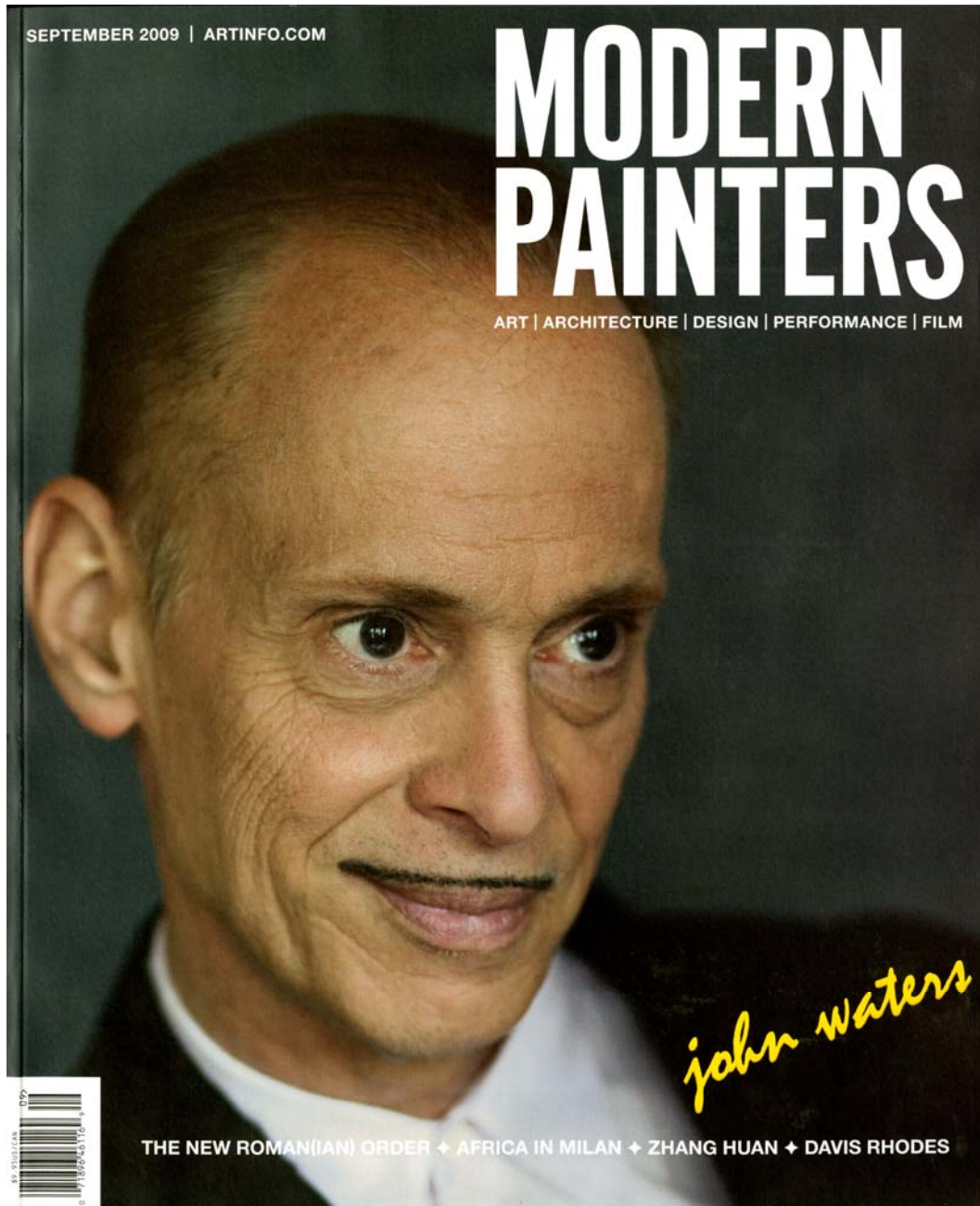


Modern Painters
September 2009

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



SEPTEMBER 2009 | ARTINFO.COM

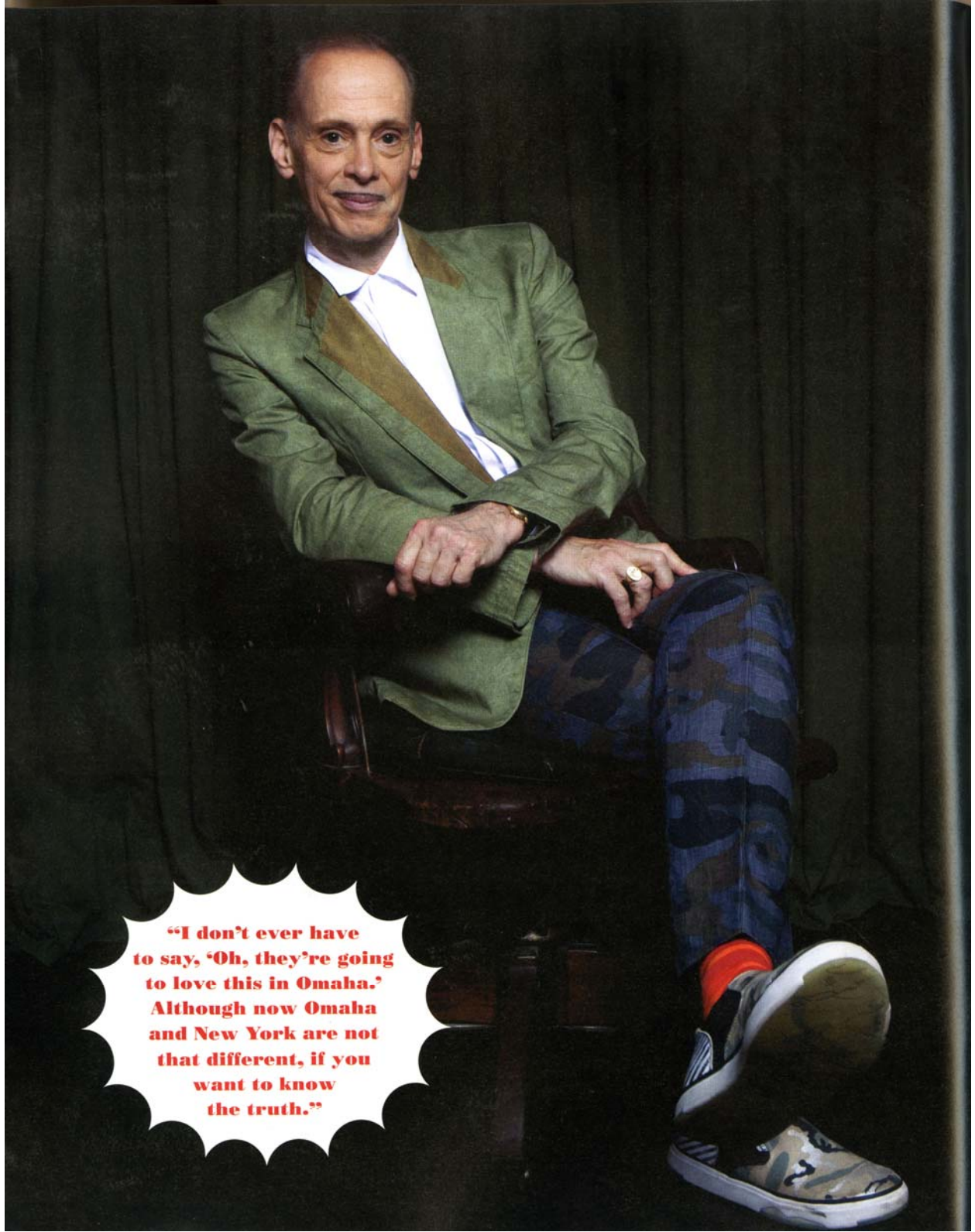
MODERN PAINTERS

ART | ARCHITECTURE | DESIGN | PERFORMANCE | FILM

john waters

THE NEW ROMAN(IAN) ORDER + AFRICA IN MILAN + ZHANG HUAN + DAVIS RHODES





“I don’t ever have to say, ‘Oh, they’re going to love this in Omaha.’ Although now Omaha and New York are not that different, if you want to know the truth.”

inside man

As an artist, John Waters sabotages
the worlds he knows best.

by Lawrence Levi portrait by Poppy de Villeneuve



Santa Molester, 2009. Ten C-prints, each image: 5 x 7 in., framed 11½ x 7½ in., edition of five.

JACKSONVILLE, NEW YORK COURTESY MARA WARE ELEGANT GALLERY, NEW YORK; OPPOSITE: GROOMING BY PULSE SCHOOL

"I love impenetrable art," John Waters tells me over the dining table in his New York City pied-à-terre. It's a funny thing to hear from a man whose name for almost 40 years has been associated with art that is anything but abstruse.

Though his movies have made him an international symbol of all that is rib-ticklingly subversive in American culture, his gallery art has remained relatively under the radar. And he seems to prefer it that way. Since his first gallery show, at American Fine Arts in New York in 1995, Waters has been creating work that shares a sensibility with his ingeniously vulgar movies—among them *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Hairspray* (1988), *Serial Mom* (1994), and, most recently, *A Dirty Shame* (2004). He says he finds the art world's small audience liberating. "I don't ever have to say, 'Oh, they're going to love this in Omaha,'" he tells me. "Although now Omaha and New York are not that different, if you want to know the truth."

Much of Waters's artwork consists of film stills that he photographs off his TV and arranges into narratives of his own invention. (The images' imperfection is important to him; he usually shoots from VHS and doesn't press pause.) He refers to them as "my little movies." In *Santa Molester* (2009), 10 frames from a children's Christmas movie become a very short story in which the interaction between Santa and a little boy is amusingly sordid.

“Hardly am I Ansel Adams. The craft is not the issue here. The idea is. And the presentation.”

Sometimes he digitally alters the images, as in *Children Who Smoke* (2009), in which the youthful faces of Shirley Temple, Elizabeth Taylor, and other cute actors of yesteryear have cigarettes Photoshopped between their lips.

Waters's work has appeared in galleries all over the United States and Europe. In 2004, a year after the Broadway musical version of *Hairspray* won eight Tonys, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York gave him a midcareer retrospective that traveled to three other cities. Last spring, his exhibition “Rear Projection” showed concurrently at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York and the

Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills; 10 works from that show are on view until September 15 at the Albert Merola Gallery in Provincetown, Massachusetts. (Waters lives and works primarily in Baltimore, his hometown, but keeps homes in New York and San Francisco and rents an apartment in Provincetown every summer.) Much of his work pokes fun at the art and film worlds he inhabits, allowing him to be at once an insider and a heckler.

One work in “Rear Projection” combines parts of four film-title stills to spell out: CONTEMPORARY ART HATES YOU. The work's title is

... *And Your Family Too* (2009). The art world “is a secret club,” Waters says. “It is a language; you have to learn everything. You have to learn how to dress, you have to learn how to see it, you have to learn how to talk about it, you have to learn how to read about it. All of it is impenetrable to a newcomer, and it was to me too.” In his 1998 film *Pecker*, when the laundromat worker played by Christina Ricci



... *And Your Family Too*, 2009. Four C-prints, each image 11 x 14 in., framed 17½ x 62½ in., edition of five.
 OPPOSITE: *Children Who Smoke*, 2009. Eight C-prints, each image 5 x 7 in., framed 26½ x 20½ in., edition of five.

tells her photographer boyfriend, played by Edward Furlong, “I don't understand any of that art crap,” he replies sincerely, “You could if you just open your eyes.” But as his feelings about impenetrability suggest, Waters has no problem with elitism.

In fact, some of his works seem geared exclusively to members of the art world. The 2003 poster *Visit Marfa* presents that Texas town, known to cognoscenti as Donald Judd's mecca of Minimalism, as a carnivalesque family attraction. (It made the cover of *Artforum* in 2004.) *Mamas* (2009), part of “Rear Projection,” juxtaposes three stills: the title screen of the 1972 women-in-prison film *Black Mama, White Mama*; an image of Pam Grier, the Amazonian star of that movie; and Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art. The similar gestures of the two women—one black and gun-toting, one white and matronly—make the work funny to anybody, but the real joke is lost on anyone who doesn't recognize Gund.

Waters calls his art conceptual and acknowledges its connection to Richard Prince's appropriative work. “It's about writing and editing,” he says. “Hardly am I Ansel Adams. Or sitting around with a pottery wheel, like in *Ghost*. The craft is not the issue here. The idea is. And the presentation.” Some pieces are downright goofy, such as the sculpture *Rush* (2009), a giant, tipped-over bottle of poppers (nitrite inhalants), or prankish, such as *Hardly Har* (2006), a photograph of flowers that squirts water at anyone who crosses a protective line of tape on the floor. The work incorporating film stills is “low-tech, pretty much—I'm just in a room in the dark like a



Rush, 2009. Polyurethane, oil, PVC plastic. 18 x 66 x 30 in., edition of five.

WITH IMAGES: JACON WITKIE; NEW YORK COURTESY: MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY; NEW YORK; OPPOSITE: JACON WITKIE; NEW YORK COURTESY: MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY





Visit Marea, 2003. Offset print, 30 x 22 in., edition of 100.

BOTH NAMES: JACOB VORON, NEW YORK/ARTIST: MARSHALL BERRY GALLERY

crazy person," he says, while sculptural works like *Rush* are fabricated by a crew that includes Michael Houstile and Patty Burgee, who have worked on the production design for all of Waters's movies.

Waters has an impressive contemporary-art collection that fills all of his homes and clearly makes him happy. (He devotes a chapter in *Role Models*, a book he just completed that will be published next year by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, to his favorites; the chapter is titled "Roommates.") The first thing I notice in his New York apartment, aside from the green walls, is a photographic portrait by Helmut Newton of actress Anita Ekberg. In it she looks like an imposing combination of Waters's great acting discoveries, Edith Massey and Divine. A large painting of a male profile—"a puke-green, melting silhouette," Waters calls it—by Lester Johnson hangs by the door. "When I went to this fancy little private school called Calvert School in Baltimore—it was a good school, I learned to read and write there, I should've quit school *then*—all the parents had a silhouette of their children done. So this one really spoke to me."

Small architectural sculptures by Vincent Fecteau sit on the living room floor along with a real-looking fake dog. A chiffon toilet-paper roll by George Stoll is installed on one wall. A hazy seascape by his Provincetown landlady, painter Pat de Groot, hangs by the kitchen. ("I live in her house, which is very *Grey Gardens*," Waters says.) In the bedroom there's a "Warhol asshole painting," a Stoll sponge sculpture, and a striking painting of a crown by Jess von der Ahe, who paints with her menstrual blood. Over the toilet in the bathroom is a Mike Kelley piece that "really pisses people off," but Waters asks me not to say why, since he writes about it in his book. Also in the bathroom are a funny "Queer Batman" watercolor by Mark Chamberlain and "a Brigid Berlin tit painting; she painted with her tits."

In Baltimore, he says, "I have the Michael Jackson print by Gary Hume looking through a glory hole right in my hall, which is really scary. Plus, you can see it in the mirror, which is even worse." There's a Cindy Sherman of herself as an unwed mother. There's the Warhol silver Jackie print that his high school girlfriend bought him for \$100 in 1964. There's a Diane Arbus portrait of his friend Howard Gruber as a drag queen taken in the early '60s, before Arbus was famous. In the hallway outside the guest rooms is *I Peed in My Pants* (1994), a life-size photo self-portrait by Tony Tasset that he picked up at Christie's. "It's just him peeing in his pants. And it was in the auction from the Enron company—they had it hanging! Which really almost made me like them."

Financing for what Waters was hoping would be his next movie, a children's film called *Fruitcake*, has fallen through twice. "I want to do two more movies—that's enough," he tells me. "I hope I *can* make two more." He's now 63 and says he'd be fine focusing on his writing, his art, and his one-man show, which he performs across the country about 25 times a year. As we wrap up our conversation, he shows me a months-old gossip item clipped from the New York *Daily News* that suggests trash culture remains an inexhaustible source of his inspiration. "Kate Moss does poppers—good for her!" he says. "I'm going to do one in her honor." ♦

"Kate Moss does poppers—good for her!"

Control, 2009. Fiberglass, silicone, urethane, acrylic, human and synthetic hair, fabric, and wood, 48 x 30 x 30 in., edition of five.

