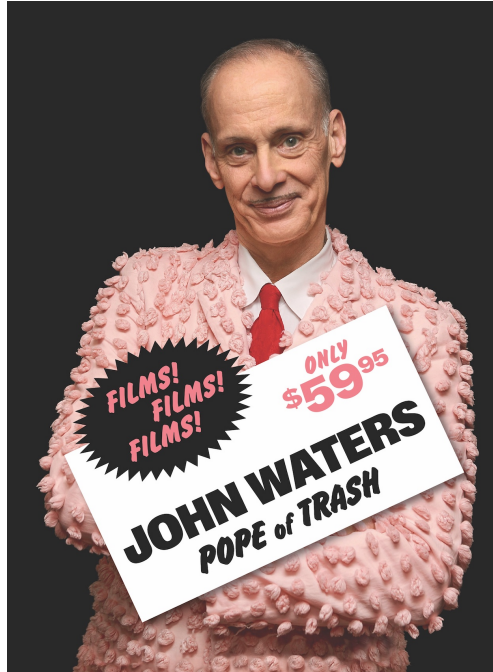


SURFACE



"John Waters: Pope of Trash." Published by the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, Los Angeles/Delmonico Books

THE WORLD STILL HASN'T CAUGHT UP TO JOHN WATERS

BY JESSE DORRIS
SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

John Waters made his first film six decades ago, and the world still hasn't caught up to him. Along with a group of accomplices known as the Dreamlanders—first, fellow Baltimoreans costume designer Van Smith, casting director Pat Moran, and stars like Divine, Mink Stole, Cookie Mueller, and, later, worldly icons like Patricia Hearst and Kathleen Turner—Waters made new worlds in his own image. From the period realness of *Polyester* to the fantasy fever dream of *Desperate Living*, Waters' worlds are camp landscapes where vicious empathy and heartfelt filth breed queer heroes. Over the decades, he's embraced other roles: fine artist, memoirist, film critic, and fairy godfather to generations of troublemakers.

A pair of strikes has put his current film work on hold, but the institutionalization of John Waters is only speeding up. Following a 2014 film series at Lincoln Center and a 2018 fine art survey at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the [Academy Museum of Motion Pictures](#) has just opened what it considers to be the first comprehensive exhibition of his moviemaking, "[John Waters: Pope of Trash](#)." The retrospective includes new restoration of those early short films; never-exhibited props, like Debbie Harry's exploding *Hairspray* wig and Kathleen Turner's murderous leg of lamb from *Serial Mom*; and recreations of iconic sets, including the *Pink Flamingo* trailer HQ for the filthiest people alive. John Waters recently spoke with *Surface* about the show, brown furniture, and the importance of being nervous. This conversation has been edited and condensed for length.



Photography by Charles White/JWPictures, courtesy of the Academy Museum Foundation

Jesse Dorris (JD): Let's start at the beginning, with you and production designer Vincent Peranio. How did you first begin thinking through what your aesthetics might be?

John Waters (JW): The first thing Vincent did for me was Lobstora, the lobster who [attacks] Divine in *Multiple Maniacs*. He's in it, you can see his legs sticking out of it. *Pink Flamingos* was the first movie where he did the whole thing. We really celebrated postmodernism. It wasn't called that. It was stuff that nobody wanted, for like a nickel at a thrift shop. His mantra would be "make a dollar holler."

JD: How did you make decisions around what was trash that excited you, and what was trash that would just sort of do the trick?

JW: Vincent grew up in blue-collar Baltimore, so he really knew the settings of both *Cry Baby* and *Hairspray*. They had to be period correct. *Serial Mom* had to be suburban, like Towson near where I grew up. Each movie had a look of that niche period—even fantasy stuff, like in *A Dirty Shame* where all the shrubbery turned into hard-ons and vaginas. He knew how to use my sense of humor and translate it very well into production design. The sets are just as much a part of the humor as the dialogue.

JD: Did you think of movies like *Female Trouble* as realism?

JW: They were stylized in our version of what was funny about bad taste. I've said that Trump ruined bad taste. Those Christmas decorations on the White House were the worst ever, but they weren't *funny*. We were raised on what's now hated by young people. The antiques in my house that my parents left me are worthless now. If I would make a movie now I would think about how people hate brown furniture. The next generation has to make fun of what I think is good taste. Find the worst stuff in the thrift shop and put that on. That's the new style.

JD: The Dreamlanders were able to—and forced to—build a community of their own and do it themselves. Do you think that kind of small-scale, grassroots art community building is still possible?

JW: When I was young, you had to go to New York City to see underground movies. You couldn't see them where you live. Now you can live anywhere and see everything. But what's vanishing is local color. I know that from traveling. I do my spoken word shows 40 times a year all over America. Local color stuff is vanishing. Sometimes it was impoverished, it was struggling. But those kinds of styles, those kinds of crackpot imagery are becoming less and less



Photography by Charles White/JWPictures, courtesy of the Academy Museum Foundation

because everywhere looks the same. So it's up to young people to find the new thing to make people nervous. And certainly the new sexual revolution is making a lot of people nervous. And I think that's great. I salute them. What's the new trans movement in furniture?

JD: Could it be the all-gender bathroom dedicated to you at the Baltimore Museum of Art?

JW: The stalls are floor-to-ceiling so anybody can have sex in there. In the old days, people used to have to go in and one would sit on the toilet and the other would stand with both legs in shopping bags. If you looked under the stall it looked like only one person was in there. I like the new modern problems of manners in elimination. I was in someone's house in Provincetown this summer, an old, beautiful, untouched fisherman's house. In the [primary] bedroom was a toilet, right there, sitting in the middle of the floor. I thought: fabulous. I'd never seen that before.

JD: How are the bathrooms at the Academy Museum?

JW: I had nothing to do with the production design of the show, but they did a really great job. They built the trailer [from *Pink Flamingos*]. They built a glory hole.

JD: A functional one?

JW: [Academy representative clarifies: "A *visual*/glory hole."] You could look through it but you couldn't put anything through it.

JD: I guess it's still possible to go too far. Were there objects coming out of the archives that shocked you?

JW: There are handwritten scripts, and my handwriting was so much better when I was young. Now it looks like a bad Cy Twombly painting. The electric chair [from *Female Trouble*] that sat in my hall is gone now. There's a big hole in my house. It's sitting here for a year. The book that was sitting on it is just on the floor now. It's funny to see something that was hanging in my garage now in a museum. And seeing production stuff, people in the background who just maybe aren't with us anymore. It was certainly nostalgic. I have a few friends that cried walking through it, because they knew all the people through so many years.

JD: Does it feel like a kind of bookend to your career?

JW: I ain't finished. I just moved into being an insider instead of an outsider.

JD: Would Divine be out on the picket lines?

JW: Yes! I don't want anybody to AI me. That would be really depressing. I've already seen something that was supposedly written by me, and it's like a really terrible first draft. But that's what's so scary—it *is* a first draft, and that's the hardest thing for any writer. So, you know... the Unabomber was right. He was against where technology is leading us to. Maybe he was right! That's a sign for the writers! I'll go give it to them. (laughs)

"John Waters: Pope of Trash" is on view at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures through August 4, 2024.