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Pogrebin, Robin. "Marilyn Minter, an Artist Who Resonates and Repels." New York Times (April 9, 2023) [ill.] [online]

The New York Times



Marilyn Minter at her studio in Manhattan recently. Her exhibition opens at LGDR gallery on April 12.
Thea Traff for The New York Times

The images are compelling — a watery blur of color and shading. But collectors don't rush to own these Marilyn Minter paintings when they realize what they depict: vaginas.

"I've been making them for about 10 years now," the artist said in a recent interview at her garment district studio, her willowy, otherworldly presence accentuated by pale skin and mischievous eyes. "I think they're really beautiful. But nobody wants them."

To some extent this is a metaphor for Minter's entire career. The 74-year-old artist has been making sexually explicit paintings and photographs that are both challenging and compelling for nearly four decades. Only gradually has the world begun to catch up with her colorful, sensual images of mouths, eyes and body parts. And she has helped spur frank discussions of gender identity, sexuality, diversity and reproductive rights.

Minter, in the vanguard on all these issues, often paid the price, with people objecting to her appropriation of pornography, her unfiltered public comments and her progressive politics.

REGEN PROJECTS

But on April 12, her most ambitious exhibition to date will in a certain way mark her increasing acceptance, taking up all three floors of the elegant LGDR gallery on East 89th Street, with painting, video, sculpture and photography.

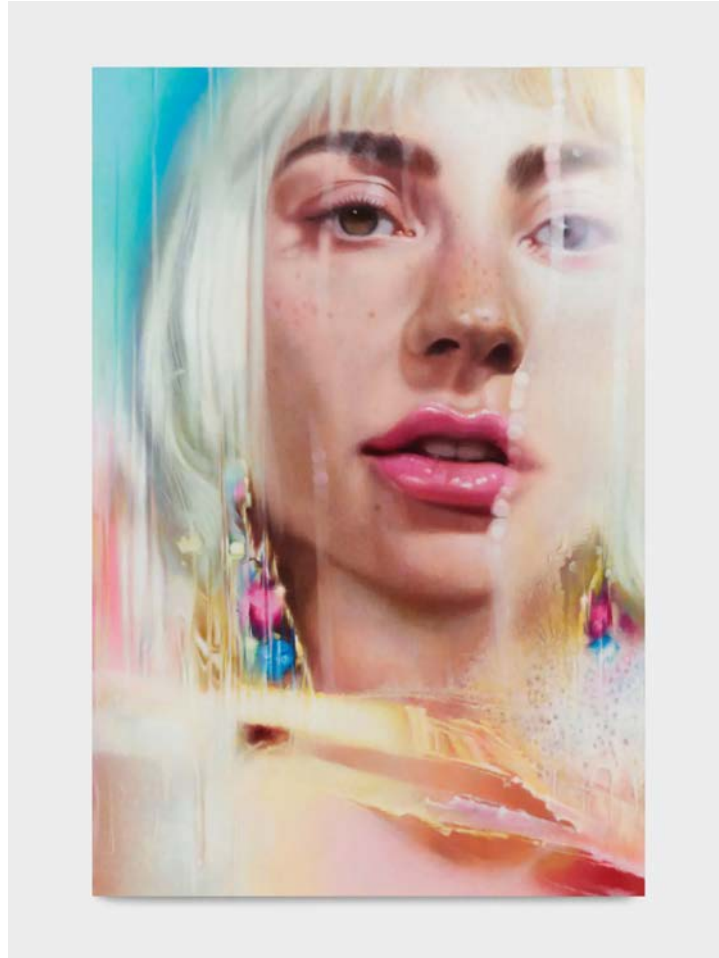
“She’s one of the few artists of her generation who really makes sense to a young generation,” said Alissa Friedman, who, with the LGDR partner Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, has worked closely with Minter for years. “The language she uses is so completely her own and now it’s completely recognizable.”

In addition to exhibiting what Minter calls her “bush painting” series, the show leans into her female-empowerment perspective with a set of new portraits featuring women she personally admires, such as Gloria Steinem, Monica Lewinsky and Lady Gaga.



“Gloria Steinem,” 2022-23, painting in enamel on metal in Minter’s studio, from her new portrait series of people she admires. Thea Traff for The New York Times

REGEN PROJECTS



“Gaga Portrait,” 2021-23, enamel on metal painting. via Marilyn Minter and LGDR

The exhibition includes Minter’s custom-made drinking fountains that display her videos in the basins. And there is a new series of “Odalisques,” reclining nudes that respond to the old master paintings by male artists such as Matisse and Manet. Among those featured are Lizzo, the singer, and Jasmine Wahi, the founder and co-director of Project for Empty Space, a nonprofit organization.

“All the paintings of women grooming throughout history have been painted by men,” Minter said. “What does it look like if a woman paints other women grooming?”

In addition, she has created a new app of digital photo filters as a fund-raiser for Planned Parenthood. And a book addressing the stigma around sexually active older people — “Marilyn Minter: Elder Sex” — is due out next month, based on her intimate photographic series that was originally published in a 2022 New York Times Magazine article on “The Joys (and Challenges) of Sex after 70.”

“If you’re lucky as an artist, you’re still alive when you’re starting to communicate,” Minter said. “And I feel like, OK, people are starting to see me now.”

REGEN PROJECTS



“About Damn Time,” 2023, from the “Odalisque” series with Lizzo, dye-sublimation print. via Marilyn Minter and LGDR



“Jasmine Odalisque,” 2021-23, painting with enamel on metal. via Marilyn Minter and LGDR

REGEN PROJECTS

Taking on taboo topics has also taken its toll. Minter became so immersed in the politics of the moment recently that she said her family and associates had to do an “intervention.”

“Trump made me crazy — he was just infuriating — no one has made me this crazy,” Minter said. “It was keeping me up at night. Eventually I started to burn out and I wasn’t being productive at all in the studio.

“I had to find a balance,” she added.

Minter says she has lately pulled back from the fray — leaving Facebook (“I had so many fights”) and trying to cut down on Twitter.

But she remains exercised about issues like abortion access and transgender rights. “I’ve been an activist my whole life,” she said.



Marilyn Minter at her studio pictured with “Mickalene Thomas,” 2022-23, with large enamel on metal painting at right. Thea Traff for The New York Times

REGEN PROJECTS

Born in 1948 in Shreveport, La., to what she described as a “drug addict mother and alcoholic, gambler father” who split up when she was 8, Minter said she essentially raised herself.

“I grew up in a cultural desert,” she said, adding that her father moved the family to “Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Party City” because he was a scratch golfer who started country clubs.

At 16, Minter spent a night in jail for altering friends’ driver’s licenses so that they could get into bars and be served alcohol. “I was very good at forging, copying, drawing,” she said, adding with no apparent irony that she also “made the posters for the school plays.”

After attending a junior college, Minter earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Florida and made her way to New York.

“I read about Warhol,” she said, “and all I wanted to do was come up north.”

Minter earned her master’s in fine arts from Syracuse University and despite her own struggles with drugs and alcohol — she says she is 37 years clean and sober — managed to build a life in New York City, starting out as a plumber’s assistant. Almost as soon as she started exhibiting her work in the 1980s, Minter created both acolytes and enemies.

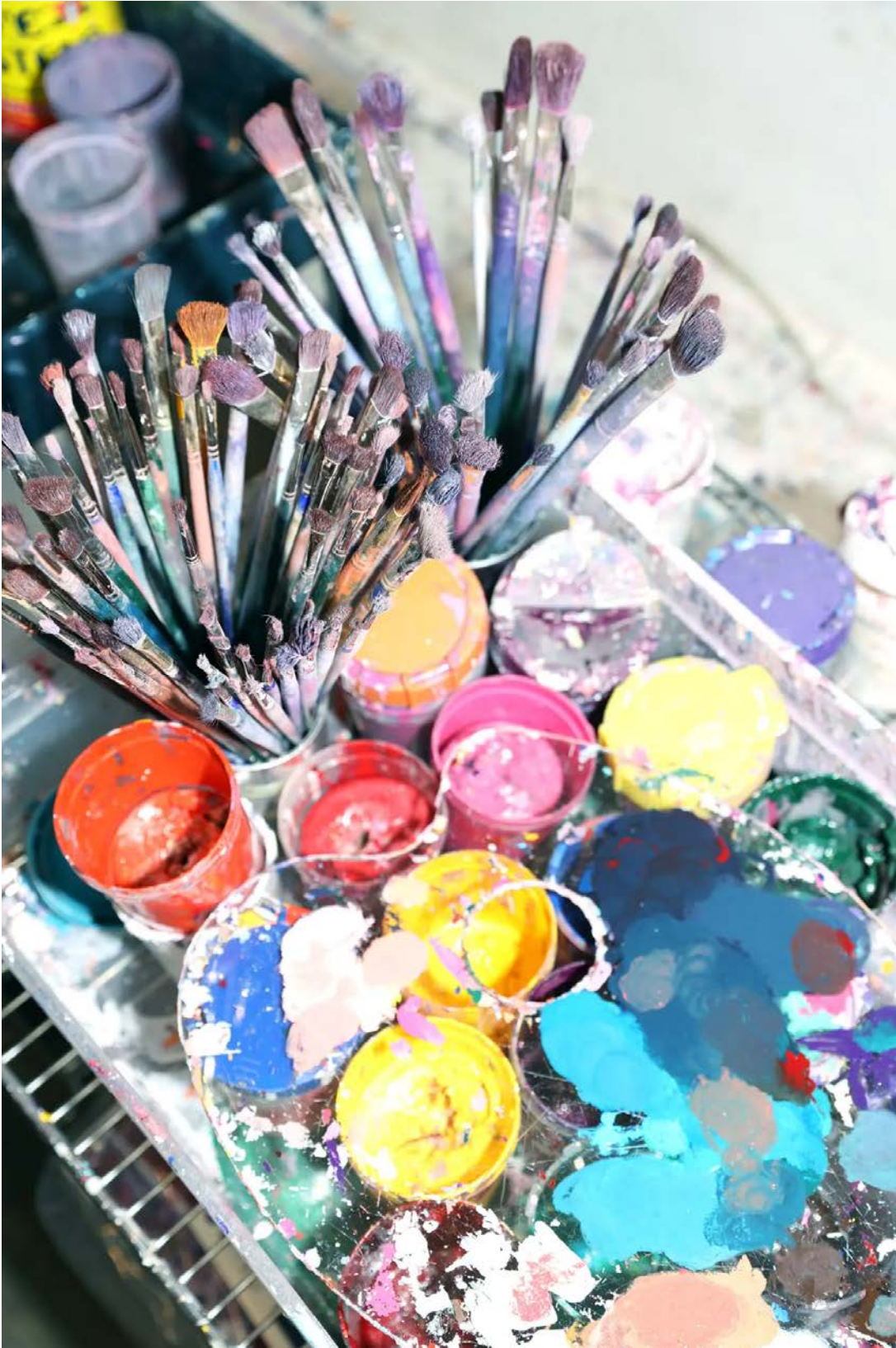
“She breaks art history again and again, she’s unapologetic about it and it’s liberating,” said Anne Pasternak, director of the Brooklyn Museum. “But she does it so far ahead of the curve that it’s hard for the mainstream to accept.”

Some prominent collectors have been very accepting, including Glenn Fuhrman, who owns several Minters. “The technical mastery is the first thing that strikes you,” he said. “I find them to be visually stunning.”



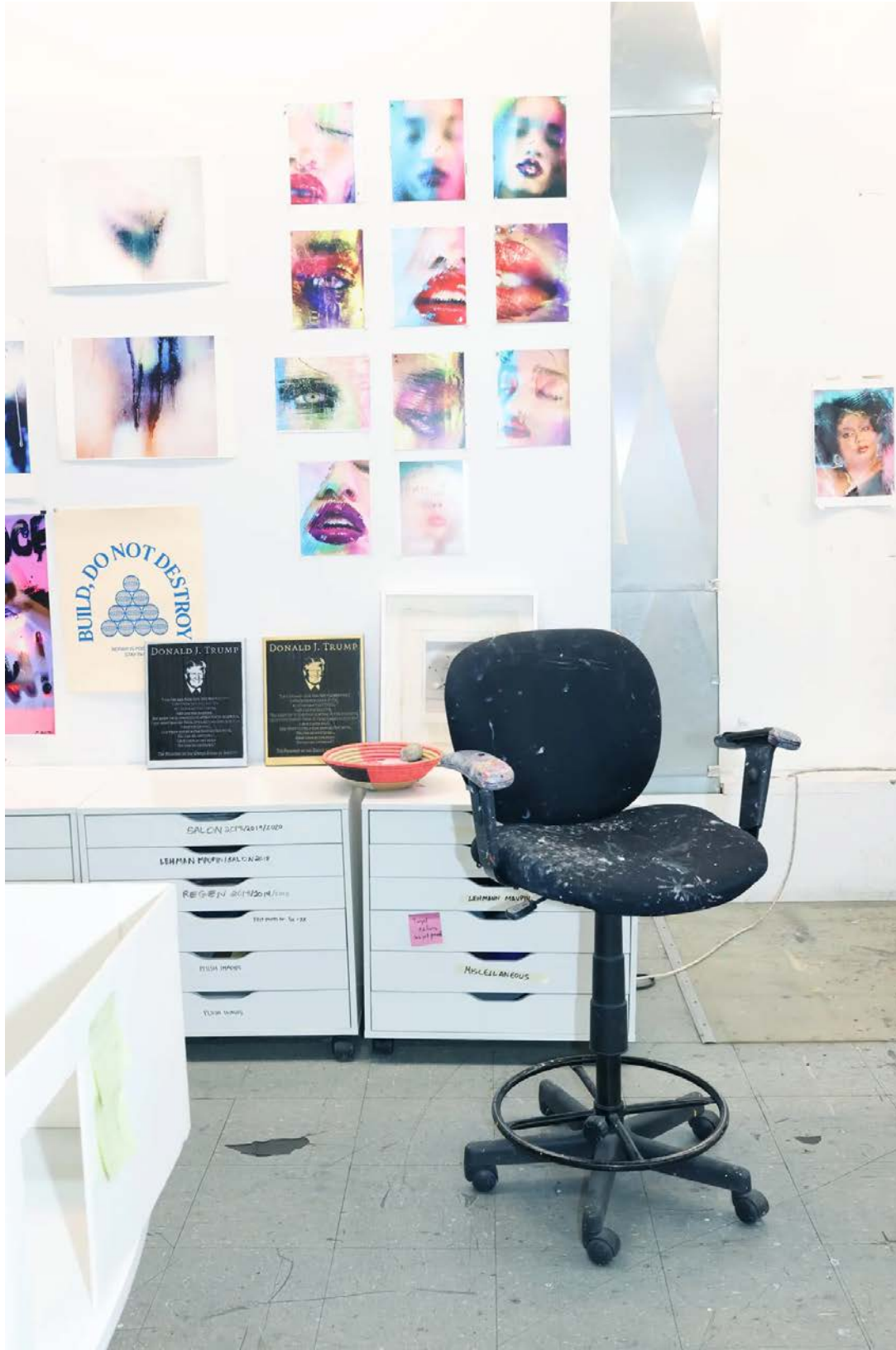
Minter points to a print of “Word of Mouth” (2022), a painting in the exhibition. Thea Traff for The New York Times

REGEN PROJECTS



Minter's painting process brings together technology — she layers images with Photoshop — and classical painting (she has longtime assistants who collaborate on her work). Thea Traff for The New York Times

REGEN PROJECTS



The artist's collection of photographs on the wall of her studio. Thea Traff for The New York Times

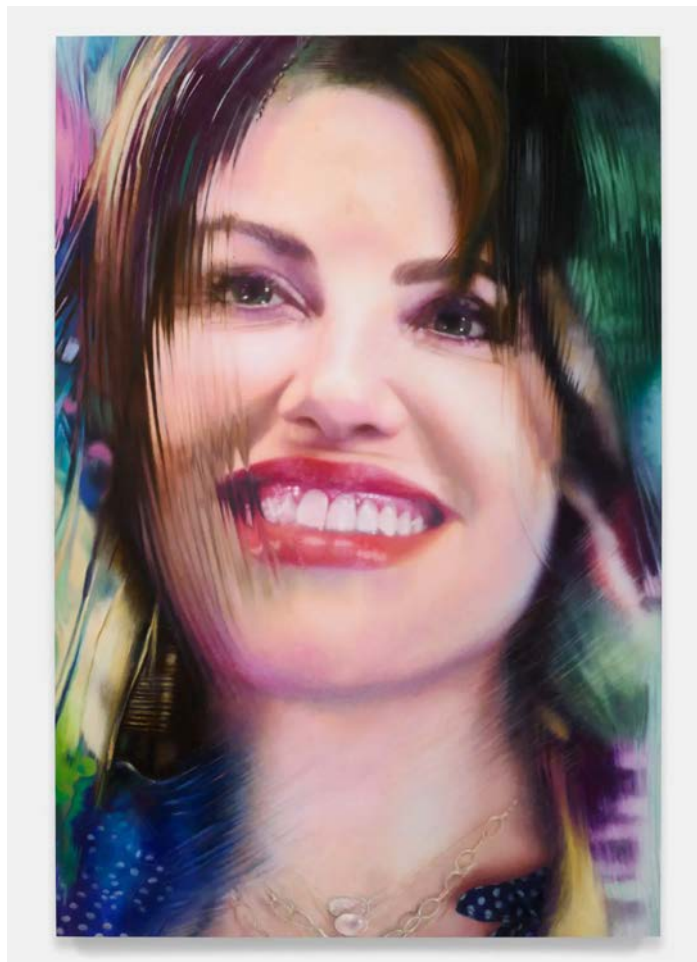
REGEN PROJECTS

Arts institutions have also acquired Minter, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney and the Guggenheim in New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Her retrospective “Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty” opened at the Brooklyn Museum in 2016, organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver.

“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,” wrote Roberta Smith in her New York Times review of the show. “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.”

If Minter has been polarizing, she is something of an equal opportunity provocateur — offending conservatives who find her images uncomfortably explicit and alienating liberals who find them exploitive.



“Monica Lewinsky,” 2022-23, enamel on metal painting. via Marilyn Minter and LGDR

REGEN PROJECTS

“She hits those disturbing points and she doesn’t back down from them,” said Bill Arning, a curator and critic who co-organized “Pretty/Dirty.” “And within a couple of years, they seem inevitable.”

Aware that she can be a lightning rod, Minter said she resists any “knee-jerk reaction” when it comes to subjects like glamour and beauty.

“That whole industry is really considered superficial, frivolous and contemptible,” she said. “It creates body dysmorphia and self-hatred. But at the same time, it’s one of the few places where women have power.” She added, “Nothing is black and white, nothing.”

“My stance is: Why? Why is there contempt for people like Kim Kardashian? She’s a lawyer. She’s a billionaire. She has something to say,” Minter continued. “Yes, she’s a flawed human being — find me a human being that’s not flawed. We’re never going to learn anything unless we develop a language and constantly communicate. And my art is all about trying to have a dialogue with the viewer.”



Minter drinks from her multimedia sculpture, “Thirsty (Drinking Fountain)” (2022-23), which will be in the new exhibition. Thea Traff for The New York Times

Minter was motivated to make the “bush paintings” after learning that young women were removing their pubic hair through laser treatments. The permanence of what she saw as an act of self-loathing troubled her.

REGEN PROJECTS

“You could shave it, but laser is forever and fashion is fleeting,” she said. “I remember in the '60s, I plucked my eyebrows and they never grew back.”

Minter’s painting process brings together technology — she layers images with Photoshop — and classical painting (she has longtime assistants who collaborate on her work).

And while some viewers continue to reject Minter’s images, a critical mass seems to be embracing them as intensely resonant.

“More and more people are coming up to me and saying, ‘Oh, something you made meant something to me,’” she said. “That never happened before.

“The art world loves young bad boys and old ladies,” Minter continued. “Maybe they can see me now because I didn’t go away — I haven’t disappeared.”

Marilyn Minter

Through June 3, LGDR, 3 East 89th Street, Manhattan, 212-772-2004; lgdr.com.