



OH, THE DAYS

by Marilyn MINTER & Jose Freire

HOW MARILYN MINTER SURVIVED THE 80S

Above and below: details from Porn Grid #2 and #4, 1989

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Any Madonna fans out there will no doubt have already seen artist Marilyn Minter's work. Her sickeningly sticky film piece *Green And Pink Caviar*, in which models slurp sweets from a glass sheet, shot from below with a macro lens, formed part of the backdrop for the Queen of Pop's 2009 tour. Others will perhaps recognise Minter's sudsy photo series of then-muse Pamela Anderson, which were published in art journal *Parkett* in 2007. But fewer will have seen her exceptionally lurid, powerfully confrontational work from the 80s, when she first embarked upon her exploration of the visual language of pornography, and began to develop a fascination with glistening sweat, dripping fluids and glossy surfaces that has come to characterise her work. Lucky then, that a selection of Minter's early paintings are to be shown this spring at Team Gallery, New York. Here, ahead of the exhibition, she reminisces with Team Gallery's Jose Freire.

JOSE FREIRE: When people think of the 80s, I think they remember (or mis-remember) really atrocious things: too much purple, big hair, synth-pop, giant Thierry Mugler shoulder pads, and Tom Cruise in tighty-whities. What do you think of when you think of the 80s?

MARILYN MINTER: The 80s for me was the East Village scene – lots of substance abuse, going to clubs at midnight, staying up all night and then going to teach art in a Catholic boys' school! Taking a nap, painting all night or going back to the clubs. At one point I did have punked-out maroon (not purple) hair, but my school made me tone it down. Lots of black, lots of great music!

JF: The 80s work that you'll be showing in New York at Team Gallery this Spring includes paintings from two different series: the *Big Girls/Little Girls* and the beginning of your porn pictures. On the one hand, you've got these images that pair the really buxom Sophia Loren and Jayne Mansfield with these innocent little twins looking in a funhouse mirror. On the other hand, you've got these guys and girls engaged in what the porn industry refers to as "money shots." It seems to me that none of these images are entirely innocent but that none of them are particularly salacious either. Why did people get so bent out of shape about them? Did anyone at the time talk about the cum and the paint as synonymous?

MM: No one talked about the work at all, other than to condemn the content. I used to say to people, "Nobody has politically correct fantasies. Women should be making images for their own pleasure and amusement." I think people got bent out of shape because I was reclaiming these images from an abusive history and asking questions without knowing the answers. Most importantly, I was a female. At the time there was just a nascent group of women who tried to own sexual imagery. Remember Madonna's book *Sex*? She and I bonded over the fact that we were both scorned for using sexual imagery. There is still a very thick glass ceiling when it comes to women using sexual imagery. Look at how everybody (well, maybe not everybody) has this knee jerk reaction towards Tracy Emin. My students – boys, girls – just automatically hate her work. I think she is an interesting artist pushing some button that drives people crazy.

JF: It seems to me that there was actually a period during which you were banished from the art world – sent out to wander in the desert. What gave you the strength to keep on? Did anyone stick by you?

MM: The dreaded porn paintings, Haha! Well, I was kinda devastated by the reaction. I was compelled to make those paintings, had no choice in the matter. I was trying to communicate, to have a dialogue. Instead I seemed to be chasing everyone away. I was pretty naive to the political correctness of the times.

I learned a lot but when it comes to sex there are no definitive answers...exceptions to every rule!

JF: You've got to have noticed that, Jack Pierson aside, your entire list of supporters is female. Where the fuck were the men?

MM: I did have support from some other male artists! Chris Wool told me he loved the work, Mike Ballou was always taking my side in the culture wars in Brooklyn back then, and Larry Clark was on my side.

JF: I think a lot of people fail to see how unique your paintings are. Would you like to comment on that?

MM: Well, every artist likes to think of themselves as unique, but I actually did develop a painting system that works just for me. My paintings have evolved a lot from those 1986 *Big Girls/Little Girls*, but one common element is enamel paint. I was originally part of a collaborative team with another artist, Chris Kohlhofer. We showed in the East Village gallery called Gracie Mansion as Kohlhofer/Minter. In 1985 I had stopped partying and cleaned up my act, and the collaboration broke up! Now I had to make something that looked nothing like the collaborations. That's when I started to work with the enamel paint. It's very different from oil and at first I used it in the conventional way – one color next to another color like a sign painter. That slowly evolved into modeling and blending the enamel. I can't do that with brushes because it dries too fast and the paint is too sticky, so I started blending with my first two fingers. That further evolved into many, many layers of blended enamel paint. Which is what I am doing now. There is a depth and translucency with the enamel that I could never get in oil paint.

JF: In the 80s that I remember, everyone was crazy about paintings.

MM: After Minimalism, I remember painting looking so fresh! I remember how fresh Julian Schnabel's plate paintings looked... and Basquiat, Scharf and Haring looked fantastic. The women of that time seemed to own photography and, except Jennifer Bartlett, Susan Rothenberg and Elizabeth Murray, painting was a boy's club. I noticed this but I had no choice, I was a painter.

JF: Gotta ask. Do any of the folks from that Catholic school, or your students from that period, know that you do things like show at MoMA or do work with Madonna?

MM: I have been walking down the street and a middle-aged guy will stop and call me Ms. Minter, and I know instantly he was one of my Catholic schoolboys. Teaching high school, the students call you Ms. Minter. As a college teacher everyone calls you by your first name.

JF: Marilyn, what does it feel like to be an overnight sensation – a painting superstar?

MM: Haha, of course, it feels wonderful! But we all know there is nothing "overnight" about the creative process, especially if you are a painter.

JF: Part of what I like about thinking of you as an overnight success (despite the fact that you've been showing your paintings for almost thirty years) is that the paintings feel really youthful to me. There is an energetic "now-ness" about them. Where does this quality come from?

MM: I don't know. It hurts me to hear people say how much better the old days were. In the 80s I remember a then-famous artist coming to my studio and I brought up the the whole Metro Pictures scene. She said, "That's where I stop paying attention." End of discussion. She was only 36 yrs old!! I thought, I wonder if that will happen to me? So far that hasn't happened. I am interested in art that is a reflection of the times in which we live. Being a teacher I have to know what's going on. I think that's part of my job.

Marilyn Minter: Paintings from the 80s runs from March 31 to April 30 at Team Gallery, New York