

The Guardian



John Waters: 'I never wanted to be a cult film-maker'

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October 8, 2018

The Hairspray and Serial Mom director talks about exhibiting his provocative artwork and why he enjoys ridiculing the art world

In 1992, the Baltimore film director [John Waters](#) started making his own artwork. Not art films, but “small pictures” that sat quietly in his studio, just waiting to be discovered.

“I just did all this artwork and I didn’t tell anyone, I just did it for myself,” recalls Waters over the phone from his home in Baltimore.

It wasn’t until his friend, New York gallerist Colin de Land, asked to see his never-seen-before artwork that he landed his first solo exhibition. “Would I have had the nerve to ask him?” asks Waters. “I don’t know.”

Now, the “Pope of Trash” is looking back on 25 years of making visual art for a retrospective at the Baltimore Museum of Art called Indecent Exposure. The exhibition features 160 artworks, where the director of Hairspray and Serial Mom shows everything but his films – there are sculptures of Michael Jackson as a baby, Tina Turner as a puppet and Justin Bieber with way too much Botox.

“I am always saying, ‘Someone has to like it other than your mother,’ and in my case, someone has to like my art outside of Baltimore,” says Waters. “I am thrilled to come back here now since I’ve been doing it since 1992.”

Waters as a canvas-and-paint artist rather than a film director might strangely seem like a more natural fit for the 72-year-old provocateur, at least in his mind. “I never wanted to be a ‘cult filmmaker’ because in Hollywood, that means three smart people liked it and it lost all the money it cost to make it,” says Waters. “Making art is just a new way for me to tell stories; it’s all about writing, editing and noticing minute little details that I don’t think other people look at.”

There is a healthy dose of art world satire which makes this exhibit as entertaining as one of his standup comedy shows. “We all know contemporary art can be witty, but can it be funny?” he asks. “I actually think it can.”



John Waters – Beverly Hills John. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

There’s one piece in the show emblazoned with the phrase Contemporary Art Hates You which, Waters says, “it kind of does if you have contempt before investigation”. In another, a spoof of the National Enquirer called the National Brainiac features paparazzi images of art critic Hilton Kramer and author Joan Didion. “I try to have fun with it as much as I can,” he said. “I do really wish there was a National Enquirer for intellectuals, but the readership base would be really small.”

The self-portraits in the exhibit feature Waters with a Photoshopped facelift in Beverly Hills John, while another piece shows stills from his appearances on late-night talkshows. Waters also collects magazine images of himself and cuts out his face for strange Dada-like collages, not to mention another strange portrait called the Town Crier, where he is gussied up in old fashioned garb.

But Waters shudders at the thought of being a “celebrity artist”. “I usually never talk about my art in film-making magazines because I know how much celebrity art is hated. I hate it too,” he says. “I mock that as much as I certainly can.”

The real celebrity compass is pointed elsewhere, like when Waters recorded the sounds of a box office the day a Harry Potter film was released, which is shown here as a work of sound art. “It’s the sound of money,” he says. “To me, that’s what showbiz is about.”

He also sheds light on his film-making process, keeping all the cardboard backs of his writing pads for a series called Shooting Script, while in another piece he shows a collection of 300 index cards of daily to-do lists. “I think I’m giving encouragement,” says Waters. “They’re all up here so it’s a message of ‘Get busy! Make a list! Check it twice!’”

Also on view is his In My House photo series, where Waters photographs all the nooks and crannies of his home, from inside his fridge to his VHS closet and the lint lurking under his bed. “I think I am showing my life, in a way,” he said. “What I find funny, the obscure.”



John Waters – Control. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

But for Waters, who is influenced by 1990s conceptualists Mike Kelley and Fischli & Weiss, there is often a dark undertone. The sculpture Control shows Ike Turner as a puppeteer pulling the strings on Tina Turner. “I was a puppeteer as a child, I loved Ike and Tina Turner very much,” he said. “I get why she hated him, but I still think she was the best when she was with him, singing-wise. It was a look at the melodrama of that.”

There is also a work called Shoulda, which references the 1949 exploitation film She Shoulda Said No! where he updates the cast to include Princess Diana, Whitney Houston and Amy Winehouse. “All these stars should have said no to some things in their lives, drugs, fame,” said Waters. “You get a title and you give it a completely different meaning by how you illustrate it in a storyboard.”

He also shows a title credit that says Starring Melissa Rivers, daughter of Joan Rivers. “Melissa Rivers, as far as I know, has never had top billing in a movie,” said Waters. “I’m trying to imagine a thought that never happened. It was a complete credit that never was.”

Probably the most revealing artwork in the show is his Study Art series, which boasts: Study Art: For Profit or Hobby. Waters saw the irony in it, so took it to the next level, changing the message to read “for prestige or spite” and “for pride or power”.

“That was a real sign at an art school in Baltimore,” said Waters. “None of these phrases are artistically correct, but I wanted to imagine things in the art world which are definitely not correct to say.”

As for his own political incorrectness? Waters proclaims he has good taste, despite his reputation for having the opposite (in one of his films, he notably featured drag queen Divine eating dog feces). “I think you have to have good taste to make fun of bad taste, to celebrate it,” he says. “I actually think I’m politically correct, too, which really makes people gag.”