

# Post-Career Rehab, Marilyn Minter's Seedy Side Shows

By Peter Duhon  
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Wet pearls against red lips. Sparkling high heels walking through filthy water. A tongue encased in silver.

Before she became famous, Marilyn Minter was a product of much of the same "nightclub kid" scene of the 1970s and 1980s that begot Madonna. And the artist's works--hyperrealistic close-ups of gleaming body parts--were as censored and controversial as some of the pop queen's.



Ms. Minter's drug-addicted, bedridden mother was an early subject, and enormous breasts have figured large in her work, even sex acts. In 1989, she tackled a subject specifically because no other major female artist ever had: pornography. Her giant, glistening, explicit pieces, enamel painted on metal, were rejected by feminists and conservatives alike.

Despite her critics, Ms. Minter was "rediscovered" in the Whitney Biennial of 2006, hailed for *Stepping Up*, a painting from her skilled series about the seedy side of glamour.

Team Gallery invited her to hang the reviled works from early in her career, along with another series on children from the period, "Big Girls/Little Girls," at a show that runs through April 30. *The Observer* sat down at the gallery with the flame-haired painter and photographer right before she left for a solo show in Germany and talked to her, ruefully, about her "overnight" success.

**The Observer: It's been 30 years since you've shown these works together. Why now?**

**Marilyn Minter:** It was Jose [Freire]'s idea from Team Gallery, the director. I think he saw them in a talk I gave, and pretty soon after that he made a proposition: 'You want to revisit that work?' I said, 'Well yeah, I think we can find it.' And we did; it took us a year to find it. I still don't have everyone, everything--I couldn't find half of it.

### **The works weren't well received at the time.**

In the late '80s, I think my vision was chasing people out of the room. Nobody else thought like this. I was really this pro-sex feminist. I did think that nobody has politically correct fantasies. And I thought that women should have imagery for their own pleasure. And I thought that everyone thought like that.

### **There was censorship?**

My New York dealer shut my show down a week early once. And I got kicked out of a couple group shows. I was going to be in group shows, and then all of a sudden I wasn't in them anymore. It wasn't overt but covert; I think the reason was because I was considered a traitor to feminism. Disappointing when you have criticism from the left; you expect it from fundamentalists, but it is a big shock when it comes from the politically correct left.

### **What was going on in your life at the time you were making these works? You were collaborating with a team of artists in the East Village ...**

It was a big experiment. We were doing lots of drugs and getting high. Once I got out of rehab, these are the first paintings that I made. That painting [*she gestures at Big Girls, 1986*] was the first one that I didn't destroy. I made these when I got out of rehab.

### **After rehab, how many did you actually destroy?**

At least 10. Ten pieces of shit. Ten lousy paintings. I was trying to find myself.

### **Talk about the "Big Girls/Little Girls" series, which juxtaposes altered images of movie stars with images of little girls looking at their distorted reflections in fun-house mirrors.**

My generation saw fun-house mirrors; your generation looks at video games. I grew up in the South, so they'd be at fairs, and they were really fun, they distorted you so much. I thought it made a lot of sense to use that imagery because I grew up with it.

[Early on] I couldn't figure out how to make a contribution to art history as a realist, so I took images that I liked and I [altered them]. ... It is basically a conceptual piece. I was thinking in terms of a little girl in a fun-house mirror, and these two famous movie stars, and I fractured it. ... I just projected [it on the wall] while I was painting and I projected at an angle. So there's this parallel of distortion, and in the middle of that painting is the girl looking into the fun-house mirror.

### **How have the responses to you work changed from the '80s to now?**

That's hard to gauge. I've been a much more accessible artist to the world since 2006 when I was in the Whitney Biennial. So people are a lot more receptive to what I have to say.

### **Has the thinking on sexual imagery in art changed?**

The Internet has desensitized people to sexual imagery. But there's still a real glass ceiling. ... I can be an old lady and work with sexual imagery, but as a young girl there is still a glass ceiling. But I'm not sure; it is really complicated, and sexual imagery is so

loaded, and male or female, anyone who works with it is going to get criticized [for sexual exploitation].

**Concerning your porn-inspired work, how did you choose your films or source materials?**

All of the porn that I picked--well, at that point it wasn't video. You had to get it from magazines. There were these giant emporiums on 42nd Street, and I was trying to cover everybody. All the different modes of being and sexuality.

**What helped you continue as an artist despite some of the brutal criticism you received?**

It is not like I had any choice in the matter. I am not that accomplished. I can hardly spell or add--like, all of sudden I would do anything else. ... But I think I do everything I do because I don't have a choice in the matter as an artist. I have a gift for only one thing. People that are accomplished have choices. I never had a choice.

**Is that what it means to be an artist?**

They really can't do anything else. Life is so much easier not being one. You can go bowling Friday nights.

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