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Democracy Dies in Darkness



Cult film director John Waters in October at his first retrospective art exhibit, "Indecent Exposure," at the Baltimore Museum of Art through Jan. 6.
(Andrew Mangum/For The Washington Post)

We took John Waters to a John Waters art exhibit in Baltimore

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On a Friday afternoon at the Baltimore Museum of Art, a Johns Hopkins student is browsing a gallery with detached interest when she comes upon a filmstrip-like group of photos that punctures her composure. "Oh," she gasps, leaning in to read the title of the piece: "Twelve A--holes and a Dirty Foot." It delivers exactly what it promises.

A few minutes later, another surprise: The artist behind "Twelve A--holes" materializes in the gallery and starts talking about his process, which, for this particular piece, involved watching a lot of porn. "Me and my friend watched so many. We had to watch a lot to find the dirty foot," he says. As for the other photos in the series: "You had to find not just an a--hole, but one without a finger, an arm, a penis, a mouth — that's really rare."

"Is that him?" someone says.

Of course it is. With his pencil mustache and Hollywood smile, the famously eccentric filmmaker John Waters — known for "Hairspray" and "Serial Mom" — is unmistakable. Today, I've invited him to spend some time at his own recently unveiled exhibit: a retrospective of his contemporary art titled "John Waters: Indecent Exposure." (It runs through Jan. 6.)

So how did art by the Pope of Trash find its way into this temple of refined taste? "There is an irony to it all," Waters says to a growing throng around him. "While I started a career based on bad taste, on trash, I've always done best in good-taste places. My movies never worked in drive-ins; they only worked in art theaters." Suddenly, Waters interrupts himself. "Whoa, bad angle!" he chides a kneeling Washington Post photographer who is attempting to snap a photo of him from below. "Never shoot up — in your arm or with a camera."



Waters agreed to tour the exhibit with a reporter, surprising and delighting museum-goers. (Andrew Mangum/For The Washington Post)

After posing for pictures with a few fans, the Baltimore native, now 72, tells the crowd how he “fell backwards” into photography and contemporary art. In 1992, he needed film stills of his muse, Divine, a 300-pound drag queen. Since Waters couldn’t find any originals, he snapped photos of his 1970 film “Multiple Maniacs” as it played on a big square television.

The resulting piece, “Divine in Ecstasy,” became his entry into the world of contemporary art. “It came back [from the developers] in the worst sort of arty, grainy way, from a film that was already technically not very good. It came out as a mistake — that means art. I mean, sometimes,” he says, getting a big laugh from the crowd.

He had his first solo exhibit at a small SoHo gallery in 1995. Since then, he’s expanded to conceptual art and sculpture, and his work has been collected by the Whitney and the Met. A gray-haired BMA docent says that she didn’t even know Waters was a fine artist until he got into the Venice Biennale, one of the world’s most prestigious art shows, last year. “You know, I kept it very, very separate,” he says. “The art world knew it, but I never talked about it when I did press for movies, because the most hated thing in the world is celebrity art.”

Perhaps the only thing people hate more than celebrity art is contemporary art, and Waters can’t help but skewer it. There’s a whole room of such pieces at the BMA show. One is a series of imagined “Art Market Research” surveys filled out by cartoonishly venal collectors. (“Can’t flip at auction,” one complains.) Another is a sign that Waters made for the Venice Biennale that reads, “Study Art for Prestige or Spite.” “It was the rudest thing I could think of to put in an art show,” Waters says.



“When John appropriates celebrity images within films, it’s to study that star power and how complicated it really is to have that magnetic quality that makes you an icon,” says the show’s curator Kristen Hileman. (Andrew Mangum/For The Washington Post)

Some of his strongest pieces consist of photos he's captured from movies — his own as well as those of other directors. According to the show's curator, Kristen Hileman, this technique places Waters within the "Picture Generation," a group of contemporary artists such as Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman who reappropriate commercial images to criticize bourgeois values.

Waters, though, is a little different because he examines pop culture without irony, Hileman explains. "When John appropriates celebrity images within films, it's to study that star power and how complicated it really is to have that magnetic quality that makes you an icon," she says. "Divine is a great example of that: a man who has the power of being something quite contradictory, both female and male, both glamorous and grotesque."

I ask Waters whether age has robbed him of his edge. The filmmaker responds that the world has merely caught up. "I haven't changed one bit," he says.

Indeed, his sense of bad taste is still keen. Consider a piece called "9/11." It's a diptych of title screens, one from "Dr. Dolittle 2," the other from "A Knight's Tale" — two movies that were scheduled to play on the ill-fated flights.

By amplifying this mundane detail, Waters takes an event that's been mythified in our national imagination and brings it back to reality. He reminds us that it could have been anyone on those flights, that there's no greater meaning in the senseless deaths. This is how Hileman sees it, anyway. But Waters, while avoiding endorsing any particular interpretation, offers an observation that's more in keeping with his reputation. "I know this sounds like a joke, but maybe it was better that they didn't have to crash while watching 'Dr. Dolittle 2,'" he says. "It would have been worse."