

# VULTURE

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## John Waters Is the Godfather of Baltimore's Art Scene

By Cara Ober

Like everyone in Baltimore, I have a John Waters story. I'm 15 and my parents think I'm at a girlfriend's house, not with an older boy, riding on the back of his motorcycle. Seeing giant spotlights and choreographed dancing in the middle of nowhere, we stop for a closer look. We crawl under chain-link fences, staying for hours to watch a camera crew film take after take. Only later did I realize we had stumbled onto the set of *Cry-Baby*, Waters's eighth feature film, starring Johnny Depp, Ricki Lake, Iggy Pop, and Traci Lords. For me, the memory represents the sense of dramatic possibility that continues to permeate Baltimore; I never know what magical spectacle awaits me and whether a 27-year-old Depp might, at least in theory, be lurking around the corner.



John Waters's first work of art "Divine in Ecstasy" Photo: © John Waters; Courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery

John Waters is one of Baltimore's greatest cultural exports. If you know next to nothing about Baltimore, you probably learned it from watching one of his films — all of which have been set in the city in which he grew up, and still lives. Whether intentionally or as a byproduct of his films, the Prince of Puke has become a pillar of the city's creative community, inspiring lawns full of plastic pink flamingos as well as a certain clever insouciance.

What many *Hairspray* fans don't realize is, over the past few decades, Waters has transitioned his creative energies from filmmaking into live performances, writing books, and making visual art. In 1992, he took a grainy still from his early film, *Multiple Maniacs*, of its deceased star, Divine, and titled it *Divine in Ecstasy*. Since then, he has mined the history of film and popular culture into photography, video, sculpture,

and sound works that veer from the absurd to reverent. He shows with Marianne Boesky in New York, and is a discerning collector and supporter of young artists as well.

At 72, Waters remains an enigmatic force in Baltimore. Even as the city which inspired him has its ups and downs (the city's other defining cultural export, after all, is *The Wire*), he's inspired generations of creative insurgents to envision Baltimore as the perfect setting to realize their DIY dreams. And since, as he put it recently, it remains "still cheap enough to have a Bohemia," artists can afford to live and work here, and it sustains a lively art scene. The Baltimore Museum of Art is currently staging a retrospective of the Pope of Trash's artwork titled "Indecent Exposure," which puts a range of his transgressive daring on display. On the occasion of the exhibition, I asked six Baltimore-based artists to consider the ways he has influenced their work.

## Joyce J. Scott



Photo: Justin Tsucalas

"John's audacity to make his own rules and succeed continues to inspire me," says artist and West Baltimore native Joyce J. Scott. The city boasts just a handful of MacArthur geniuses and none is as badass as Scott, who employs traditional craftwork like beading, blown glass, and weaving to depict racial and sexual violence, pairing trauma with humor and stunning visual beauty. Her subversive approach, combined with impressive technical prowess, results in a visual complexity that pops with the shock of a punch in the face. "When they look at my work, I always want people to say, 'What the fuck, Joyce?'" says Scott. "I want people to always be like, 'Daaaaaaam' with all of the As." You can see her bold sculptures at the solo exhibition "What Next and Why Not" at Peter Blum's lower Manhattan gallery on view through November 10.