

Joyful Filth

The iconic John Waters brings his monologue — and more — to FotoFocus

BY STEVEN ROSEN · OCTOBER 8TH, 2014 · CULTURE



The filmmaker, art collector and provocateur will present an evolved version of the *Filthy* performance filmed in 2006. - Photo: Greg Gorman

It's at first a bit perplexing why the FotoFocus Biennial booked John Waters to perform his *This Filthy World* comedic monologue at Memorial Hall on Saturday night.

Not because his observations about his life and the larger world around him can be — as the title indicates — randy and raunchy. But how exactly does it fit with an arts event that is supposed to be about the role of photography in today's world?

The once infamously naughty director of such underground films as *Pink Flamingos* and *Mondo Trasho* became a beloved American success story when his film *Hairspray* was turned into a smash Broadway musical in 2002.

He and his pencil-thin mustache have stayed popular, and he also has stayed a gay icon and arts-oriented big thinker, even as he's stopped making films after 2004's NC-17-rated *A Dirty Shame* flopped. His recent book *Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America* was a best seller.

He is also Baltimore's Andy Warhol. Born there and raised in the suburb of Lutherville, he has set his films there, populated them with colorful locals (like the late Divine, Mink Stole and Edith Massey) and still keeps a home there.

"He seemed like a good general person to expand the idea of what photography is," says Kevin Moore, FotoFocus' artistic director. "Film is a component [of FotoFocus], and in New York they're having a festival of his films at Lincoln Center that has been mobbed.

"But he is also a visual artist and makes photographs — one will be in *Stills* [a FotoFocus "featured exhibition" at the Michael Lowe Gallery]. And he made a film about a photographer, *Pecker*. He also did a road trip across America, which relates to the Taiyo Onorato-Nico Krebs show [*The One-Eyed Thief*, at the Contemporary Arts Center]."

Waters, at age 68, remains relentlessly active. Even though *This Filthy World*, as a performance, has been around quite some time (and was filmed in 2006), it constantly evolves.

"I call this *Filthy Word Vol.*

2: *Filthier and Dirtier* because it's not the same material as on DVD," Waters recently told *CityBeat* by phone from his Provincetown, Mass., summer home. He was packing up to move back to Baltimore for fall. "'Filthy' is a word I use as a compliment. To me, it still has a punk edge. It is a joyous word to me. Nobody gets mad at anything I say anymore. My sister said to me after seeing the show, 'How do you get away with saying that shit?' Because no one gets mad because I'm not mean."

Waters is a serious collector of serious contemporary art. That goes against his public image — an incorrect one, he protests — as a buyer of extreme kitsch, such as the clown paintings of executed serial killer John Wayne Gacy.

"That's always online about me and I say, 'Take that out, it's not true.' It's because I have one John Wayne Gacy painting," he says. "It was given and it's hidden in the deepest, most obscure corner of the guest room so people don't stay too long at my house. But I would never have given him money for one."

"Are you kidding? I have Cy Twombly," Waters adds. "I have a lot of Mike Kelley. I like art that still astounds me, surprises me and pisses me off, but I buy it seriously."

As an example, he mentions a recent purchase: a work by Karin Sander, the German conceptual artist.

"She never painted on it. She told her dealer to put a canvas out in the Hamptons and it got mold over it. You were afraid to buy it because it would put mold in your house. I had to have it treated. I love it because it could wreck my house, it could kill me technically, it might disappear and it's ugly and expensive. That is the perfect contemporary art in my book."

It also, he says, looks great.

Waters' love of challenging fine art started early.

"I remember I got this little Miró print that was \$1 at the Baltimore art museum and as a kid I hung it in my room," he says. "All the other kids said, 'Eww, that's ugly. Why would you want that?' And I remember thinking, 'Oh my god, the power of contemporary art. It could make people insane.' It made me a collector really early. I have a silver Warhol Jackie Kennedy print that was \$100 in 1964. It was so long ago my girlfriend gave it to me."

In the *Stills* exhibit at the Michael Lowe Gallery, Waters' contribution is "Inga #3," which appears to be a reproduction of promotional shots from an actual 1968 Swedish movie of the same name. But they're far more complex than that — as is Waters' approach to his similar photographic work.

"What I am in the art world is a failed publicist," he says. "With the stills, I look at other peoples' movies, take [images] off the TV screen and put them in a different storyboard that hasn't any of the original meaning of the original movie."

"It's me like an insane fan, standing in front of a big TV with a real camera with film snapping it. So it gives a certain bad quality that I like, a certain low-budget quality that, hopefully if I'm successful, puts it in another context."

The closest Cincinnati has to what Waters means to Baltimore — beloved locally for his accomplishments, giving the city international renown, and yet also shockingly scandalous for his rule-breaking outrageousness — might be Pete Rose. It's different, of course — the trajectory of Waters' life and career has been constantly triumphant; Rose's is tragic. But still ...

That analogy is met by a long silence from Waters before he asks, "Who's he? Is he sports? I'm sports-illiterate! What did he do?"

After he is informed, Waters wonders, "Why did he get banned for gambling? Oh, you mean on his own games? He should have been a wrestler. It's respected in that world." ©

JOHN WATERS presents *This Filthy World* Saturday at Memorial Hall. For admission details, visit fotofocusbiennial.org.