

# ARTFORUM



View of “John Waters: Pope of Trash” 2023–24.  
Photo: Charles White/JW Pictures.

## JOHN WATERS | ACADEMY MUSEUM OF MOTION PICTURES

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What it is it about John Waters’s work that has made him such an enduring figure of “outlaw cinema” (to quote the filmmaker’s 2000 ode to DIY cinema, *Cecil B. Demented*), to the point where he’s landed an 11,400 square-foot, eleven-month long retrospective at the glitzy Academy Museum of Motion Pictures? Is it the unique combination of his surprisingly “good” and “bad” taste, paired with his outsider (read: “queer as in fuck you”) take on the heteronormative, white supremacist, patriarchal Catholic suburbia of his native Baltimore? Perhaps it’s his wry and dry humor and Taurean work ethic? Or maybe it’s his penchant for out-of-the-box publicity stunts that boosted his status and granted his unique oeuvre entry into the hallowed halls of the academy? At its core, Waters’s expertise is in taking the weird stuff of life and making it iconic. Indeed, this exhibition is a tour de force of trash turned treasure.

Exhibition curators Jenny He and Dara Jaffe have certainly laid it on (appropriately) thick, with Waters assuming the proto-religious status of “Pope of Trash”—as he was dubbed by William S. Burroughs in 1986—in an icon-like portrait with halo and clerical collar encountered at the exhibition’s entrance. The painting adorns the wall of no less than a full-on mock chapel, replete with stained-glass windows and pews that face the “altar”: a monitor on which plays a supercut of moments from across Waters’s canon, with beloved characters delivering iconic lines from the films. A gun-wielding Divine yells, “YOU STAND CONVICTED OF ASSHOLISM! The proper punishment will now take place” in *Pink Flamingos* (1972): a sermon to absolve the worst of sinners.

In a second room titled “Welcome to Dreamland,” viewers are introduced to the Dreamlanders — the now-infamous cast and crew who orbited Waters’s Baltimore-based production company for decades—and can watch a montage of early short films. Notably, a display titled “Showmanship” presents the various props and gimmicks Waters used to augment his screenings, including an advertisement for the “Odorama”: a screening experience of *Polyester* (1981) paired with bespoke scratch-’n’-sniff panels for the audience, unleashing a panoply of scents from a rose to a fart, dirty shoes, and skunk spray, respectively. Waters’s lifelong interest in “stunt-queen” antics undoubtedly bolstered his career, creating an aura of raunchy experimentation and elevation of the outlandish that has positioned his oeuvre as both avant-garde *and* decidedly lowbrow.

The following rooms are painted in various gaudy colors, appropriating the pink from of Ricki Lake’s show-stopping cockroach-print dress from *Hairspray* (1988) (also on display), and the robin’s-egg-blue of Divine’s padded dressing gown in *Polyester* (1981). Contrasting nicely against these unifying colors are three gorgeous galleries of matte-black mannequins sporting costumes from *Hairspray*, *Cecil B. Demented*, and *A Dirty Shame* (2004). The mannequins are true to size, showing the diversity of body types that inhabit Waters’s Dreamland; walking through them, as a transfag fatty, felt generous and affirming—the true secret sauce of Waters’s oeuvre.

The exhibition ends in a room dedicated to the auspices of the filmmaker’s fandom and fame, with a supercut of film and TV cameos (what Waters calls “fame maintenance”) paired with an original puppet of Glen/da —his accidental murderer in *Seed of Chucky* (2004)—and a wall of fan-made art, credited and uncredited, that has been given to him over the decades. Thus, the viewer walks from one altar to another: As the viewer moves across rooms dedicated to each of the films, his status grows from icon of cult cinema to beloved patron saint of misfits worldwide. Perhaps the only truer representation of Waters’s work can be found in the bawdy gift shop that punctuates the show’s end.

In the exhibition’s catalogue, Waters remarks, “The final irony: a creatively crazy person who finally gets power. Think about it: I didn’t change. Society did.” Walking through five decades of work, one can easily see that Waters has remained steadfastly loyal to his centering of outsider figures and championing the cast-offs of the world. I think the secret to Waters’s enduring power is that he taught the world to love the worst of us, and, therefore, to love the worst of ourselves. The world may not have initially wanted a Pope of Trash, but now we’ve learned that he’s the pope we need.