

# MOTHER'S DAY

## EILEEN MYLES

How is it that one of my absolute favorite artists makes her work out of an assortment of my least favorite things. Marilyn Minter's paintings and photographs play into my own worst phobias. Researching my response to, for instance, a mouth full of pearls (*Vomit*, 2003), I discover on the Internet (of course) that I've got something called kosmemophobia—which means fear of jewelry and fear of gold.

Yes! That's it. I hate jewelry and I hate gold and I also hate makeup, so I'm absolutely the last person who should be writing about Marilyn Minter's work. Originally, thinking about this piece, I thought I had a way to skillfully sidestep this problem. I had a perfectly good idea about how to write about Marilyn Minter's work. A mother and daughter are standing in the gallery together:

No, the lady means that pretty and dirty are not always the same but sometimes they are. That's the lady's mother. Well, look at the color. Do you think that's pretty do you think that's dirty. Would you like a dress that color. You might like a popsicle that color. You might like a dog that color. Me, too. Yeah, I think that's funny.

I could certainly run with this and discuss the work indirectly and bury my own discomfort in the wide-eyed and innocent discomfort of a child . . . but then I thought, hmmm, maybe I should talk to Marilyn first. We know each other and I've followed her work for years, but we've never actually hung out. And as soon as I sat down in her studio, I knew I had to tell her this other story, which felt a little bit like sitting shiva.

I had a traumatic experience on September 10, 1995, the morning after I saw Marilyn Minter's famous mom photos for the first time. So the show was a turning point, a moment of reckoning for both of us. I went to the show with my girlfriend, and then we proceeded to the Angelika to see Larry Clark's *Kids*, and then I was pissed off. I mean, why couldn't he save the girl. Why do we always have to watch *her* get the virus or whatever. And then I bought the *Sunday Times* and we trundled off to Williamsburg, where my girlfriend lived, and went to bed and had some half-assed sex, I think, and in the morning I woke

early, made coffee, and started crying because I knew I shouldn't be there. We were "over." I'll cut to the chase: My girlfriend broke my nose. That morning I broke up with her (again), and in response, she slammed a coffee grinder into my face and blood spurted from the bridge of my nose. So I never look at these photos of Marilyn's without thinking of that jet of blood. And I liked the photos so much.

This is such a portrait of the subject's daughter, I thought. Her sweet calm distended pain at her own mother's interiorized self-destruction. Same daughter, Marilyn tells me, who got arrested in Florida as a teen for manufacturing fake IDs. I can copy anything, Marilyn said. *Because she holds the power of fact!* Having divulged her mother to the art world, Marilyn gained authority. She slid right onto the throne.

As I write this, my computer keeps shaking, and I thought how can a computer be uneven, or is it my desk. Is it the floor. But I turned my Mac over and a piece of schmutz was stuck underneath. I figured out later that it was fig. Like a fig's twig. How the fruit once connected to something else, but now it's gone.

So, last Monday I spent time in Marilyn's studio, where young women with tall platform sandals are walking around being efficient. Giving us a handsome cup of coffee while Marilyn and I talk. They're helping. And she helps them. She is not the interiorized mother. She is not the grave monstrosity preparing for the party that never comes. Not the embalmed mother. No, Marilyn is more like the Medusa's valet—a liaison to female power. She told me that when she decided to do that "pornographic" work in the '80s, the only people she definitely made common cause with were the sex workers and Susie Bright, that whole sex-positive dyke crowd. So we're still here. You know, and so is the rest of the world.

I left her studio warmly confused and rode my bike home to the East Village thinking I would dedicate the following weekend to Marilyn's concerns. It's now Mother's Day and I'm still here. I had decided I would watch porn. Well, I would go see *Nymphomaniac Vols. I and II* (by the lavishly uneven—dare I say, feminine—Lars von Trier) at the Sunshine. And in the movie theater, I mostly thought about picking people up. It was very '80s of me. There was a beautiful young woman who fell in love with her boss and she began to love his desk and the mess of it, how he arranged his paper clips and pens all in disarray, the sprawl of him, it was sexy, it was obscene, and then she would go into the bathroom and jerk off. It was the pornography of him. Marilyn says, "I like the idea of having freckled breasts, kittens, jewelry, and lacquered nails."<sup>1</sup> There's true salvation right there. There's sort of a shrine worship of stuff, the wrong kind of femininity—soil and the spot. And as they used to say about

trans people: Look at the feet. Dirt accrues. It's rising currency. Marilyn suggests that she's not making work to turn anyone on. She's just investigating here. Might I say she's also claiming the right to assemble femaleness from the same ragtag of preferred items an adored man might feel comfortable allowing to sprawl. That's an abomination, a heresy of sorts, and also, I must add, she's powerless over what we find hot. I'm not talking about the dark inside of a woman's bag, that symbolic puss. She's turning the dirty side of femininity inside out. I'm sure this has been said before, but allow me to speak it as manifesto here. Because people are saying that feminism has failed. For instance, it couldn't really find a place for porn. *Did it*. It was undecided. And it didn't know what to do with lesbians, either. And gender. Trans stuff. And excess. "So I am going to do something with that." That's what Marilyn always says (not the more vapid "What I'm interested in . . ."), and this is her shame.

So she was regaling us with her favorite stuff and she was punished and tortured for it. Three chicks and a dick (*Porn Grid*, 1989; cat. 27). Bad Marilyn. The witch. So what did they do to her next? Try and dunk her in water. See if she would recant. This is one of the many places where it gets interesting. Cause she would do it to herself. But I'm getting ahead here. In *Nymphomaniac Vol. II* (cause I spent hours at the movies yesterday), "Joe" the grown-up nymph is told by Willem Dafoe's quasi-pimp that, though she's a very talented dominatrix and extortionist, she's a gettin' old and needs to find some fresh blood to replace herself. She needs to find a young girl. He directs her to a local school for waifs and to the one girl who comes from a criminal background and has been abandoned by both of her parents (one in jail and the other dead of drugs), who would be just right for their needs. Joe cringes but she does it. Or, "she can do something with that." The targeted girl is easily charmed by Joe and virtually volunteers for whatever her new symbolic guardian's got, which is a lot. I mention this simply because Joe is a new kind of bad mother. And she had a bad mother. Her mother was a cruel bitch who refused to watch Joe's beloved father die. So Joe is a *different* kind of bad mom. Unlike her own, she is farming her girl out to the world. She is actively corrupting her—selling her, in effect. And including her, too, in her own dark industry. It's a match.

And it strikes me that this is exactly the glory and the obscenity of Marilyn Minter's work. Her entire oeuvre is a flash inventory of what's at stake: in the world of sex, in the world of gender, in your home, in the world of fashion and power. I love reading the old clips of Hilton Kramer squawking that *this* is not art. Cause look. It's pretty alarming and not just dirty. Isn't every woman who gives her daughter a fashion mag, who pimps her

out in clothes, who teaches her to obey the cock *über alles* and not her own dirty cunt, who doesn't teach her how to come and be a messy dangerous slut, who probably envies her daughter's beauty and how her husband looks at her and hates her daughter even more when her husband abandons her for a younger woman (the daughter being the first!), somewhat entitled by her own castration so the least she can do is fuck her daughter up and teach her to go out into the world like a broken toy full of the destructive messages of the culture. And I'm thinking that a *bad mother* like Marilyn reproduces, instead, a fun-house version of the beauty myth. It's a big fake ID. It's a form of advice. It's a Black Mass brand of femininity she's reproducing here. The world of fashion and mascara, the obscene need for women to be wet, has been dilated to splashing and drooling. It's macabre. O they're coming right at you. As Mary Heilmann says, the mascara's so clotted it's "abstract."<sup>2</sup> It's kind of male. When you go this far, that's what happens. It's battered and flipped. It's so flattened. It's bent. Now it's covered in glass. Bombarded by globby drops. It's time and it's monumental. Like a monumental crime. Again and again. Think how dangerous water is to technology. It threatens to destroy. Right here in front of everyone. It's like a natural curse. And that is her shame.

#### Notes

1. Marilyn Minter, in "Twenty Questions: A Project by Matthew Higgs," in *Marilyn Minter* (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2010), p. 43.

2. Mary Heilmann, in "Marilyn Minter in Conversation with Mary Heilmann," in *ibid.*, p. 27.