

ARTINFO

Marilyn Minter

By Robert Ayers

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NEW YORK—Marilyn Minter has been a part of the New York art scene since the 1970s, though her career has been anything but a smooth ride. She made a series of now-celebrated photographic studies of her drug-addicted mother while still a student in Florida, and in the early '80s she explored Pop-derived images that often had a sexual undercurrent. Then, at the end of that decade she painted herself straight into fevered and often bitter controversy when she began using imagery taken from porn magazines. Her infamy was exacerbated in 1990 when she produced her own TV ad, *100 Food Porn*, which ran during late-night mainstream television shows. The 1990s and the early years of this decade saw her gradually refining her style and imagery so that, while still suggesting pornography, her photographs and paintings seem equally to breathe the atmosphere of high fashion (a world that she claims to know nothing about) and glamour. Her painting technique is equally startling, employing many layers of translucent enamel paint on metal to produce an incandescent, almost hallucinatory finish. Her work came to the attention of entirely new audiences last



year, when [Creative Time](#) commissioned a series of giant billboards from her that were hung in Chelsea and, a few months later, she was included in the Whitney Biennial. Now, in the summer of 2007, she's suddenly everywhere. She is guest designer for the current issue of Francis Ford Coppola's magazine [Zoetrope All-Story](#), and her work is featured on the cover and in the centerfold of the current issue of the art publication [Parkett](#), for whom she produced an editioned photograph of Pamela Anderson that immediately sold out. She shot the campaign images for Tom Ford's new fragrance, Tom Ford for Men, which will be launched in September, and [Gregory R. Miller & Co.](#) has just published a lavish \$60 monograph of her work.

Last week, on her birthday, she shared coffee and cake with ARTINFO in her SoHo loft, where three assistants were hard at work on a group of new paintings. We began by talking about the new book.

Marilyn, congratulations on this new book. It really manages to convey the physical character of your work. I don't think I've ever seen a book that used such heavy, glossy paper before.



Thank you. Isn't it great? The designers are pretty brilliant. From day one they said, "We'll use different papers. We'll use pink, we'll use silver. We've got this shiny paper, we've got paper that feels like it's wet." I can't take any credit for anything of it. It was their idea.

But you must have given them some direction?

I'm a catalog collector. I showed them all the catalogs that I love, and I said to them, "Do what you always wanted to do and no one would let you," and this is what they came up with.

I can't imagine that's how you work with your painting assistants here.

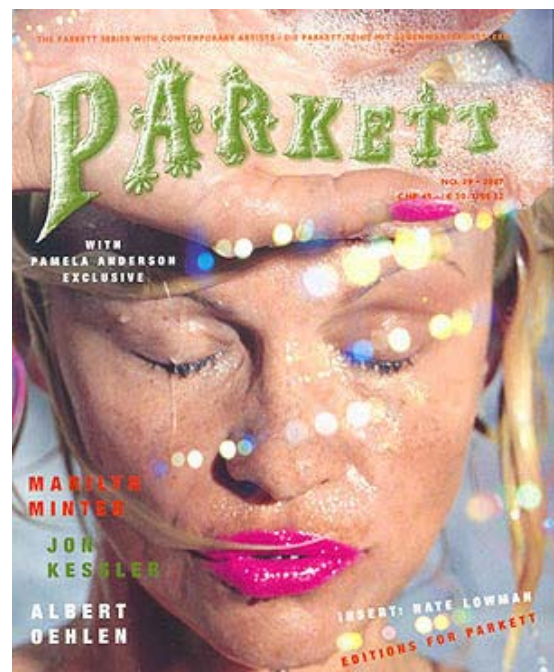
I'm so overwhelmed with everything that's going on right now. In the last year I've been constantly pulled away from painting. I'm at the computer, figuring out what we're going to do, figuring out images, and ordering prints. If it was just me in the studio I'd be making one painting a year!

I invented the technique, but at this point, I'm their [the assistants'] underpainter. But I am also the director. An assistant might do the painting, but I'm constantly changing what she does. Whether I'm painting on the painting or not, I have the vision of what it's supposed to look like. I'm still the painter. I know that things are going to slow down, and I'll be back to painting again.

Can you explain the difference between the photographs that you make and your paintings?

Every photo I take is to make a painting, but sometimes a photo is so good that I don't need to make a painting out of it. It's like when a conventional artist makes a drawing and then makes a painting from the drawing. Sometimes the drawing's just a perfect moment, a finished artistic project, so the painter doesn't touch the drawing. That's how I sometimes feel about a photograph: It's a perfect sketch.

Plus I'm a conventional photographer. I don't Photoshop any of my photos. They're not cropped or anything, whereas in the paintings I use different photos for different parts of the image. I'm using five photos to make this painting of



Stephanie Seymour: one photo to make that jewelry at the bottom, a different photo to make the baby's hair, a different photo to make the pearls inside the mouth.... I combine these different photos. In photography you can't do that. In painting you can.

Also, I think that something really happens with this painting technique that I've invented, with layers and layers and layers of enamel paint. You can't get that translucency with a photo. The painting's so rich. So it might look like the same series, but the paintings are way different from the photos. People that don't see the difference, I think their eyes have died or something. It shocks me that some critic would go to a gallery—as someone did—and say, "Well, you can tell the paintings from the photos, because the photos have glass in front of them!" No, there's a little more difference than that.

I've never quite understood your attitude toward the glamorous images that you present in your work. Are you celebrating glamour, or criticizing it?

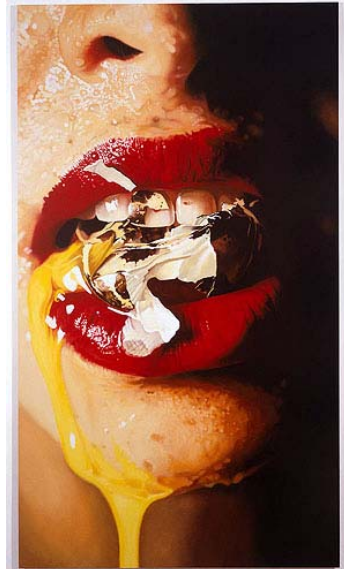
Both. Because I think it's a complex emotion when you look at glamorous pictures. I can't say that everybody gets pleasure out of it, but I do, and a lot of people I know get a lot of pleasure out of looking at the most glamorous pictures. But you're constantly aware that you're never going to look that good. So there are two feelings there, not just one, and I'm just trying to mirror that, to make a picture of what that feels like.

Does that mean you're not taking a position at all?

As soon as you tell people what to think, it's not interesting. It becomes an illustration. I constantly have to walk the tightrope of metaphor. The more layers of understanding I can add, the stronger my images will be. And it's so easy to fall off that tightrope, so I have to be careful, because for me it's the difference between something interesting and bullshit. If it looks to me like I've made any moral judgment at all, or I'm trying to tell you what to think, then I'm not interested. It's like when you see a movie—if you don't come out thinking, "What did the director mean? What did that mean?" then there's something wrong. I want to do the same thing with my paintings. All you can do is ask the questions. There are no answers. People are constantly trying to give you answers, but there are exceptions to every rule.

Let me pursue this a little further. You've just done the promotional shots for Tom Ford's new perfume. Ford has used a particular sort of glamorous soft porn in promoting his designs. What do you think of him?

Well, you know, I don't really know what Tom Ford stands for. I don't have that experience. I don't know anything about fashion. I had to be told who Tom Ford was. I had to go and buy his book.



All right, then. What about Pamela Anderson? Do you admire her?

Of course I admire her. I like Pam because she's not a victim. She doesn't have some Svengali taking care of things. She owns the production of her own imagery. She's not an actress or a comedian, she's a personality who makes a fortune from the way she looks. She's real savvy. She works with Richard Prince, and she works with Jeff Koons, and now she works with me.

She doesn't have education. She comes from some little town in Canada, and now she's a multimillionaire and successful and a happy person. She's very self-deprecating, extremely funny, very sharp. If you make money because of the way you look, the world's gonna help you do it. They're gonna give you money to put those shoes on. Those guys are gonna put silicone in your boobs. It's so easy not to admire her. It's so easy to make fun of Pamela Anderson. Actors snub her and they're mean to her, but anyone who writes her off is stupid. She's not Anna Nicole Smith or Marilyn Monroe.

And is that why you wanted to photograph her?

The only reason I did Pam Anderson was because I wanted to put her in *Parkett*. I wanted to take all her makeup off and get to the animal activist. I wanted to photograph the person who's so empathetic toward animals that she's a PETA person. I'm not. I might admire what they do, but I don't do anything. I still wear leather. Pam's a longtime

vegetarian. I don't think she's ever had a piece of meat. Isn't that amazing? And she's made all these millions of dollars being a pinup, but I see her as an animal activist, basically.

How did the whole project come together? Did you just phone her?

How it started was David LaChapelle wanted to commission me. Tony Shafrazi's his dealer, and they knew about the Stephanie Seymour painting. Pam was marrying Kid Rock, and so David LaChapelle wanted to commission me to make a painting as a wedding present. And then the wedding fell apart, but in the meantime, I got asked by *Parkett* to be one of their artists, and I said, "Yes, but I want to make Pamela Anderson your centerfold." Of course, she's very savvy. She doesn't do anything for nothing. It takes a million dollars to get her to take her clothes off. So I had to have somebody produce the whole thing, and I have to make three paintings. I'm going to make three really good ones though. And she gets a free painting!



You know, I think a lot of people just imagine that they're a few more pictures of Pamela Anderson. Do you think that most people underestimate your work?

I think that whenever you make something that looks good, people want to underestimate it. They immediately want to dismiss it. If it looks really good, there's an automatic rejection. But it doesn't really matter, because I know that these paintings are going to look good in 20 or 30 or 50 years. So if people don't get it now, they're going to get it sooner or later.

I'm surprised you're so relaxed about people's responses. You're an artist who's been utterly demonized because of your work.

Good point. I was. Nobody ever asks me about that, so I'm glad you did. I was demonized. People hated me. I fell from grace. I was cast out of the art world. The generation of the late '80s clung to politically correct '70s feminism, and I was seen as a traitor. But it's been a really healthy thing for my work. It was a lousy thing in terms of how it made me feel, but I think that you're a better artist if terrible things happen to you. I hate to say that because it's such a cliché, but it's true. I'm a better artist because I went through that stuff in the '80s and '90s. I almost had to step outside of my body, that's how painful it was. Especially when you're getting called names over sexual imagery. What could be worse? Sex! Oh, you sick pervert! Waves of shame! So I went to therapy, and hung out with this group of people who helped me a lot.

It must have made you really question what you were doing.

I've never doubted myself, but I did have a few questions like "Maybe I'm just not supposed to be a painter." But I swear that the reason I continued on, why I thought, "I'm just going to keep doing it anyway," was because I'd had this loft since 1976 for \$400. I had this really cheap loft and I didn't have to kill myself to make rent payments, so I was obviously doing what I was supposed to be doing. I thought, "You're so lucky with the space. You're supposed to be a painter making work." It was that clear-cut. I really believe in that serendipitous thing.

You seem very philosophical about it now.

I'm old enough to know that it doesn't mean anything. It all comes down to making the work. Back then the times weren't open to what I was trying to say, and I had a really hard time communicating. Whose fault is that? It's nobody's fault. But now I am communicating, and people are hearing me. I'm in a really unique position. I'm getting all this success, but I'm not going to go crazy, because I don't really care. What does it really change? I feel really lucky. I lived through it. But I know the way the world works—I've got a couple of years and then I'll get criticized again.