THE BALTIMORE SUN

Baltimore Museum of Art opens its John Waters exhibit Sunday — and it's as weird as you'd expect

By: Mary Carole McCauley
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Only Baltimore bad boy John Waters would create a sculpture that envisions a babyhood encounter between the pop star Michael Jackson and the serial killer Charles Manson. In “Playdate,” the late singer, attired in a powder-puff pink romper beneath his surgically altered adult face, crawls on his hands and knees toward the bearded cult leader.

Only Waters would cunningly engineer a seemingly innocuous photograph of a flower to squirt viewers who venture too close with a spray of water.

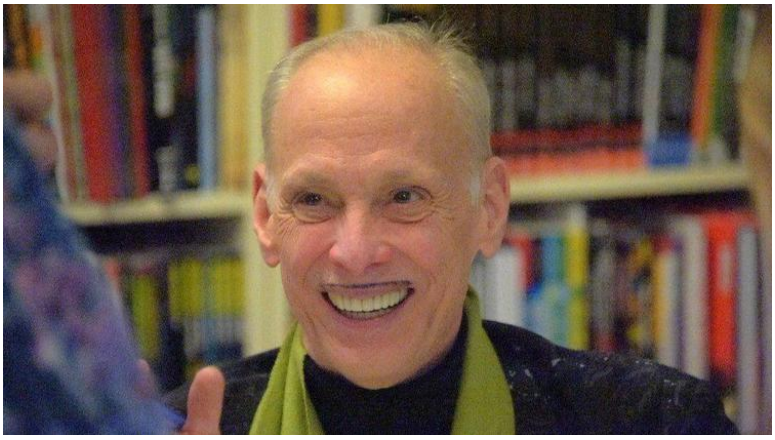
And only Waters would manipulate publicity photos of former child movie stars by placing lit cigarettes between the tots’ cherubically bowed lips.

But the strangest, most confounding — and arguably the most deeply weird — of the 160 artworks on display in “John Waters: Indecent Exposure,” the ticketed exhibit opening Sunday at the Baltimore Museum of Art, just might be the imposing black-and-white print titled “308 Days.”

Roughly 10 months’ worth of 3-inch by 5-inch index cards contain Waters’ hand-written daily “to do” lists in his tiny, cramped script; the exhausting result is 3½ feet tall and more than 9 feet long. I challenge you to decipher more than one or two of these self-imposed tasks, and not merely because the filmmaker scribbles out each chore in a cloud of black ink once he completes it.

Some notes consist merely of an area code and phone number, including one supposedly belonging to adult film star Traci Lords. A circled scrawl in one corner of the card is linked by a thin and meandering line to another circled inscription several rows down and two-thirds of the way across. Waters’ handwriting is minuscule, his margins non-existent.

The cards convey a sense that their creator had little tolerance for boundaries — physical or otherwise. They indicate a mind that finds links between ideas that appear unrelated. And they point to a person with formidable discipline who crams his days and nights full to bursting. John Waters, it would seem, doesn't do space.

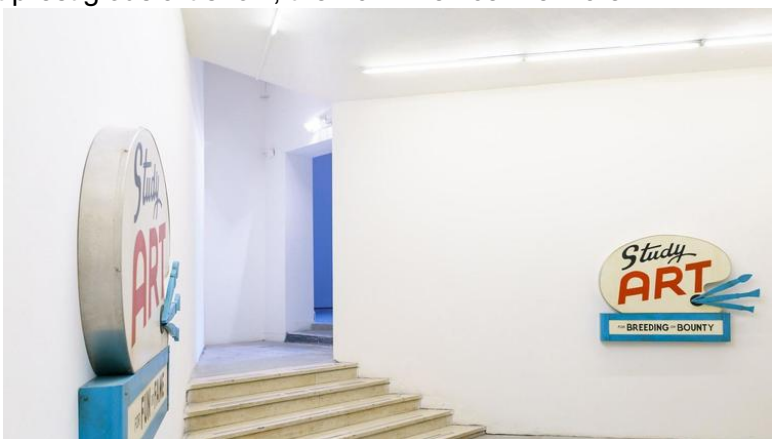


The prints, sculptures, film clips and sound installations on view are funny and revealing. Who could resist "Doubles," which cheekily points out the physical similarities between the legendary beauty Elizabeth Taylor and the drag queen Divine? Who won't smile at the three peephole-style viewing booths showing footage from Waters' 1960s-era underground films — booths complete with boxes of tissue.

Curator Kristen Hileman said Waters has used his potent combination of impatience, razor-sharp insights and charm to help American culture become more accepting of people who deviate from the mainstream, particularly drag queens and gay people.

"John used popular culture to bring about social change," said Hileman, the museum's curator of contemporary art. "That takes talent, it takes vision and it takes daring. You have to be good to entertain people so much it shakes up their value system."

Waters' name is familiar to many Americans as the creator of such cult classic films as "Pink Flamingos", "Polyester" and "Hairspray," which went on to become a Tony Award-winning musical. But as Hileman noted, he's also a visual artist of some note. His prints and sculptures are owned by such mainstream institutions as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He was invited to exhibit in the world's most prestigious art show, the 2017 Venice Biennale.



The curator began working on the exhibit show four years ago after realizing that inexplicably, no retrospective of Waters' visual art had been held in his hometown. (The BMA held a comprehensive — and controversial — three-day festival of Waters' films in 1985.) After leaving Baltimore in January, "Indecent Exposure" will travel to Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts.

For his part, Waters seemed moved to see artworks that he's been creating since the early 1990s in the museum's galleries.

"Seeing all these different pieces together for the first time is like walking into a meeting of old friends," Waters said. "I like to imagine that they start talking when no one is in the room. I'm a great believer in the life of inanimate objects."

The exhibit includes a section called "Tragicomedy" in which the artist puts his own spin on galvanizing world events. For example, "9/11" consists of juxtaposed images of the title sequences for "Dr. Doolittle 2" and "A Knight's Tale" — the movies shown aboard the fatal American and United Airlines flights during the terrorist attacks. There's a section of artworks featuring the charismatic cast and crew who worked on Waters' Dreamland Productions, from the casting director Pat Moran to such cult actors such as Mink Stole. There's a section on Waters' childhood in Baltimore and a section skewing art world pretensions ("Contemporary Art Hates You.")

The Baltimore museum has scheduled a slate of celebratory activities around the exhibit, including a daylong opening festival Sunday that will feature cocktail tasting, a photo booth and discounted admission; a conversation between Waters and Hileman on Nov. 1; and an 18-hour film marathon Nov. 9-10.

Fans can also purchase an original, limited-edition print created by Waters for $500 from the museum shop.

A warning for the easily offended: Waters is famous for his shock tactics and bad taste, and both here are on ample display. For instance, viewers who learn that "Slimy the Snake" is a six-foot long rendition of the filmmaker's favorite childhood toy may find themselves envisioning a sensitive, impish lad, all snips and snails.

Squelch that impulse.

The first clue is the "JW" engraved on Slimy's forehead. The second occurs as your eyes settle on the tip of Slimy's ridged tail — and you find yourself fending off an unsettling but unavoidable mental association.

Though the work on view in "Indecent Exposure" undeniably is naughty, what's striking is that it's no longer widely perceived as threatening the moral fiber.

That has not always been the case. A 1973 review of "Pink Flamingos" in Variety referred to the film, in which Divine appears to eat a dog turd as "one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made." It was an editorial writer for The Baltimore Sun who famously nicknamed the director "The Prince of Puke" — a nickname he promptly embraced.

Though Waters says, "I haven't changed one bit," he doesn't seem to regret that his art and films no longer draw the virulent response they once elicited.

Perhaps, he says, the world has finally realized that there's no meanness in him. He's not out to destroy anything. Waters celebrates and demands that mainstream society make room for the outcasts and failures, the misfits and miscreants, the people who exist at the margins.

"When I was a kid," Waters recalled, "I'd come home from school and tell my mother about this weird kid in my class who always drew with black crayons. I talked about him so much that one day my mother mentioned it to my kindergarten teacher.

"The teacher told my mother: 'The kid who draws with black crayons is your son.'"

Of course he was. And for the past 67 years, John Waters hasn't stopped.