

John Waters @ the New Museum

The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City exhibition of Water's non-film art is entitled "John Waters: A Change of Life".

John Waters, the iconoclastic filmmaker whose cult classics such as "Mondo Trasho", "Pink Flamingos", and "Hairspray" defined "trash" for a generation, turned to still photography in the early 1990s. Watching videotapes of the films that fascinate him (from "Cleopatra" to "Baby Doll" to "The Bad Seed"), Waters photographed images off the television screen, capturing moments that became the raw material for his new artworks. Selecting from the many photographic images he took, Waters assembled photographic sequences to create his own "little movies". I didn't see them as such, although I thought many of them were clever (for example, looking at the various collars of a 50's b movie actress). The labels are good at describing his process, yet I was never able to see the connection that he was trying to make, or that the curators said he was trying to make: "to make the viewer think about the differences of viewing still photography and moving images.

Selected objects, scrapbooks, artifacts, movie props, and ephemera that Waters collected from the late 1960s through the early 1970s were on view in a specially-created Waters environment, designed by his longtime set designer Vince Peranio, highlighting Waters' ongoing fascination with photographic imagery and the mass media. And it had that set designer touch, but it was appropriate for the show... I didn't think it was overly fabulous (unlike the re-installation of the Egyptian works at the BMA). I especially liked the studio pop ups of the

The exhibition also features the first public showing of Waters' extraordinary early no budget films: "Hag in a Black Leather Jacket" (1964), "Roman Candles" (1966), and "Eat Your Make-up" (1968). I found the films particularly interesting because I found out the artist created his earliest films in high school at his parents' house, often with his parents acting. I was interested how a high schooler in 1950's Baltimore could be so daring to create films about underwater dancing after interracial marriage and death by "makeup".

The exhibit was successful at delivering an overall gestalt of the person- John Waters. It reminded me of reading Proust- in the sense that Proust would describe a person in a very indirect way, but somehow his point came through. I have always thought that you can understand more about a person from looking at their room than from interviewing them or looking at their picture. I was particularly fascinated with a picture of John Water's personal files. I was amazed that no matter how you entered this exhibit, clock wise or counter clockwise (when it would be one of the last images you see), it would not only aid, but probably demystify in understanding the man's craft. He has everything neatly categorized and filed: from re-financing of his New York home to files for his air conditioner. The inclusion of pieces such as this are incredibly important because it tells the viewer what sort of diligence it took for someone to be filming fringe films and maintain some sort of order on all of his diverse interests. Again, as you walk in to the exhibit you are immediately confronted with a collage of his to-do list note cards. I found myself looking through them, finding connections: he had visited Berkeley (many 510 area code numbers) in his research. There were references to certain famous

writers and intellectuals, as well as street directions and budgeting. It read like a map of his life. It could have been my mother (a lawyer). I suppose that the most exciting thing is that it was the completely rational, librarian like work of a “wacky guy”, ergo organized people are not necessarily dry.

The wall text to the mural makes claims that the exhibit, or the art really, cannot deliver. Its points are as follows:

- 1) *there are snippets of John Waters Material from his own movies, art film, forgotten material and images that have fascinated him.*
- 2) *the exhibit explores how these images have fascinated and how still and moving images coffer from each other and what they reveal about each of us.* It sounded like a fantastic question direct from aesthetic philosophy—one that could possibly be presented, with some direction, through an exhibit. kept looking for this throughout the exhibit. But those connections were very unfortunately not clearly made.
- 3) *How Waters has affected our culture, moving fringes to the mainstream and applied an iconoclastic perspective and aesthetic to filmmaking., writing and photography.* Well, I see that that maybe what his method is: *an iconoclastic perspective and aesthetic to filmmaking., writing and photography.* However, they don't show how that has affected our culture. To me, that is how he became famous (that and possibly his organization). If they demonstrated how these “fringes” came to the mainstream, simply by showing aspects of Waters-ian fringes in mainstream culture (“mainstream” movies, for example).
- 4) Another point I would like to ask is- “what is the fringes?” that which John Water's decides? The wording should have been clearer to relate the fringes to John Water's experience. Because for me growing up in a beach town in California, people on the fringes were something else entirely- Mexican immigrants, surf bums, Democrats.

I didn't see him as making much of a deep “commentary” on society. He really is not an anthropologist. He is indeed an intellectual and popular filmmaker who gathers images, and possibly information, for himself. Point #1 (above) is what was accomplished in the exhibit. It is his images that we see, his images and information about John Water's himself. I think with that in mind, the exhibit is great fun.