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MARILYN MINTER
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Beauty and Desecration

Marilyn Minter's photo-realist enamel paintings and large-scale photographs combine the brash energy of popular culture with an understated awareness of art history.

BY BARRY SCHWABSKY

The phrase "dirty realism" may have been popularized by a 1983 issue of the literary magazine *Granta*, but the idea has been around at least since Caravaggio started painting his angels and pilgrims with mud and grime on their feet at the end of the 16th century. Four hundred years later, Marilyn Minter has taken to doing the same with the denizens of her own fiercely dazzling paintings and photographs. But for all her slyly understated awareness of art history, one look at Minter's work is enough to know that its brash, boisterous energy comes from pop culture as much as from the great tradition of painting. What she takes from pop, above all, is its simultaneous love of glamour and compulsion to desecrate it. As Minter recently explained to critic Carlo McCormick, her art is invested "in the moment when everything goes wrong. . . . It's when the model sweats. There's lipstick on the teeth and the makeup's running."¹ Not that anything's ever allowed to go awry with the paintings themselves. Their technique is never less than immaculate—and unprecedented: no one has ever handled enamel paint with such sensitivity and nuance. What's astonishing, though, is the way Minter's fascination with this moment in which the construction of beauty collapses brings her back to ambitious painting—and some of the most lovingly painted dirty feet since 1610.

A painting like *Stepping Up* (2005)—shown at the last Whitney Biennial—might give the impression of being based on a paparazzo's telephoto scoop: Glamourpuss Walks Through Soot! But that dirt represents not so much the intrusion of reality into a fantasy as an occasion for painterliness in the document, just like running makeup or the lipstick smeared across a girl's teeth. And far from undermining the allure of fashion, this extremely close view of the filthy skin revealed by a



Marilyn Minter: Mudbath, 2006, enamel on metal, 84 by 120 inches. Collection Gael New



Stefan Edlis, Chicago/Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. All photos this article courtesy Salon 94, New York.

A symbiotic relationship was made clear in Minter's most recent show: if her paintings are based in photography, her photographs are imbued with the vision of a painter.

gaudy, strapless high-heeled shoe as its owner ascends a staircase serves to prove, if anything, the compelling power of extreme footwear: The shoe still looks fabulous and the woman who wears it, though one sees next to nothing of her, comes off as heroically defiant of her soiled condition. Or as Bruce Hainley wrote of an earlier, very different body of work by Minter—a series of stark, black-and-white photographs of her mother, shot in 1969 but not shown until 1995—the unknown and almost unseen woman depicted in *Stepping Up* manifests “the strange staunchness of self-creation, the often-ignored aggressive calm and defiance of femininity. Of her complex introspection nothing is learned except the importance of not giving a damn.”² Like Francesco Vezzoli with his over-the-top *Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's "Caligula"* (2005), Minter went brilliantly against the grain of a relentlessly earnest Biennial, showing that a more dis-

Right, Glazed, 2006, enamel on metal, 96 by 60 inches. Private collection.

Below, Cyclone, 2006, C-print, 50 by 36 inches.



turbing (and perhaps deeply, though obliquely, political) art could be made by voluptuously plunging into the morass of our contemporary decadence than by tut-tutting from its sidelines.

It's impossible to speak for very long about Minter's work without worrying at its relation to photography. I'm one of those, it should be said, who thinks that while painting has

gained a great deal from the interaction with its sister medium, painters who affect the “look” of the photograph have mostly been paying diminishing returns since the heyday of Gerhard Richter and Malcolm Morley. Minter has been the signal exception, and her most recent one-person show in New York (at Salon 94, immediately followed by exhibitions at Gavlak, West Palm Beach, and

Baldwin Gallery, Aspen) helps explain why. Juxtaposing four, mostly large, enamel-on-metal paintings with three (nearly as large) color photographs, it highlighted the similarity of effect in her works, whatever the medium. The exhibition made it clear that if her paintings are based in photography, her photographs are imbued with the vision

of a painter. This symbiotic relationship was most evident in a painting and a photograph depicting the same subject. In the 8-by-5-foot painting *Glazed* (2006), a heavily made-up eye appears open, watching like that of a bird of prey. *Cyclone* (2006), a photograph of the same eye, gorgeously dusted with purple glitter but this time closed, revels in the



Above, Rosary, 2006, C-print, 50 by 36 inches.

Left, Crystal Swallow, 2006, enamel on metal, 96 by 60 inches. Blanton Museum, Austin.

decomposition of the subject in a disorienting play of reflections and points of light, each little spangle like a brushstroke that constructs the image and takes it to pieces at once. That's a fundamentally painterly perception.

Most paintings-that-look-like-photographs look more or less alike—styleless—because so do most photographs (I mean the family snapshots and news photos that are generally the raw material for such work). Thanks to their extreme stylization, Minter's paintings and photographs manage to break this predictable cycle. Her paintings may look like photographs but the photographs they resemble, made with a painter's eye, don't look like anyone else's. Minter's unwavering pursuit of excessive sensation and raunchy surfaces amounts not to a "dirty realism" but, if anything, to a dirty formalism. □

1. Carlo McCormick, "Fashion Crisis," *Paper*, March 2006, p. 58.
2. Bruce Hainley, "Solitary Refinement: Marilyn Minter's 'Coral Ridge Towers,'" *Artforum*, January 1996, p. 61.

*Marilyn Minter's recent paintings and photographs were shown at Salon 94, New York [Nov. 12, 2006-Jan. 20, 2007], Gardak, West Palm Beach [Nov. 25, 2006-Jan. 6, 2007], and Baldwin Gallery, Aspen [Dec. 26, 2006-Jan. 30, 2007]. Works by the artist will also appear in *Les Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Artes* [July 3-Sept. 16].*

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