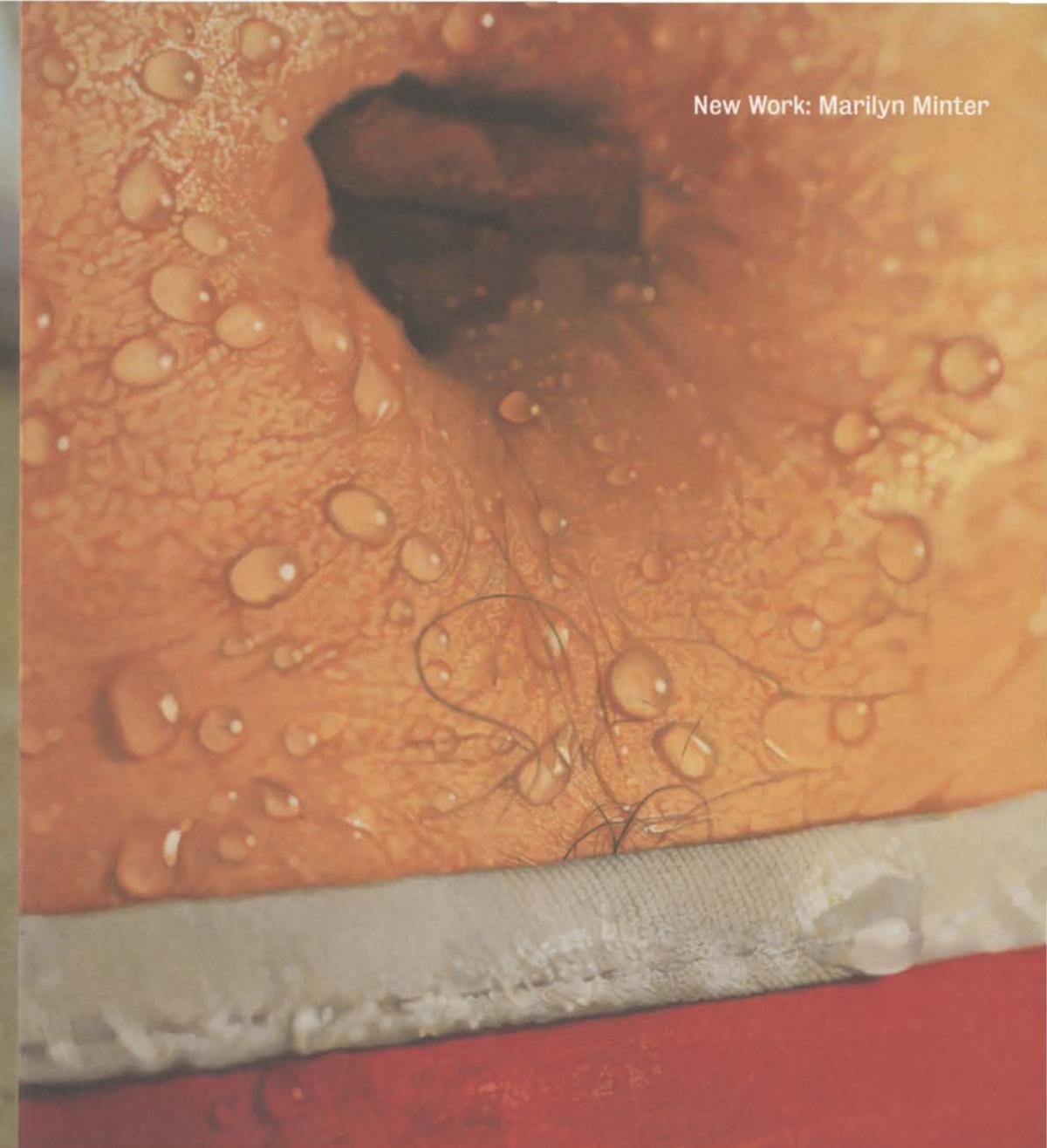


new work

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
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New Work: Marilyn Minter

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April 1–July 24, 2005

In 1969 the photographer Diane Arbus visited a class at the University of Florida in Gainesville and, as a guest instructor, led a critique of the students' artwork. Marilyn Minter, an undergraduate at the time, was not enrolled in the class, but her professor encouraged her to bring in her proof sheets. Minter did not yet know who Arbus was, but her series of photographs, *Coral Ridge Towers*, was the only work that Arbus liked that day. It documented a weekend in the life of Honora Elizabeth Laskey Minter, a pill-popping recluse and the artist's mother—a ragged ghost of a woman stubbornly clinging to, but inevitably failing at, Hollywood beauty standards (less *Now, Voyager* than *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*). For Minter, these pictures were simply what home was like, but despite Arbus's imprimatur, her classmates recoiled and she left the negatives unprinted for twenty-five years.

This anecdote reflects an all-too-common response to Minter's work while introducing the concerns that still inform it. The gap between received images of femininity and lived experience can be traced through her paintings of the following decades: photorealistic spills on kitchen floors in the 1970s; 1980s depictions of Jayne Mansfield and M&Ms that inject autobiography into post-Warhol Pop; manicured hands that slice and penetrate various meats and vegetables; and revisions of hard-core pornography that seek to map our culture's relationship with sexual images and to acknowledge the art world's intrinsic scopophilia. 1989 and 1990 turned out to be the wrong time for that last experiment. Although Minter's paintings were in many ways less extreme than the work that would shortly be grouped under the "bad girls" rubric, the fact that they did not occupy a clearly didactic or ironic position "ignited . . . an esthetic firestorm" that included threatening letters, phone calls, and scoldings from friends and critics alike.¹

In 1995 Minter finally decided to print the *Coral Ridge Towers* photographs, which helped her find a way out of the pornographic

quagmire. She picked up a camera and began making, for the first time in years, paintings based on her own photographs instead of mass-media sources, although her primary interest remained commercial depictions of femininity. Minter began exploiting the vocabulary of photography to investigate the extent to which it has reshaped our vision. Her images echo an abstract, fragmented way of looking at the body that developed as a consequence of the medium's mechanical characteristics—particularly framing and focal length—and that existed as early as the 1920s in the surrealist photography of Man Ray and Jacques-André Boiffard. This "morseling" is a familiar cliché from many different modes of photography, from Surrealism to pornography and advertising.

Minter's paintings evoke those commercial genres through their compositional strategies as well as through their shiny enamel surfaces, which are akin to glossy magazines. Her interest in blurring the boundaries between fine and commercial art has led her to shoot, since 2002, several fashion spreads for shoes, jewelry, and cosmetics—the same subjects that appear in her paintings, though she considers the ads a separate category of work (the distinction is generally one of degree and not of kind, with advertisers predictably preferring a toned-down version). Her decision to address topics such as fashion and sex in paintings, and to show paintings alongside related photographs, questions traditional notions about the separation of these media and how artists should utilize them. She stands in particular contrast to the 1970s-era



Mom Dyeing Eyebrows, 1989/1995



Piggies, 2002

Photorealists, who insisted that their photographs were merely a stage in preparation for their "real" work in painting.

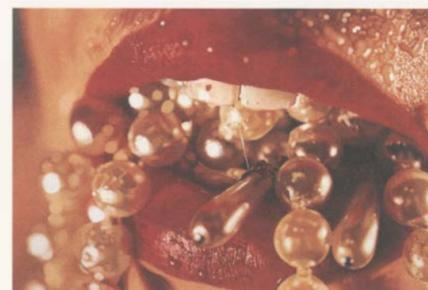
The link that Minter draws between mainstream pornography and fashion/cosmetics advertising relies not only on their similar structures, but also on their common emphasis on a fantastic, idealized body. While the objects of desire in porn and in ads may not always be identical, they are designed to be equally unattainable, with the goal of generating more desire and thus selling more products (couldn't one always have better skin and better orgasms?). They are not real bodies. It is not just that actors' and models' bodies are far from average, although that is certainly true. The pictures that result from the modifications of makeup, styling, lighting, airbrushing, and digital alteration are fictions produced by technology. They may bear photography's connotation of realism, but they are most assuredly not records of human organisms. Indeed, it is impossible to match that degree of perfection, but the perception that we might goads us to buy more and more.

In place of these idealized objects, Minter shows us unruly bodies that cannot fit within our culture's carefully drawn lines: greedy, excessive bodies that ooze and leak and are marked by too much sweat, too much makeup, too much hair, too much grime. As her lens moves up and down, it reveals the armpit stubble and sock indentations that are often experienced but rarely represented. These works are about our private ruminations and self-scrutiny; they reveal bodies that, compared to the fantasies that bombard us daily, seem to be in a state of constant eruption. Regardless of

our efforts and the products we buy, we can never replicate the ideal's unblemished surface. Minter points out our ambivalence toward beauty by trying to picture something in between flesh and its imaginary simulacrum. She captures our mind's-eye view of ourselves, and, in her words, helps us make sense of "how it feels to look."

Given her interest in the erotic and the glamorous, the presentation of gender is also a key theme in Minter's work. The philosopher Judith Butler has argued that gender does not naturally follow from biology, but that it is constructed as the sum of behaviors learned from culture and family, which must be vigilantly reenacted in imitation of "masculinity" and "femininity."² The mainstream images that Minter parodies are of the sort that constitute these normative gender roles. Her photographic framing often excludes any anatomical signs of sexual difference. Gender is thus communicated only through makeup and jewelry, leaving us crucially unsure about what type of body is underneath. Even when the model is female, the unpleasant overload of maquillage illustrates the chemical artifice of her femininity. By exaggerating popular imagery, Minter highlights its failings. She takes our fantasies literally and to their logical extremes, giving us the bodies we have come to think we want and asking us whether we really do.

A psychoanalytic interpretation of Minter's art might focus on the Freudian minefield of her motifs, from the mouth as *vagina dentata*



Bullet, 2004



Quail's Egg, 2004

paint, a slick, shiny substance in between solid and liquid) also functions abjectly. We want bodies that are flawless and contained, which is impossible without cosmetic intervention. By covering our flaws, makeup ineluctably reminds us that those flaws exist, defeating its ostensible purpose and generating an everyday abjection.

But the unsettling effects of misrecognition and abjection cannot account for the pleasure to be had in looking at Minter's lushly painted, seductive objects. Enter one last theorist, Luce Irigaray, who believes that women and men, perennially delimited by a masculine way of thinking enshrined in language, can imagine themselves only as positions within the established patriarchal hierarchy. Realizing that there is no way to communicate outside the dominant forms, Irigaray challenges us to use those forms to radically reimagine language as a kind of feminine writing (*écriture féminine*) that rejects linear precision in favor of fluidity and ambiguity built around metaphors of the body, especially touch—a language that will give women a mode of writing their desires and selves.⁴

Unlike Irigaray, who privileges words over images, Minter seeks to dissolve the traditional strictures between touch and sight. Her painted mimicry is a step toward *écriture* without words—a way of making images with slippery meanings that evoke and provoke rather than prescribe. If the imperfections of her models rupture the surface of the idealized body, so too does her technique interrupt the surface of the photograph. In reproduction her paintings may be indistinguishable from photographs, but in person, her saturated, skinlike surfaces glow with juicy—or, better yet, sweaty—life. Minter learned early on while working with enamel that the pigment was too tough and dried too quickly for traditional brush painting, so she devised a method of softening it and applying it with her fingers. By blurring photographic lines and marring—or completing—the painted surface with her own fingerprints, she begins to fulfill Irigaray's hope for a new kind of language based on the possibilities of touch.

Theoretical considerations aside, what may be most immediate about these works is their reminder that the parts of the body that we decorate, that we make beautiful, are sense organs: the skin that feels, the fingers and toes that touch, the eyes that see, the ears that hear, the mouths that taste and talk and kiss. The clusters of tissue that provide us with such uncertainty and anxiety and pleasure are the same ones, she posits, that enable us to know the world.

Joshua Shirkey

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Notes:

- 1 Deborah Ripley, "Postcoital Painting," *artnet.com*, December 8, 1988, http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/reviews/ripley/ripley2-8-88.asp.
- 2 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 3 See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- 4 See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). My discussion of Kristeva and Irigaray is by necessity abbreviated. Also of interest are Hélène Cixous's work on *écriture féminine* and all three writers' meditations on the maternal body (whether Honora Minter?). I introduce these theories not as gospel truth, but as a way to start thinking about Minter's work, and to suggest Minter's art as a way to start thinking about the theories.



Pit, 2004

Marilyn Minter was born in 1948 in Shreveport, Louisiana, and lives and works in New York. She received a bachelor's degree in fine art from the University of Florida in 1970 and a master's in fine art from Syracuse University in 1972. Most recently, Minter has had solo exhibitions at Baldwin Gallery, Aspen; Andr hn-Schiptjenko Gallery, Stockholm; Fredericks Freiser Gallery, New York; and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris. Her work has appeared in recent group exhibitions in Milan, Toronto, New York, Seattle, London, and Amsterdam, and it is included in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego.

Works in the Exhibition

Enamel on metal

<i>Piggies</i> , 2002 24 x 33 in. (61 x 83.8 cm) Collection of Charles J. Betlach II	<i>Pit</i> , 2004 28 x 24 in. (71.1 x 61 cm) Courtesy the artist
<i>Crisco</i> , 2003 37 1/2 x 40 in. (95.3 x 101.6 cm) Collection of Lenore and Richard Niles	<i>Quail's Egg</i> , 2004 84 x 48 in. (213.4 x 121.9 cm) Private collection
<i>LA to NYC</i> , 2003 72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 121.9 cm) Collection of Dave Gahan and Jennifer Sklias Gahan	<i>Clip</i> , 2004–5 30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm) Courtesy the artist
<i>Treasure Trail</i> , 2003 72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 121.9 cm) Courtesy the artist and Baldwin Gallery, Aspen	<i>Sock</i> , 2004–5 30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm) Courtesy the artist
<i>Bullet</i> , 2004 48 x 72 in. (121.9 x 182.9 cm) Collection of Richard Edwards, Aspen	<i>Strut</i> , 2004–5 96 x 60 in. (243.8 x 152.4 cm) Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York

Chromogenic prints

<i>Glisten</i> , 2002 50 x 35 1/2 in. (127 x 90.2 cm) Courtesy the artist and Fredericks Freiser Gallery, New York	<i>Brooch</i> , 2004 50 x 35 1/2 in. (127 x 90.2 cm) Courtesy the artist
<i>Drool</i> , 2003 50 x 35 1/2 in. (127 x 90.2 cm) Courtesy the artist and Fredericks Freiser Gallery, New York	<i>Goldi</i> , 2004 50 x 35 1/2 in. (127 x 90.2 cm) Courtesy the artist and Salon 94, New York

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The gelatin silver print *Mom Dyeing Eyebrows* is reproduced courtesy of the artist. Reverse, left to right: *Glisten* (detail), 2002; *LA to NYC* (detail), 2003; *Goldi* (detail), 2004; *Treasure Trail* (detail), 2003.