

# REGEN PROJECTS

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### MANSION

HOUSE CALL | MARILYN MINTER

# She Turned to the Camera And Brush to Escape Family Woes

The artist taught herself to draw from comics, and her student photos were praised by Diane Arbus

Even as a child, I knew something was off about my mother. When I was little, she'd wake me at night to help her go through my father's suit pockets looking for evidence of infidelity.

I didn't even know what that meant then. When my parents had terrible fights, I'd have to go into their bedroom. Only then would they stop fighting.

My two brothers, Charlie and Al, were six and seven years older than me. They went through the same thing.

My parents were alcoholics. They finally separated when I was 8. In some ways, my mother, Nora, never recovered from the stress and failed expectations of her marriage.

We first lived in Shreveport, La., and moved to Miami Beach when I was 5. I think we moved to Florida so my father, Allan, could get to Havana faster and gamble. We lived in a house on Normandy Isles, near the north end of Miami Beach on Biscayne Bay, an upper middle-class area. Both of my parents came from money.

After my father left us, he paid child support to my mother, but she just handed it to me. I kept the money in a jar by my bed. Then my mother had a breakdown and went into an institution.

I started drawing just after we moved to Miami Beach. I was astonished at how much better my drawings were than my friends'. Mostly I learned from copying comic books.

After my mother recovered, she and I moved to a high-rise in Fort Lauderdale. I quickly became an escapist. I read books constantly or watched movies on TV just to



Marilyn Minter, above, in her New York studio in 2017, and, above right, with her parents, Nora and Allan, and her brothers, Al and Charlie, in 1951. Top right, Ms. Minter's painting 'Lilith' (2021).

distract myself. When I was 13, I started drinking. The first time I got high, I said to myself, "Oh, this is what normal feels like."

Florida was the land of no par-

ents. All my friends drank and did drugs. In high school I argued a lot with my teachers and was often sent to the dean of students. One day she said, "You're not a



bad kid, just bored."

To make money, I began changing students' driver's licenses so the underage owner could buy alcohol and get into bars.

Then I got busted. I was 16 with braces holding two bags of liquor bottles in a parking lot. I was in trouble all the time.

At the University of Florida, I took myself more seriously. In painting class, I was interested in pop art but didn't get good grades because I wasn't an abstract expressionist, which was in vogue.

I took a creative photography class and got an A, so I majored in photography. One weekend in 1969, I went home with my camera to my mother's apartment and took candid photos of her.

Back at school, I developed the film and showed my teacher, Jerry Uelsmann, my contact sheet. He was blown away. He said, "Show Diane." Diane was Diane Arbus, a visiting photographer. She was impressed.

I moved to New York in 1976 after grad school at Syracuse University. The years that followed were exciting and productive, but in 1985, I entered rehab. My big break was getting clean and sober.



#### MARILYN'S MOOD

##### Why did you leave Florida?

I would have gone down the same hole as my mother. I wanted to be an artist and I saw no future in Florida.

**Current work?** I'm painting portraits of people I admire for my upcoming show at New York's Salon 94.

**Theme?** There will be a room of portraits, a room of "bathers," a monumental sized mouth and a video drinking fountain.

**Fountain?** You'll have to see it.

Today, my husband, Bill, and I live in a 2,500-square-foot loft in Manhattan's Soho. We also own a house next to a stream north of the city. Bill has landscaped the property beautifully.

After my father left my mother, I saw him infrequently. When I was in my late 20s, he died, homeless.

My mother was brought up to be a socialite. Then her husband left her. I feel sorry for her now. She was broken. The world broke her.

—As told to Marc Myers

Marilyn Minter, 73, is a photographer, videographer and photorealist painter whose depictions of women and contemporary notions of beauty have been exhibited world-wide. Her works will appear in three shows through 2023.