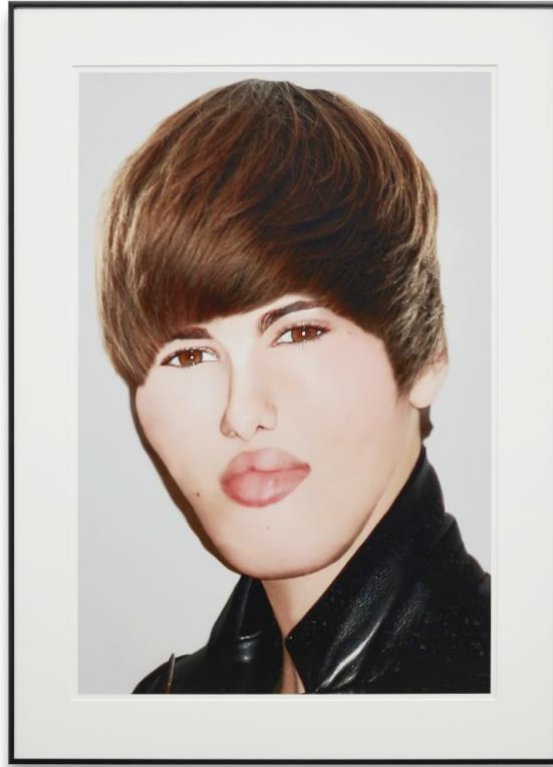


Los Angeles Times



John Waters, *Justin's Had Work*, 2014, C-Print, 30 inches by 20 inches unframed. The artwork is part of Waters' Sprüth Magers show opening Tuesday. (John Waters / Sprüth Magers)

Bieber, pimples, Lassie with a facelift: John Waters on his L.A. art exhibition

Jordan Riefe
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The latest release from John Waters is not a movie. "Hollywood's Greatest Hits," opening Tuesday at L.A. art gallery Sprüth Magers, is a collection of more than 30 pieces by the iconoclast filmmaker — items such as "21 Pasolini Pimples," a frame dotted with what looks like acne, taken from still frames of the Italian filmmaker's works; and "Justin's Had Work," a headshot of Justin Bieber under a mask of disfiguring cosmetic surgery.

"This show is about Hollywood, but it's all work that mostly hasn't been shown in L.A. I thought it would be a perfect show to have at Oscar time," Waters says from his office in Baltimore. "It's just a different way for me to tell a story. But it's still the same sense of humor. What I'm getting at is can art be good and funny? Not witty — all contemporary art is witty, usually. But funny is harder."

A self-taught filmmaker, Waters is best known for cult classics like "Pink Flamingos," starring frequent collaborator Divine. It originally was rated X but now carries an NC-17 for what the MPAA called "extreme perversities shown in an explicit way." Waters found a home in 1981 at New Line Cinema, where he made movies like "Hairspray."

In 2018 he was awarded Officier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government for his contributions to the fields of film and literature (author of seven books, he has a novel forthcoming). A year earlier, he received a highly coveted invitation to exhibit his sculptures in the international group show that serves as the centerpiece of the Venice Biennale. He's been an art maker for more than 30 years.



John Waters stands next to his *Fellini's 8 1/2*, a 2014 artwork that's part of his Sprüth Magers show. (Studio John Waters)

"I very, very purposefully kept it as separate as I can from my film career. And I still do, 'cause I'm aware that the only dirty word left in the art world is 'celebrity,'" he says, although his 1998 movie "Pecker" is centered in the art world. "I had a piece that had art slogans — 'See You in Basel, Bitch' [a reference to the Swiss art festival], 'Out of State, No Taxes,' 'All Photographs Fade.' I am satirizing them but I'm one of them. I've been to all those art dinners. The excesses of the art world I find charming. I make fun of things I love. I always said I think art for the people is a terrible idea."

The Times recently spoke to Waters about his life in art and film, acquiring an early Warhol for \$100 and building a career on negative reviews.

I know you don't operate like other artists. What's your process like?

I think it up beforehand. It's like writing a book, like writing a movie. The show is about editing, about taking images from other people's work, my own, and putting it together in a storyboard that tells a completely different story than the original directors, including myself, meant.

The self-portrait "Beverly Hills John" has a Cindy Sherman quality.

When that came out there were fan pages that said, "How could he have done that?! We really thought he had better self-esteem than that!" I have friends in L.A. who look like that. I was just honoring local customs when I made "Beverly Hills John." Maybe if I had come to L.A. when I made my first film, maybe I would look like that. You don't look old. Joan Rivers didn't look old. She looked like an alien. And some people would prefer to look like an alien than old.

"Reconstructed Lassie" is a fitting companion to "Beverly Hills John."

There will be facelifts for pets. I'm sure there already are. I keep reading that boys and girls are getting facelifts when they're 12. So these things happen. All of these things are not that odd.

For the audio piece “Sound of a Hit,” you placed a microphone in the box office of a theater?

I asked the Senator Theatre in Baltimore if I could put a microphone inside the box office [on the] opening day of “Harry Potter,” so all you hear is the sound of money. So, to me, it’s almost a satire of art for someone who’s in the movie business. In a way, it’s a very optimistic piece ’cause everyone hopes that happens to them with a movie.



Left: John Waters satirizes plastic surgery in his *Beverly Hills John*, 2012, C-Print. (John Waters / Sprüth Magers)

Right: **John Waters**, *21 Pasolini Pimples*, 2006, consists of film-still cutouts of pimples on characters in Pier Paolo Pasolini films. Twenty-one C-Prints, 35 1/2 inches by 35 1/2 inches framed. (John Waters / Sprüth Magers)

“21 Pasolini Pimples” seems like a signature piece from you.

It kind of looks like nipples but it’s actually from boys he found attractive. I’ve seen all his movies, and I love [Pier] Pasolini and I know who his boyfriends were from reading everything. And they all had pimples. I went through and found every movie where you can see them. And then I had to zoom in and then cut each one out very clumsily, like a child in kindergarten, and glue them on the page and then take a photograph of them. As ridiculous as it is, it is quite a process. There’s a lot of research that goes into it.

In the “Kiddie Flamingos” table read, did your movie script seem more debauched with children, or less?

I always thought maybe I should give in to every censor and take “Pink Flamingos,” cut everything out that’s bad and make it for children. And that’s what I did. They had the best time doing it. I think it worked because the children are so innocent. They don’t know that the real scene was somebody having sex with a chicken. In the end, I’m not going to tell you, they don’t eat dog [feces], they eat something else. But at the same time, there was gross stuff in it that the kids had just as much fun saying. In a way, I guess I could do “Female Trouble” in an old-age home. I could do “Desperate Living” with deaf people. You can do each one of them rewritten for a new niche audience, which again is satirizing the movie business.

You own a substantial collection of contemporary art, including works by Sherman, Cy Twombly and Diane Arbus, plus an Andy Warhol “Jackie” that you picked up in the ‘60s for \$100?

My girlfriend gave it to me, that’s how long ago it was. It was in 1964, and it was \$100. I met him when Fran Lebowitz and Glenn O’Brien from Interview took me to the Factory to show Andy “Pink Flamingos,” and he had

a whole thing for us. That's the first time I met him. I had seen a lot of the films and knew all the people that were in it. I'm sick of reading things where people say bad things about him, where he's suddenly the villain and they had the ideas and they had sex with him and all that. Say it when he's alive.



An image from John Waters' *Kiddie Flamingos*, 2014, Blu-ray with two-channel audio, 74 minutes. (John Waters / Sprüth Magers)

In November you bequeathed your collection to the Baltimore Museum of Art, despite that institution coming under scrutiny for planned deaccessions.

I disagreed with it. But what am I going to do, have a hissy fit and not give them the work? Basically, my hometown museum did one thing I disagree with. That does not mean I'm not going to leave my collection to my hometown museum where I first learned everything about contemporary art.

You've said that if you hadn't become a filmmaker, you'd be in jail.

I would be in jail 'cause I wouldn't have had the outlet to do all the antisocial things I've been able to do on film. If I did every single thing that happens in my movies, I would have gotten the death penalty 40 years ago. To me, it has been the outlet for all my antisocial behavior and I was rewarded for it, not punished. You can do that whole thing for real and go to jail, or you can do the same thing and get paid for it.

Are you surprised by your success?

No, because for the first 10 years nobody said I was good. I built a career on negative reviews. And now I look on Rotten Tomatoes, and "Multiple Maniacs" has 100% favorable reviews, which almost no movies have. Even I rolled my eyes at that. It's hilarious how people's opinions can change in 40 years, but I didn't change that much. My last film, "A Dirty Shame," wasn't that different than "Multiple Maniacs." It got an NC-17 rating. I don't think I've changed. I've learned from mistakes, and I've learned to negotiate and to have a backup plan.

Do you think you benefited by not going to film school?

The first movie I made, "Hag in a Black Leather Jacket," I didn't know there was such [a] thing as editing. It was very Lars Von Trier without knowing it. You could say my early films are raw. That means you liked them and I didn't know what I was doing. You could say they're amateurish, which means the same thing but you just didn't like them. Amateurish and raw mean the exact same thing depending on if you like it or not. Would I have been able to make those movies in film school? Probably not. Today, yes. Then, no.

For someone who was derided by critics for years, to what do you attribute your longevity?

I've lasted so long 'cause I ask you to come into a world that you would not maybe be comfortable in. I'm the guide and I'll take you in somewhere you haven't been. All I'm asking you to do is consider and try to understand why something happened. And maybe for the first time you can see the humor in it and you can understand why people act the way they do. That's what every bit of my work, no matter the form, is about. And the worst of things can be the best, if they're treated with humor and embraced.



John Waters, *Bad Director's Chair*, a 2006 artwork consisting of a chair decorated with descriptions of a bad film director. Canvas, wood, steel, paint with leather-bound script, 46 inches by 24 1/2 inches by 22 inches. (John Waters / Sprüth Magers)