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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



Marilyn Minter, *Mom in Negligée*, 1969/1995, black and white photograph, 30 x 40". All from the series "Coral Ridge Towers," 1969/1995.

## SOLITARY REFINEMENT

MARILYN MINTER'S "CORAL RIDGE TOWERS" BRUCE HAINLEY

**T**he history of solitude will never be fully written. Solitude's practitioners all pursue anonymity, but the greatest ones thwart intercourse of any sort. In an American culture maniacally fixated on coupling, they vanish like smoke. Accusations of masturbator or freak stick to anyone who actually finds pleasure a solitary occupation,

but when such pleasure is combined with a love of illicit substances—cigarettes, pharmaceuticals, booze—its asocial not-niceness should be taken as a lesson in self-reliance. Marilyn Minter's mother, Honora Elizabeth Laskey Minter, called "Mom," spent a good deal of her life practicing the lost arts of eyebrow dyeing, smoking in bed, and lolling

about alone. The somewhat agoraphobic sprawl of her life in "Coral Ridge Towers" (all works 1969/1995) can be seen as a continuation of a lineage of contrariness and repose that includes Emily Dickinson (consider, for a moment, that Mrs. Minter is what Dickinson really looked like—"I am not wife" with a vengeance), Marcel Proust, Colette, Stephen Tennant, Mary Butts, Jean Rhys, Big Edie Bouvier Beale, Sunny von Bülow, and Elizabeth Bishop, whose dream it was to retire "and do nothing,/or nothing much, forever, in two bare rooms."

The rooms of Mrs. Minter are not bare. Neither is her mind. She surrounds herself with labial curves—the lace trim of her negligées, the clefts of her bed linens, the halo of her curlers, even the erotic connotations of her Walden, Coral Ridge. Mrs. Minter is an accumulator, and her memories fill more rooms than those she lives in. Her decorator's sense aims for French touches—the severity of her newly dyed eyebrows, like freshly inked fermatas; her choice of accent pieces, the glass decanter, the two ornamental mirrors. The esthetic of wig governs everything, suggesting that beauty, like existence, is artificial, askew, and concealing.

While many have been quick to link Marilyn Minter's work with that of Diane Arbus (who was *not* her teacher), Larry Clark, and Garry Winogrand, which obscures the fact that Minter found alienation as a blood relation, they have not seen the luxe if slightly sour air of Ingres' odalisques; the perverse family album of the later years of Manet's *Olympia*; the oneiric decline of Emma Bovary, who, as Avital Ronell has shown, was, like Mrs. Minter, a grande dame of the pharmacopoeia; the



post-Hollywood quotidian of Greta Garbo, who stayed home in cashmere disguise, giving the impression she couldn't care less that she ever had a public. Honora Elizabeth Laskey Minter and her ilk display 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 caring a damn.

By not showing this work—shot almost thirty years ago when she was still a student in Florida—until now, Marilyn Minter proves that artistic success has as much to do with the vault life of creativity and the lag time of seeing as anything else. Understanding may seem accomplished by synchronicity, but, due to fear, ignorance, or impatience (or some combination of all three), it can take years to figure out how to see beauty, which can be—even should be—an irritant, as perverse as desire and banality.

Mrs. Minter lived for more than a decade after this sequence was taken. Displaying such stunning intimacies, perhaps despite her intentions, her daughter reveals the has-been or never-was as heroine, mother as eight of nine new muses: Sag, Laziness, Narcotics, Seclusion, Abandon, Cosmetology, Nicotine, and Refusal. The ninth muse prefers not to be—or cannot even be—identified. Unnamed, unphotographed, she is off somewhere savoring a Valium, but her hypnotic, cultured influence is apparent everywhere. You are feeling the effects of it now. □

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