

# REGEN PROJECTS

Simmons, William J. "Marilyn Minter: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston." *Frieze* No. 173 (September 2015) [ill.]

frieze

USA

## MARILYN MINTER

Contemporary Arts Museum,  
Houston

As I wandered through Marilyn Minter's retrospective 'Pretty/Dirty', curated by Bill Arning and Elissa Auther, I noticed a small hair clinging to one of the otherwise pristine paintings – probably unintentional, but evocative nevertheless. This minor imperfection is the antithesis to popular opinions about Minter's work: that it is slick and executed with the mechanistic perfection of the fashion industry, despite her insistence on depicting exactly that which is aberrant about our bodies. These assumptions, it seems, stem from a latent sexism that continues to haunt female artists. Critics and historians relegate anything too beautiful or too perfect to the gendered realm of the decorative, or to the conservative/academic art world's nemesis – fashion. Alongside this is a tendency to consider work made by female artists only in terms of subject matter, with no consideration of the intricacies of formal execution and its engagement with an art-historical lineage. Such is also the case with Minter's Pictures Generation colleagues, such as Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons, and with fellow painters Deborah Kass, Joyce Pensato and Betty Tompkins. This is not to say that Minter's work isn't a touchstone for feminist art; it is rather to insist that her career be examined with the rigour it deserves, which is something this exhibition fully addressed.

With 25 paintings, as well as photographs and three videos, 'Pretty/Dirty' spans a period from 1976 to 2013, beginning with Minter's very first foray into art with portraits of her mother, 'Coral Ridge Towers' (1969). Among her signature steamy, glass-covered portraits are some surprises, such as the little-discussed series 'Big Girls, Little Girls' (1986), which features pixelated images of young women in a foreboding dreamscape filled with mirrors – representing, perhaps, a damaged, fragile femininity like that of Andy Warhol's obsessive silkscreens of Jackie Kennedy. Also not to be forgotten is the 1989 project *100 Food Porn*, in which Minter bought 30-second advertising spots during several late-night television shows to advertise her exhibition at Simon Watson Gallery in New York.

What emerges from this comprehensive retrospective is not only a concern with identity politics, but also a sophisticated engagement with surrealism. It is no coincidence that there was a resurgent interest in surrealism in the 1980s when Minter was developing as an artist – evidenced most prominently by Rosalind Krauss's 1985 exhibition, 'L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism', at the Corcoran Museum of Art in Washington D.C.. In a revision of the surrealist tradition, Minter has, from her earliest student work, been interested in dissecting, refracting and examining the body. In *Gasp* (2004), a sensuous open mouth is swathed in gleaming beads. We are only given access to lips excised from the body, as if the rest of the model has been sliced away by the dripping, gaudy necklace (or, perhaps, expensive

REVIEWS

BDSM prop). The same operation drove Jacques-André Boiffard, known primarily for his *Big Toe* and *Mouth* photographs, which were both published in 1929 in the surrealist art magazine *Documents*. The body parts are severed photographically; Boiffard's toe is as unsettling as Minter's magnified erogenous zones and high heels, often filled with thickened, aged feet. A similar kinship occurs with Claude Cahun's *Object* (1936), a sculpture of a vaginal eye covered in hair, placed beside a lone hand grasping at air. The relationship between Boiffard, Cahun and Minter, however, is not a purely iconographic one; Minter's distancing and obscuring techniques – such as the imposition of steam, hair, strange colours or glass upon a scene – are equally important in her complex homage to her dadist and surrealist predecessors.

Minter transfers tropes central to the historical avant-garde into the postmodern moment, infusing them with new-found criticality. Like Boiffard and Cahun, she is committed to undoing oppressive norms – a critique that, as many have argued, extends into gender and sexuality. Not only does Minter present a deliciously ambivalent and complex conversation surrounding gender relations, she also requires viewers to consider the specific historical roots of postmodern investigations into identity.

WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

