

John Waters

Rear Projection

John Waters, Baltimore's "Pope of Trash" and the filmmaker behind cult classics like *Hairspray* and *Pink Flamingos*, makes more than movies. His contemporary art, a collection of montage photography, sculpture, and self-portraiture, is as bizarrely humorous and intelligent as his films. *Rear Projection*, his latest exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, is a bawdy feast of good-natured parody. In what follows, Waters explains how bad film stills make great art, why contemporary art hates people, and what it's like to pose as the Provincetown Town Crier.

Clayton Maxwell: On the Gagosian website, you are quoted as saying, "There is no such thing as a bad movie frame. It can be a terrible movie but in the art world it can be seen in a totally different way." Could you explain this?

John Waters: When you go to see a movie in the theatre you are thinking of the whole movie, the plot, and the performances throughout. If you are seeing it in the art world, as I am especially, and it doesn't work in the movie world, you can take a still, which is basically 1/24th of a second, and think of it as a still to be printed. So you can look at whatever you want – the lamps or the rugs. Or take that image and edit it in with one from another movie and that turns the whole narrative around. And sometimes it's the opposite of what it was saying in the original movie. I am really writing with these images what I notice in a

movie. With two of the pieces in this series, *The Penmark Collection* and *The Rope Collection*, basically I am sneaking into a movie like an art thief, when none of the characters, the writer, the directors, the crew, when no one is looking, and taking the art off of the wall and taking it back to my home and then putting it into a gallery. That art has nothing to do with the plot. You are not supposed to notice it. No one talks about it. It is never featured for long on the screen. Therefore, to me it is the most important thing when I am watching the movie with an artistic eye.

CM: So it can be a pretty bad movie, but because you are free to do whatever you want with the stills, you can transform it.

JW: I love bad movies sometimes. Bad, what does that mean? Sometimes I think movies that win the Oscars are bad. Bad is an opinion. What I'm saying is, you can take any movie, one you love or hate, and subvert the original meaning of that movie by putting it up with another movie or putting it in a different order or editing out the details. Like a failed publicist for a movie who would be fired the first day – because the stills that I take are ones that would get no one to see the movie. They might get them to buy it and take it home from an art gallery. But that's not what a publicist is supposed to do. And I am always convinced that nobody remembers movies, they remember the stills that made the movies famous.

So in that way I am trying to subvert all the insider knowledge about show business, but in a joyous way. Because I always make fun of things I love. I never parody the things I hate.

CM: Yes, and that's what makes it more appealing to me as a viewer because it doesn't come off as mean-spirited.

JW: No, it isn't mean spirited, not at all. Even the Smile Train people called me. (Smile Train is the world's largest cleft surgery charity.) I explained to them I parodied them because I love them. To me they are stars, too. Edith Massey could have been in the Smile Train. I could have switched stars.

CM: How did you come up with the Smile Train idea?

JW: Well, I get the ad in the mail everyday almost. And there are billboards of those children. They are as big as Jerry's *Kids* ever were.

In the charity world there are stars, also. If I saw one of those children on the street I would recognise them I think because I've seen them so often. They are promoted. And I am not saying that's wrong, I'm sure that charity does a great job. But at the same time, there are stars in every world and when I put them together I hope I am commenting that they are the same in a weird way.





© John Waters, *Self Portrait #4 (Town, Crier)*, 2009 Chromogenic color print, 42 1/4 x 42 1/4 inches framed (107.3 x 107.3 cm), Ed. of 5, Gagosian Gallery



© John Waters – *Product Placement*, 2009 Chromogenic color print, 13 3/4 x 86 3/4 inches framed (4.9 x 220.3 cm), Ed. of 5, Gagosian Gallery



© John Waters, *Children Who Smoke*, 2009 Chromogenic color print, 26 1/4 x 20 1/4 inches framed (67.9 x 52.7 cm), Ed. of 5, Gagosian Gallery



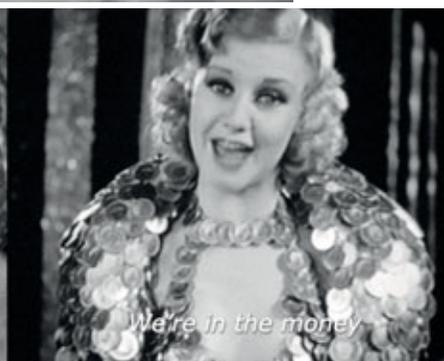
I've-way always-way epended-day on-way
e-thay indress-kay of-way angers-stray.



I-way ant-way o-tay eszay alone-way.



Osebud-ray.



We're in the money.

"Well, let me talk to them." She told me, "You know, I don't want a straight man doing my flowers." Is that acceptable sexism? Is it a hate crime to ask if your florist is heterosexual? I'm trying to really analyse the situation for its sexual politics.

CM: Can you tell me about the process of putting together a montage like *Rear Projection*? [*"Rear projection"* is a movie term for the process in which a studio-filmed foreground action is combined with a previously shot background scene to give the impression the actors are on location.]

JW: I found each rear projection shot. Matt, my assistant, looked at hundreds of ass pornos, and then we took the pictures of them and isolated them and zoomed in and took them out of different frames. Then Brian Gossman, who does all my photo retouching, he put them in. I conceptualised it. I'm directing and editing it. It's all about editing. It's hardly about photography. I use photography. But it's not about photography. That's the least of what it's about.

CM: Are you ever surprised with what you discover through the process? Does it ever turn out to be very different from what you've expected?

JW: Oh yes, completely. It's impossible to get the right picture sometimes. You are running the video and just snapping in the dark with a hand held camera. Many times I leave in mistakes, which all contemporary artists do. Yes, you are always surprised when you get the film back, when something that you thought would really work didn't. You might have an idea and you shoot all the photos and then when you put them together it just doesn't work. But you just have to do it. But it is all thought up in the very beginning and what ends up is a variation of that original idea.

CM: How is it satisfying to you in a way that filmmaking isn't?

JW: They are both satisfying in that they are both creative work. I don't compare them; I don't do them in the same place. I keep them very separate. Even though they both have humour. If you mean "satisfying" in terms of success, well, in the movie business I guess it would be how much the movie grosses, and in the art world it would be a sold out show. But the real thing you hope for in the movie business is a rave review from a critic you respect and the same thing in the art world. But both never really happen the way you want, in the same way they don't make anything better. I learned a long time ago, with reviews you read the good ones twice and the bad ones once and then you put them away and never look at them again. But I do read them. I don't believe anybody who says they don't read them. But a lot of times in

the artwork you do, the failure is better. Where in filmmaking, that doesn't work. Well I guess you can have the failure of technique, but I just didn't know any better. And the people who liked it would call it "raw" or "primitive" but that just meant "bad." The same way in the art world when people use the word "rigorous." It just means that other people can't understand it.

I always thought movies are for the people and art is not for the people. Whenever they try to make art for the people it is a terrible idea.

CM: And that's the inspiration for the piece *Contemporary Art Hates You*.

JW: It does hate some people. It hates the people who have contempt without investigation. People who say, "Aw, my kid could do that, that's the most ridiculous thing." It does hate them and it should hate them. And yes, those who do follow contemporary art and must learn the secret way to look at things, well, they're happy it hates those people. Because those people are too stupid to look.

CM: So contemporary art is not meant for widespread audiences.

JW: It could be if everyone would open up their mind enough and study enough and see enough so that they learn to see. Or learn to understand it. Or learn to be outraged by it. Which is what contemporary art is supposed to do in the first place – it's suppose to wreck things, it's suppose to destroy what came before. It's suppose to alter what you think is good, I think. But unless you accept that and look for that or find delight or some kind of intellectual stimulation, it does hate you because you are stupid. And I don't hate all stupid people, but I hate militantly stupid people.

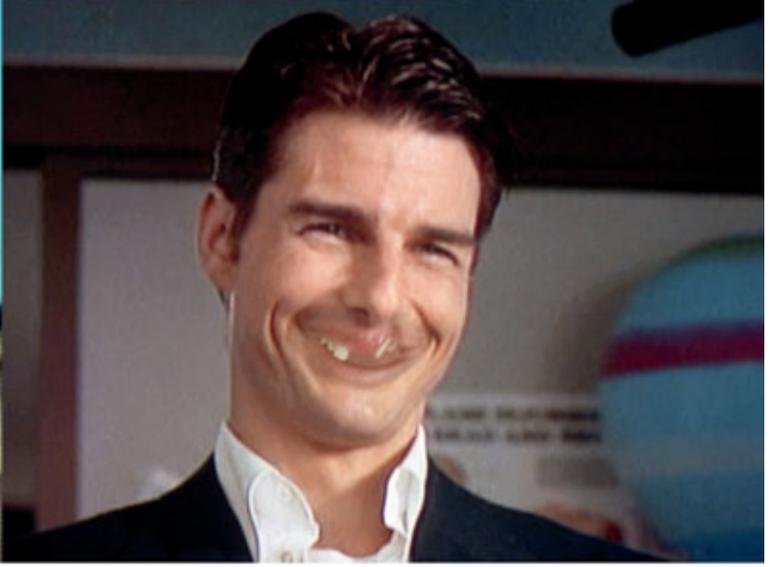
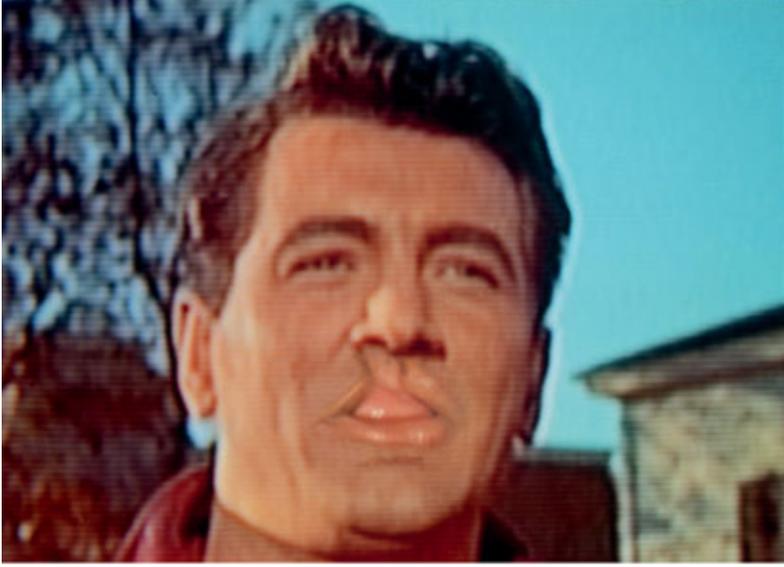
TEXT BY CLAYTON MAXWELL

© All pictures: John Waters

Exhibition:

John Waters
Rear Projection
Gagosian Gallery
456 North Camden Drive
Beverly Hills
CA 90210
USA
www.gagosian.com





© John Waters, *Hollywood Smile Train*, 2009 Chromogenic color print, 26 3/4 x 20 3/4 inches framed (67.9 x 52.7 cm), Ed. of 5, Gagolian Gallery

