the glittery sculptures of Lynda Benglis and Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, the sequined paintings of Mickalene Thomas, Catherine Opie’s photographs of Elizabeth Taylor’s jewels and makeup. Welcoming all earnest attempts at perfect bedazzlement, and embracing, with fanfare, the effort’s futility, Ms. Minter insists only on taking the risk.