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Artist-filmmaker John Waters.
Photo: Greg Gorman

'THE WORST OF WATERS' HIGHLIGHTS THE ARTIST-FILMMAKER'S BEST WORK

BY TONY BRAVO

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Try to remember the last time you had a really good laugh at an art show.

I'll wait.

In "John Waters: The Worst of Waters" — cheekily subtitled, "Works never before exhibited in San Francisco. The rudest, the hardest to sell, the just plain wrong" — on view now at Rena Bransten Gallery, I lost count of the number of times I laughed, either in delight or sudden shock.

There are visual puns, dirty jokes, art world in-references and even some sacrilegious gross-out humor. In other words, it's exactly what you'd expect from the [filmmaker](#) behind the 1972 cult classic "Pink Flamingos" or the author of the 2022 bestselling novel "Liarmouth: A Feel Bad Romance."

"I can't help it, I try to use humor in everything, even in the art world," Waters told me by phone from New York, a few days after we saw one another at his show's opening night reception on Saturday, Sept. 21. "I think everybody knows the art world can be witty, but can it be funny?"

Waters, who [lives part time in San Francisco](#) in addition to his homes in Baltimore and New York City, is best known for his films like "Female Trouble" (1974) and the original "Hairspray" (1988) featuring drag performer Divine. But since the 1990s, he has exhibited internationally as a [fine artist](#), including at the New Museum in New York and

Baltimore Museum of Art. "The Worst of Waters" features work from 1993 to 2014, mostly photo prints with notable examples of sculpture and video. A different version of the show was presented at C. Grimaldis Gallery in Baltimore in 2022.

Waters' interests as a filmmaker, as an art collector, as an overall cultural consumer, have always fed into one another. Film, his own and others, is very present in the show, but always "redirected," as Waters said, with images from movies often taken off his television screen.

"It's an art show about editing," he said.

You don't have to be a fan of the larger Waters canon (he's a prolific writer and tours with [spoken-word shows](#) in addition to filmmaking), but if you are, you'll get even more from references that pop up throughout "The Worst of Waters." "Edith Has a Fit" (1996) takes a few seconds from his film "Female Trouble" and shows actress Edith Massey progressively more hysterical, at an angle that showcases her ample cleavage, her missing teeth and spidery false eyelashes. It's not a vantage you often see in movies or art, but it's gorgeous and terrifying.

Likewise, "Chesty" (1993) takes an image of 1970s porn performer Chesty Morgan and shrinks it down within a much larger mat and frame, a play on scale and proportion with a performer known for her enormous 73-inch bust. "The Hot Seat" (2001) presents a series of cinematic executions in the electric chair, while "Pimples" (1998) focuses on movie zits, including a close-up from "Hairspray."



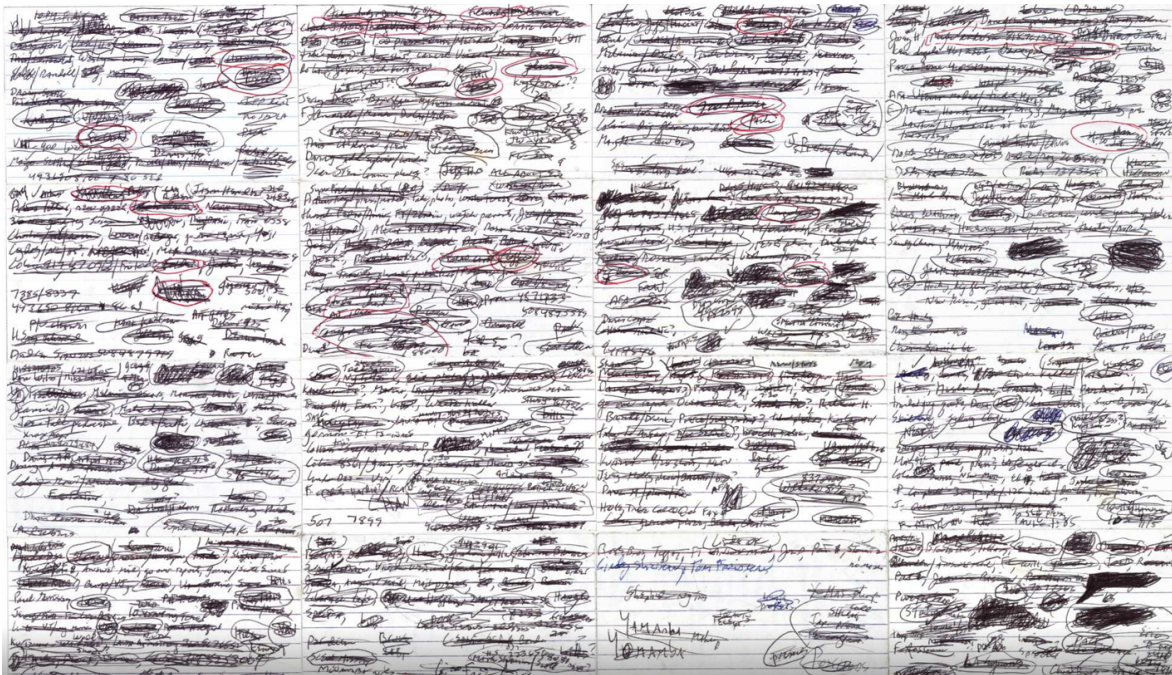
John Waters, "Kiddie Flamingos," 2014.
Photo: John Waters

Among the most well-known pieces in the exhibition is the video work "Kiddie Flamingos" (2014), which takes his notorious, career-making film and turns it into a G-rated children's production, read by nonprofessional child actors. It's disorienting and very funny, and if you know the movie it's a shock to hear the dialogue neutered.

"They don't know the original script, but they had just as much fun," Waters said with a laugh. "Like, at the end, they don't eat dog s—, they eat dog food. But still, to them that was gross and hideous."

The print "16 Days" shows a collection of the file cards Waters uses to organize his daily agenda, in his own cursive, with items crossed out. It seems to be among the most personal works in "The Worst of Waters," especially since he notably still writes his projects by hand.

"It looks like my Cy Twombly," Waters jokes of his handwriting, comparing it to the American artist known for his indiscernible penmanship-inspired pieces (which he collects).



John Waters, "16 Days," 2003.
Photo: John Waters

As for other barbs at the art world, what better trick to play on San Francisco than "Cancel Ansel," which features a series of San Francisco photographer Ansel Adams' well-known landscape photos with absurd interruptions imposed in them like gargantuan cruise ships, killer clowns and apartment towers.

In keeping with the "worst" theme, Waters' photo print "Rex Reed Gets Blowed" pays tribute to the vitriolic film critic, who said of "Female Trouble" in a review: "Where do these people come from? Where do they go when the sun goes down? Isn't there a law or something?"

The photo shows the critic's face gasping in pleasure in a notorious scene in "Myra Breckinridge" (1970) in which Reed starred opposite Raquel Welch. The film adaptation of Gore Vidal's novel is considered one of the worst films of all time, and Waters' has memorialized it, too. The saturated colors of the cropped image of Reed are actually quite beautiful.

Tying much of the work's themes together is "Bad Directors Chair" (2006), a director's chair with "Hack" on the seat back where a name would be, along with other negative industry jargon like "bring the numbers up," "tested badly" and "reshoot."

Waters has always satirized and made work about things he loves and takes seriously, but he has avoided self-seriousness. There is depth and layers of artistic reference in "The Worst of Waters," but more importantly, there's the same humor that's been tilting at the windmill of taste for decades.