

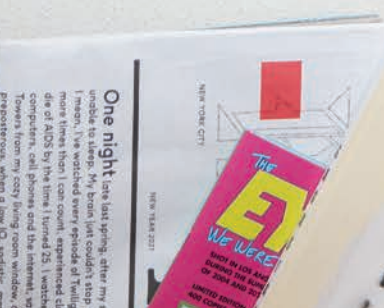
# COMING ATTRACTIONS THE JOHN WATERS COLLECTION



**CURATED BY  
CATHERINE OPIE AND JACK PIERSON**

Gore  
Vidal!

Paul  
Lynde!



The Nancy Dorman and Stanley Mazaroff Center for the Study of Prints, Drawings and Photographs is generously supported by Nancy Dorman and Stanley Mazaroff, the State of Maryland, the City of Baltimore, the Henry Luce Foundation, the France-Merrick Foundation, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and The Sheridan Foundation.



Generous support for this exhibition is provided by Clair Zamoiski Segal and the Clair Zamoiski Segal and Thomas H. Segal Contemporary Art Endowment Fund.

Front Cover: Paul Gabrielli, *Untitled*, 2012, in John Waters' Baltimore Residence, 2022. © Paul Gabrielli. Courtesy New Discretions/Invisible-Exports, New York. Photo by Catherine Opie

Front Inside Cover: Cary Leibowitz, *Gore Vidal! Paul Lyndel*, 2017, in John Waters' Baltimore Residence, 2022. © Cary Leibowitz. Courtesy New Discretions/Invisible-Exports, New York. Photo by Catherine Opie

Back Inside Cover: Karen Kilimnik, *Candles, Chandelier and Burning Chairs*, 1993, in John Waters' New York Residence, 2021. © Karen Kilimnik. Photo by Jack Pierson

# INTRODUCTION

John Waters' homes in Baltimore, New York City, and San Francisco are like mini-museums. Filled with art, books, and an outlaw sensibility, they offer a glimpse into what John values.

We have known John for years as an auteur filmmaker, a writer, an artist, an art maven, and a friend, and we are proud to be included in his collection. It is an honor for us to curate this exhibition showcasing his gift to the Baltimore Museum of Art.

With this show, we will uncover the intimate and personal nature of John's collection. These artworks define certain aspects of his personality: wit is abundant, crackpot eroticism rules, and all ridicule the very concept of pretention. John collects with a deep respect for those who take risks, do not compromise, and create their art outside the margins.

We thank the Baltimore Museum of Art for this wonderful opportunity. It is our hope that you tour this show with John's sense of humor in mind, as his beloved collection is a telling reflection of one of the most important provocateurs of our time.

*Catherine Opie and Jack Pierson*



# JOHN AT HOME

## **JOHN WATERS IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTISTS AND EXHIBITION CO-CURATORS CATHERINE OPIE AND JACK PIERSON**

*Photographer Catherine Opie and multimedia artist Jack Pierson spoke with filmmaker, producer, writer, artist, collector, and BMA Trustee John Waters in his Baltimore dining room last winter to discuss the underlying themes of his art collection. Portions of their conversation are below with light edits for clarity and space.*

**CATHERINE OPIE:** Record, testing one, two, three. Recording on January 28, 2022, in the dining room of John Waters' home with Jack Pierson, myself Catherine Opie, and John Waters—

**JOHN WATERS:** In Baltimore!

**CO:** In Baltimore, to discuss John's art collection. Hi, John!

**JW:** Hi!

Catherine Opie. *John*. 2013. Collection of John Waters. © Catherine Opie. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London

**CO:** Jack and I see certain themes running through the collection. I was wondering if you could name the themes that you see.

**JW:** Firstly, I always love art that infuriates people. Sometimes it infuriates me first, and it takes me a minute to realize I love it. And that's when I know I'm going to buy it.

Secondly, I would say art that makes me laugh in some way. Because contemporary art is often witty, but is it ever funny? I think that's a very, very delicate question. And "funny" is looked on with suspicion, but sometimes Mike Kelley's pieces are so rude that they make me chuckle.

Confidence, that's the third one. Perfect example—Cy Twombly. Imagine him showing his scribble drawings to people for the first time. He gave them to friends, and they threw them out. The confidence to believe that what you have done is perfectly valued even when no one else agrees. I don't think the artist should ever call themselves an artist. I think that's up to others. When people say to me that they are an artist, I always think silently: I'll be the judge of that, history will be the judge of that, not you.

Mike Kelley, *Reconstructed History: The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*. 1989. Collection of John Waters. © 2022 Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. All Rights Reserved / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY





Fourth would be narrative—filmic in a way, even though it doesn't have to be about movies. But narrative—imagined or otherwise—that tells a story that other people might not get. That goes along with confidence too, I think.

Catholicism—I guess there's some of that leftover in my damaged psyche. Sexuality, yes, but in a way that's always kind of creepy or funny but not just sexy. I've never jerked off to any artwork. Is that a question?

**CO:** I don't think that is a common question I've seen.

**JACK PIERSON:** Maybe that's the title of the exhibition.

**CO:** *John Waters: I've never jerked off to any artwork.*

**JW:** That I own! Those are my themes right off, I guess. Did you have any of the same themes?

**JP:** Part of what I see is kitchen-sink realism since we're talking filmic. This occurs with the Richard Baker and Doug Padgett works.

Douglas Padgett. *Untitled*. 2010. Collection of John Waters. © Douglas Padgett



Christopher Wool. *Untitled (West Texas)*. 2008. Collection of John Waters.  
© Christopher Wool

**JW:** George Stoll, too. Working with your mother in the kitchen—

**JP:** Yes, exactly.

There's also a disaster element—

**JW:** I curated a whole show called *Catastrophe* at the Merola Gallery [in Provincetown, Massachusetts].

**JP:** All of them dovetail. The disaster goes in

with your Christopher Wool photograph of his studio. It's—

**JW:** Well, ugly! I think that's the thing. Ugly.

**JP:** It's a disaster, but it's realism—ugly realism.

**JW:** Because it's hard to do ugly, right? Everybody kind of tries to—

**CO:** Well see, I wouldn't call it ugly. I always think of ugly as “bad art.”

**JW:** That's a different thing. Do I own any works that I think are purposely bad paintings? I don't know that I do. Christopher Wool's photograph is the ugliest thing I own in my collection. And I look at it in awe that any artist could take a picture that ugly.

And that's the problem with cell phones. Diane Arbus wouldn't have been able to use [them]... They make every picture look beautiful, like a travel poster! You can't take a bad picture. That's the enemy of art.

**JP:** Okay, but what about Kathe Burkhart? That's purposely bad.

**JW:** Well, okay, it's purposely bad, but she's also a film buff. Because she takes an Elizabeth Taylor movie every time and then writes words that



Kathe Burkhart, *Slit from the Liz Taylor Series (Ash Wednesday)*, 1992, in John Waters' San Francisco Residence, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist, Fredericks & Freiser, NY. Photo by Catherine Opie

a feminist would never write, usually “slit” and “cunt” and that kind of bait.

**JP:** This leads into the third theme I’m coming up with, which is kind of, “What the fuck?”

**JW:** Is that the same as pissing off people? Like Peter Fischli and David Weiss and those airplane pictures? Why is that photo so big? Why did anyone take this



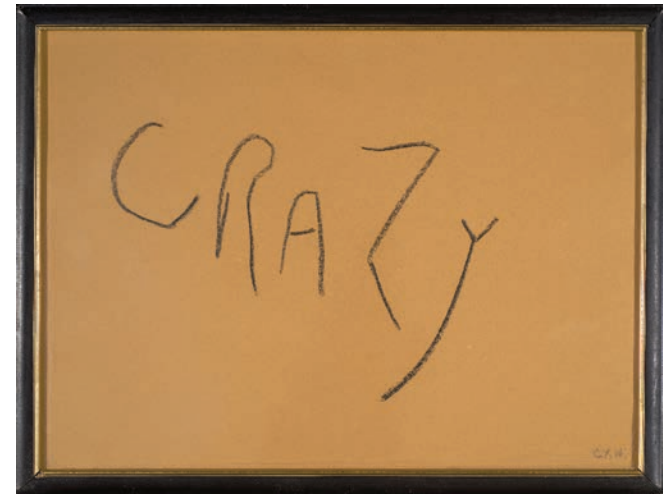
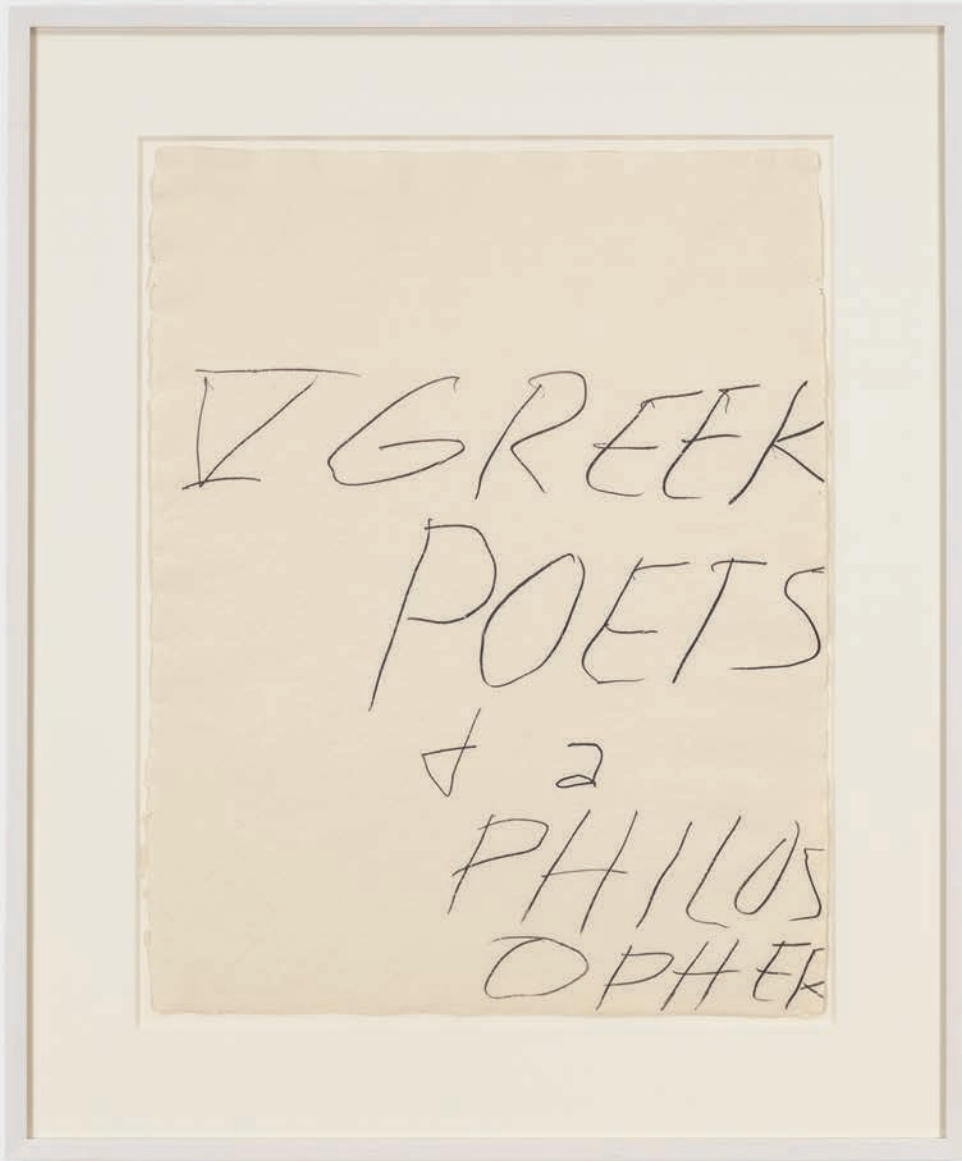
Fischli & Weiss, *Airport-Federal Express*, 1989. Collection of John Waters. © Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

picture? It would be the third reject in a barber shop calendar. Now I never look out the window in an airport without thinking of that work.

I think the piece that sums up this outrageousness more than any of my collection is the Mike Kelley collage. That made even the sophisticates I know in the art world mad when they saw it.

**JP:** Right. But there’s a lot of that going on, like with this Cy Twombly suite of lithographs.

**JW:** It completely made my father insane when he saw that hung on my wall. He always used to gripe,



Left: Cy Twombly. *Five Greek Poets and a Philosopher*. 1978. Collection of John Waters. © Cy Twombly Foundation

Above: John Waters Sr. *C-R-A-Z-Y*. 1994. Collection of John Waters

“You bought that? They saw you coming, boy.” And the dealers did! But that’s how my dad and I could talk about contemporary art. He was just amazed and stupefied that anyone would want to own this piece. Look at that drawing he did—*C-R-A-Z-Y*—to show his contempt for my Twombly purchase. He was mocking it but somehow *did* get it right. He understood Twombly without ever realizing it.

I taught an art class at a grade school recently. And we had one class on Cy Twombly. The students never made fun of him. They loved the drawings. We turned out all the lights, they were blindfolded, and they drew like Cy Twombly. The teacher said, “I’ve never seen them act like this before.” Imagine when they went home with their scribble drawings and showed them to their parents. They’d say proudly, “Look what we did!” And the parents probably complained. But the children completely got it!

I think art's job is to make you mad. To challenge you, and make you look at something in a different way. All the pieces I'm donating have spoken to me because I live with them, and I look at them every day. I wrote a chapter called "Roommates" in my book *Role Models*, which is about the artists I like the best. They are my roommates, and I have a lot of them! I don't own one piece I can't hang up. I only buy little art now, because all my walls are full.

**JP:** I was wondering whether talent got in your way as a photographer or a collector?

**JW:** I think more as a photographer than a collector. I never knew all the rules of photography, I never developed one of my photographs ever. But as an artist, Andy [Warhol] could draw way better than what he's famous for. And to draw those soup cans? It's not easy! To paint those soup cans is hard if you think about it. Talent isn't enough. A million people can really paint. But how they paint it and what they paint, and what you do with it, those turn it into the magic trick of art, to me.

**CO:** One of the films that I always show in all my photography classes is *Pecker*. Because it's about photography in a different way.

Andy Warhol. *untitled [Cheddar Cheese] from Campbell's Soup II*. 1969. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis: Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Herbert W. Johnson, 1993. © 2022 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**JW:** Well, it's about the art world, but he's more of an outsider.

**CO:** Yeah, exactly. He's an outsider artist that gets discovered. But I'm just thinking about that and your own relationship to photography in your collection and as a filmmaker.

**JW:** People thought that I was either Pecker or Cecil B. Demented. But I'm not either. Cecil B. Demented was a cult leader but he had absolutely no sense of humor about himself and hopefully I do. And I'm the opposite of Pecker. I knew about the New York art world, and I wanted them to come down and discover me. Pecker didn't. I wasn't naive, that's the difference.

I'm for the elitism of the art world. I think that art for the people is a terrible idea. To me, art is like a biker gang. There are extremes: you have to learn a special language, there's a killing room. It's all hilarious. And you must dress a certain way. When the art world went to Marfa, Texas, the locals thought Satanists were moving in because everybody dressed in black.

**JP:** The final theme that I see is the notion of touchstones and people that make a difference to you.

**JW:** The person that taught me the most about art was Brenda Richardson [former deputy director and curator at the BMA]. She really taught me everything about collecting art. She gave me my first film exhibition in a museum at the BMA in 1985,



John Waters and Brenda Richardson, 2006. Image © Julie Skarratt Photography, 2006

too. That was before *Hairspray*, so people were outraged that the government would pay for my so-called “disreputable” movies to be shown. Brenda encouraged me when I started taking my photos. She was my very first collector.

**CO:** Is there anything that you'd like to add about the work going to Baltimore, and Jack and I curating it?

**JW:** All three of us have a common history in some ways, and a common taste. And even though we might not agree on some pieces of art, we all have a sense of humor and that's how we get through life. That's how we change other people's minds. Make them laugh to listen.





*Coming Attractions: The John Waters Collection* presented at the  
Baltimore Museum of Art, November 20, 2022–April 16, 2023