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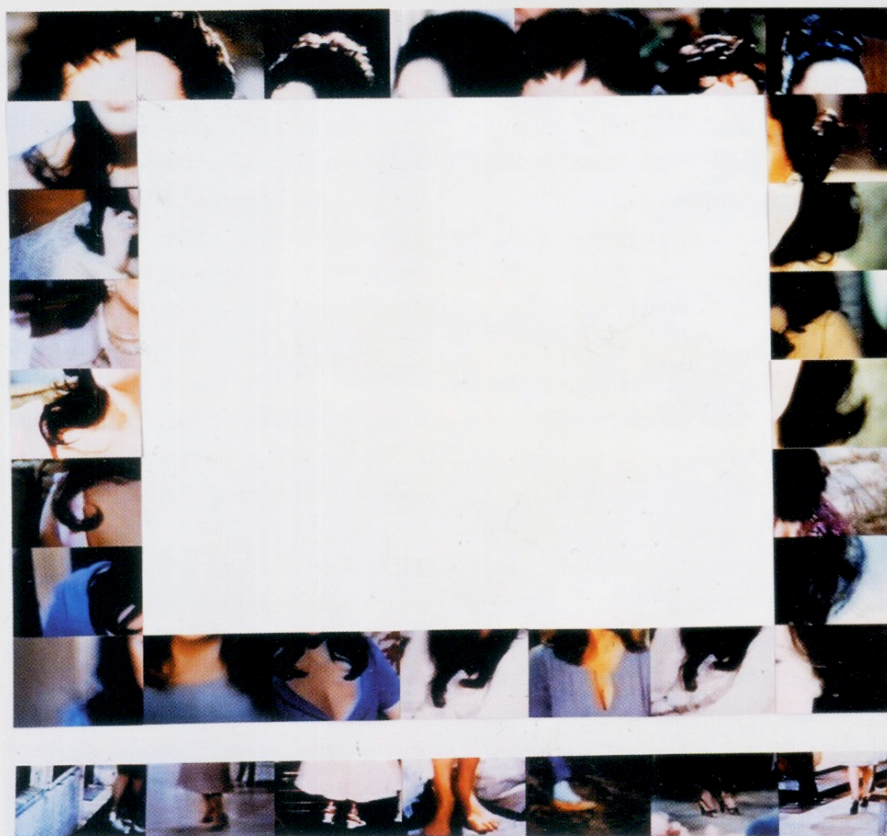
contemporary visual culture in Ireland

Special Theme : Collectors and Collecting
coordinated by Liz Aders

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New York: John Waters at New Museum



John Waters: *Liz Taylor's hair and feet*, 1994; courtesy New Museum of Contemporary Art

The filmmaker John Waters established himself in the 1970s as a maestro of 'bad taste'. Although his later films are less explicit than his earlier work, Waters continued to delve into the psyche and actions of extreme personalities in outrageous circumstances. Over time his work came to straddle three worlds. Waters' films from the 1970s, often starring the voluptuous, cross-dressing actor, Divine, have achieved cult status, while Waters' mainstream successes have landed him a musical version of *Hairspray* on Broadway. Waters is undoubtedly an influential filmmaker, but since 1995 he has also been exhibiting multimedia artwork in galleries and museums. Co-curators Marvin Heiferman and Lisa Philips have organized an exhibition

at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City of Waters photography along with his three earliest films, *Hag in a black leather jacket* (1964), *Roman candles* (1966) and *Eat Your Makeup* (1967).

The exterior window of the New Museum set the exhibition's tone. Many artists in the past have treated the New Museum window as an extension of the exhibition space, but Waters unapologetically blurs the line between a commercial advertisement and an art installation. Displayed in the window, in all her glory, is a life-size, cardboard cutout of Divine wearing a tight leopardskin dress. Around her are the numerous books written by Waters and a television continuously playing Waters' films.

Like a movie theater, the window installation advertised what's showing inside and it was also in the spirit of credits introducing a film.

The star of the show is, of course, John Waters, and he is fully aware of it. The first piece encountered in the cavernous exhibition hall is *308 days*, consisting of the three hundred and eight index cards Waters used as 'to do' lists. The lists are written by hand and then scratched out as he completed his tasks. The overall effect is that of a nonrepresentational painting, but a closer examination reveals the specifics of a hectic life. The exhibition included a number of representational and nonrepresentational self-portraits.

The leading lady of a Waters production could be none other than Divine himself. Divine, who died of a heart attack in 1988, holds mythical status in Waters' world. A compelling homage to the actress is the 1995 piece, *Divine in prayer*, consisting of six film stills. The five lower frames are portraits of a euphoric Divine reminiscent of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Teresa*. Divine is wearing a blond wig and the blurred images progressively sharpen as they rise. The top image represents the sun's rays bursting through the clouds. Some people will recognize this image of the sky as a cut-away shot from Judy Garland's rendition of *Somewhere over the rainbow* in the *Wizard of Oz*. *Divine in prayer* affectionately depicts the ascension of Divine to an idealistic place that exists only fleetingly in film; 'somewhere' where Divine might finally feel at home in the company of other leading ladies.

Waters' fascination and celebration of peripheral personalities has been consistent throughout his career as a

filmmaker and photographer. Although two of the three films exhibited are without obvious plotlines, they all contain a humorous and ironic collision of values. Waters was a senior in high school when he made his first film, *Hag in a black leather jacket*, where a white supremacist Ku Klux Klan leader was portrayed in drag addressing his followers. By using a KKK leader in drag, Waters employs the traditional structure of a character in conflict with oneself. The results are humorous and extreme. In-your-face humor is an element intrinsic to nearly all of Waters' work.

The John Waters survey is not for the squeamish, but it is for anyone seriously interested in filmmaking and photography. He fuses both mediums by rearranging film stills into alternative storyboards describing new plotlines and concepts. The results make his audience wince while smiling. The art world itself functions as a peripheral demographic where Waters can elevate eccentric personalities like Divine's to celebrity status while marginalizing real-life celebrities. For example, Liz Taylor's extremities provide the subject for the 1994 piece, *Liz Taylor's hair and feet*. To Waters the whole world is not a stage, but is, instead, a movie set. He interprets life as a *mise en scène* where anyone might be cast as an extra or even a star, but a cardboard cutout will do in a pinch.

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John Waters: *Change of Life*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, February – May 2004



John Waters:
Divine in prayer,
1995; courtesy
New Museum of
Contemporary
Art