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MARILYN MINTER'S RAPTUROUS VISIONS

*The artist was shunned by the art world for being too vulgar.
Her new show embraces the female body, with muses like
Lizzo, Padma Lakshmi, and Jane Fonda.*



In the late nineties, the artist Marilyn Minter was in exile. After a sexually explicit show called "Porn Grid" upset critics, several galleries dropped her. She turned to painting images of things that she knew existed but had never seen represented in art: a glitter-encrusted glam-rock eye, girls' mouths with lustrous red lips and food stuck in their teeth. While she painted, the Clinton-impeachment hearings played on the radio. "I listened to every minute of it," she said the other day. "I was thinking to myself, If I was her, I would have fucked his brains out."

REGEN PROJECTS

Minter, who is seventy-seven, with reddish-purple hair and glinting blue eyes, was sitting on a folding chair in the middle of the art gallery Regen Projects, in Hollywood, surrounded by a newly installed group of her realistic portraits. She begins each painting with a photo shoot, then uses Photoshop to create composites, searching for her subject's essential characteristics. Like a sketch, the resulting image becomes a study for the painting, which she renders in layers of enamel sign paint on sheet metal. Minter did one of Monica Lewinsky, in 2023. "I met her at one of Cindy Sherman's New Year's Eve parties," she said. "She was slut-shamed so bad. She's my hero because she lived."

The show featured other Minter heroes, including Jane Fonda giving the finger and two large-scale odalisques: Padma Lakshmi, in a bra and a boa, eating oranges, and Lizzo, in a corset, holding an iPhone. Historically, Minter said, such paintings were a sanctioned form of titillation. "They were tits and ass for the public," she said. "I decided I would make my odalisques women who are really proud of their bodies. They have agency. Lizzo's talking on the phone to her boyfriend, Myke. She's actually talking to him while I'm shooting her, and she's shooting me, too, sometimes."

Minter, who wore braces until high school, grew up in Florida, with a drug-addled single mother. Once a glamorous Southern belle, her mother routinely called her a whore, despairing that she wasn't invited to be a *débutante*. (There was no way: Minter had been jailed at sixteen for using her drawing skills to make fake I.D.s.) Minter, who herself struggled with drugs—she started freebasing as a kid—has been clean for forty years. She and her husband, a former portfolio manager at Morgan Stanley, have matching twenty- and thirty-five-year anniversary tattoos. If you're fit and healthy, she says, you can "have sex until you die." She's made art about that—a series, using models and about forty dildos, collected in a book called "Elder Sex."

"All my work has been about getting rid of shame," Minter said, specifically the shame that accrues to women in the public eye: Pamela Anderson, Miley Cyrus. She regrets not being able to schedule Virginia Giuffre, a survivor of Jeffrey Epstein and an advocate for sex-trafficking victims, whom she had planned to photograph. Giuffre died by suicide in April.

Also in the column of righting historical wrongs? Pubic hair. Why has art history pretended that it doesn't exist? "I could find maybe ten paintings where the artist paints it. Pubic hair was vulgar," Minter said. "So I decided to make pubic-hair paintings that are gorgeous. They're so beautiful you can put them over your living-room couch."

The following night, Minter attended the West Coast première of "Pretty Dirty," a documentary about her work, directed by Jennifer Ash Rudick and Amanda Benchley. Jane Fonda, whose photo shoot with Minter is featured in the film, arrived wearing a periwinkle pants suit. Minter told her that she'd made a rapturous portrait of her but that, judging it too proper, she'd had to start over. "You looked gorgeous, but I couldn't make you a stately elder," Minter said, apologetically.

REGEN PROJECTS

“Instead, you got this,” Fonda said, extending a middle finger banded in a thick gold ring.

“You’re a troublemaker,” Minter said. “I had no choice. I got so mad at Trump.”

Talk turned to politics. Members of Minter’s studio had spent months knocking on doors for Zohran Mamdani, the thirty-four-year-old democratic socialist who was just elected mayor. Minter said that she got so caught up in scrolling election news—from Mamdani to California’s passage of a redistricting measure—that she lost her winning streak on Connections. “I want to paint Gavin Newsom,” she said. “He was one of the first to stand up to Trump.”

“What else do you want to do to him?” Kenny Scharf, an artist she has known for decades, asked.

It was almost time for the movie to begin. Minter settled into a big red theatre seat next to Fonda. “Would you like some popcorn?” Fonda asked her.

“I don’t think so,” Minter replied. “Because then it will be stuck in my teeth.”

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