

On listening to your inner voice



Visual artist Marilyn Minter discusses the evolution of her creative practice, surviving in the art world, and how sobriety allowed her to finally trust her own instincts.

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As told to Thora Siemsen, 1773 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Education](#).

You waited almost 30 years to show the photographs of your mother that you took as a student. Why did you not show them in the beginning?

I had so much shame. I came from the wild west part of Florida, Fort Lauderdale and Miami—which is the land of no parents—to the very conservative town of Gainesville, Florida. If you saw pictures of drug addicts, with needles hanging out of the arm on the street, [my mother's] was a picture of high-end addiction. My friends would comment about never seeing my mother in anything but a nightgown. I never thought about it. We were the wild group in a wild area. Back then, people went to Miami and Fort Lauderdale like they go to Vegas now. Anyway, I got a taste of how my childhood was so different from everybody else's. I was a real oddity in the South.



Coral Ridge Towers (Mom In Negligee) 1969, black and white photograph

Why did you decide to show these photos when you did?

It was just an accident, really. Linda Yablonsky was curating a reading at the Drawing Center, and she asked artists to do installations. I thought, "Well, I can't take the drawings down." So, I decided to make these giant photos and just push-pin them into the wall. The only negatives I had that I thought were interesting were the ones I took in '69. I showed them. I got such a positive reaction. I got offered a show, right on the spot practically. It was after Oprah and people were starting to talk about telling on themselves, which had been verboten.



Coral Ridge Towers (Mom Smoking) 1969, black and white photograph

Do you often keep work secret?

I don't have any secrets anymore.

How much of your career's focus do you consider to be by dint of sobriety?

All of it. I just had a retrospective and there's like a 10-year period where there's nothing. What was I doing in that 10 years? I was in a coma.

When you destroyed earlier work of yours, how and why did you it?

I just tore it up and threw it out. I'm a labor-intensive kind of artist. I build up these surfaces, and I was trying to get rid of that. I thought there was this movement where you had to be an expressionist. Everyone always came to my studios and said, "Can you loosen up?" I could, because I could copy anything, but it looked so phony. I did a massive amount of drugs to be able to loosen up. That's not really what my gift is. I kept the collaborative work, which was pretty good. It's only since I cleaned up my act that I could start to focus on what I was good at, and then I started believing in my inner voice. Now I listen to that.

You recall that some of your work in the 1980s, particularly "Porn Grid," 1989, came about by asking yourself the question, "What is the subject matter that women never do?" Do you still ask yourself this question?

Oh, that was good. That was sober. That was one of my highlights. That's one of the brave things I did when I got sober. I wouldn't have done that if I was high.

I think at this point, anything you can think to do in art, a woman has tried it. Female artists were doing it-making work about sexual agency-before I was, I just didn't know who they were. They were just so underground. I met a bunch of them later. Valie Export. Penny Slinger. Judith Bernstein. I had no idea how powerful she was. I never knew what Betty Tompkins was doing. The only ones I knew about were Carolee Schneemann and Joan Semmel. That's it. I thought if women worked with porn, they were soft-core. I just thought, "I'll see what happens if I do hard-core."



Big Mouth, Enamel on Metal 2017

What advice do you have for artists during times when they feel marooned from the art world?

You have to listen to your inner voice no matter what. People love my early work now. At the time, nobody could see it. I'm glad I didn't destroy that. And it gave me street cred. I lived through being eviscerated by the art world. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? You have a point of view that makes you unique. You'll be able to see and say things that no one else will be able to see and say.

When did you start to go bigger in your work, in terms of scale and also maybe in terms of popular appeal?

When I was in grad school, I worked big. Then I had no money. And then I went small when I started working with enamel, because that was me all alone. I started making these layered pieces with depth of field. When I had to do all the early layers, if I would've done a big painting, it would have taken me one year alone to do half of it. Maybe two years to finish.

I hired an under-painter and then he ended up getting better than me. Then I had to get as good as him. Then we were going back and forth for a while. Somebody else came in who was better than both of us. She changed our palette. We learn every time. Hiring better people ups my game. It's like playing with better tennis players. We've been together, this one person and I, since 1997. He's like my studio manager.

We couldn't make enough paintings. I could do one show a year and I still didn't have enough paintings, so I'd have to put the photos in to fill up the space. The photos for me are like drawings for a traditional artist. Now, the paintings are totally done in Photoshop, take about a week to do, to put together each one. There are 20, 30 digital negatives in each "reference," we call them.

Now, I don't start paintings at all. I just work as a finisher. Surfaces are really precious to me.



Wangechi Gold 3, 2009, C Print

Do you often mentor your studio assistants on their own work?

All the time. I'm a teacher. It's one of my gifts. I don't try to make them little Minters, you know? I hire sculptors, mostly. Realist painters can't do this. I only have one person I would call a realist painter. I hire people who are into finishes.

You've described yourself as a sculptor before. What do you mean by that?

I've always thought of it that way. I'm building this surface and it's just really thin, but it's sculpture.

What have you observed from your time as a graduate student to then teaching graduate students, in terms of the curriculum expanding to include more women artists?

It's like night and day. It is so much better and right now is the best time ever. I'm really glad to see mediocre women artists getting lot of attention, because the boys have been doing it for years. It's about time we're allowed mediocre women, too.

You've done campaigns for Tom Ford, M.A.C. Cosmetics and Jimmy Choo, as well as collaborations with pop stars. While on assignment for these behemoths, have you had opportunities to put their resources towards making new work?

Whenever I take on a commercial job, I'm always piggybacking. I don't take on a job unless they give me a lot of freedom. And they'll even say to me, "Do whatever you want" now, with the studio space and all the professionals—makeup artists, manicurists—they've hired. So I give them what they want, and then I have the rest of the day to make my own images on their dime. I love learning from the professionals, whether it's about lighting or doing hair. I never knew anything about fashion or beauty before.

Madonna used your video "Green Pink Caviar" in her tour, and you recently worked with Lady Gaga for the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*. This is very bipartisan for you!

Are they enemies? They're both really political creatures. I love them. They'll speak their mind and they're the opposite of, "Oh, I'm only a singer or dancer" or whatever. I don't really work with anybody who isn't a progressive political person. They're both real icons as far as I'm concerned.

When you talk about taking out the narrative of a work, is there a story in mind that you're keeping secret? Is it also taking out certain narratives oft-imposed on women?

The story is always multi-layered. It isn't just one thing. I don't ever want to tell anyone what to think. Come to your own conclusions. You're going to do it anyway.



Heavy Metal, 2011, enamel on metal, 108 x 180 inches

Marilyn Minter recommends:

[Swing Left](#)

[Downtown for Democracy](#)

Movies:

[Mad Max: Fury Road](#)

[Revenge by Coralie Fargeat](#)

[Blade Runner & Blade Runner 2049](#)

Books:

[Elena Ferrante series](#)

[Lincoln and the Bardo](#) by George Saunders

Any Biographies of Drug Addicts and Sybarites:

Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay by Nancy Milford
Nico: The End by James Young
Lee Miller: A Life by Carolyn Burke
de Kooning by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan
The Long Hard Road Out of Hell by Marilyn Manson and Neil Strauss
Edie: American Girl by Jean Stein and George Plimpton
Been There, Done That: An Autobiography by Eddie Fisher and David Fisher
A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles by Millicent Dillon
No One Here Gets Out Alive by Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman

Music:

Aretha Franklin, "Don't Play That Song-You Lied"
Kanye West, "Ultralight Beam"
Nico, "These Days"
Eminem ft. Rihanna, "Love The Way You Lie"
K.d. lang, "Hallelujah"
The Smiths, "How Soon is Now?"

Name

Marilyn Minter

Vocation

Visual artist



Photo credit: Ryan McGinley