John Waters

Marianne Boesky / New York

"Witty is always funny in the art world, but is funny acceptable, too?" asks John Waters. "It's a thin line." And it's just one of the tenuous borders that the pencil-thin-mustachioed artist gleefully trampled across in his latest exhibition at Marianne Boesky. Also left smudged in the wake of Waters' C-prints, sculptures and video — a G-rated remake of his cult-classic *Pink Flamingos* — are divisions between innocence and perversity, satire and parody, tribute and travesty.

The show's title, "Beverly Hills John," a nod to the fizz of fermented glamour that loosely united the 42 works, is shared by a portrait of the artist as plastic surgery victim. The plumped, tightened Waters was flanked by augmented visages of Justin Bieber and Lassie, while the theme of mortality literally raised its head — and scythe — in a photo of Jack and Jackie Kennedy disembarking Air Force One in Dallas, with the president trailed by the Grim Reaper.

Taking on the obscenity of celebrity, Waters deployed the pitch-perfect sense of parody evident in his 2003 *Visit Marfa* poster in imagining *Brainiac*, a *National Enquirer*-meets-*New York Review of Books* tabloid fronted by an obese Joan Didion and news of a beyond-the-grave sighting of critic Hilton Kramer ("He's in hell!").

Although a few works did not rise above the status of visual puns ("Did not sell" spelled out in red-dot stickers; a bondage-themed baby stroller), many offered a slower burn, including manipulations of the photographs of Ansel Adams, whose placid vistas are disturbed by vulgarities ranging from wind turbines to a menacing clown.

It was in works such as *Cancel Ansel*, in which multiple images, ideas or pulp novel covers are arrayed in sequence, that Waters' directorial instinct dazzled. His knack for pacing and pay-off is apparent in mock-storyboard works that recombine frames of other directors' films to create new narratives, such as one that suggests a lost Three Stooges short involving a visit to the proctologist, giving new meaning to physical comedy.

by Stephanie Murg

Villa Design Group

Mathew / New York

An omphalocele, a rare birth defect in which a fetus's intestines or other organs develop in a transparent membrane sac ballooning outside of the body, is an abnormality upsetting not only for its bodily consequences but in small part for its material reminder of one's fragile, porous substance, a reality often taken for granted in good health. Walking through Villa Design Group's installation "One Blow in Anger (Evidence 2011–2014)," their first exhibition in New York, at recent Berlin transplant Mathew, evokes a similar sensation — a sinking admission that, like intestines and nerves, what literally keeps us going is actually quite twisted and grotesque.

In a perimeter of nineteen sketches of nonsensical objects on drafting paper, each frame mounted above a plaque engraved with a corresponding chapter of the group's nineteen-part text piece *Evidence of Childhood I-XIX*, the plates narrate a contortion of overlapping, forbidden love affairs. The floor is papered with large acetate sheets printed with pages of Patricia Highsmith's 1984 *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, the artists' notations in the margins. Meanwhile imitation Barcelona chairs, van der Rohe's persistent midcentury object of aspirational-lifestyle fetish, sit under plastic sheeting (*Suffocation Harp 1–4*). Nestled within this cellophane layer are cold, steel forensic tables holding alternately wooden architectural models of impossible structures and brand-new Calvin Klein sweatshirts, stitched with names of his evocative early '90s fragrances: Escape, Eternity and Obsession.

Softer is the adjoining den, with an imposing, geometric charcoal-colored lamp (*Futurized Mussolini Meteorite Lectern*); and *Carrion Circle*, an installation of fluffy floor pillows and another indicator of high taste: a sinister redesign of Eileen Gray's sleek side table, creating an inviting setting for thumbing through the group's new publication, *REPERTORY 2011–2014* — a hefty report of clinical case studies in "queering the object," using symbols of refined luxury and design as a means of dismantling relentless consumer desire.

by Jennifer Piejko

Gruyter & Thys

CCA Wattis / San Francisco

For their first solo show in the U.S., the Belgian duo Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys filled San Francisco's Wattis Institute with varying tones of blankness. Upon entering the main gallery, one is oddly "greeted" by a plethora of tall, stark white, paper-doll-like figurative steel sculptures titled *The White Elements* (2012). Each is topped with a scribbly, pencil-drawn portrait of an indiscriminate face. This sculptural installation is complemented by *Untitled (Public Transport)* (2013), an equally unmemorable yet clearly purposely rendered set of drawings of, as the exhibition's title claims, trams, buses and their plebeian passengers. These are the kinds of faces we pass by each day on the street, in the subway, at the supermarket, the kinds that one ignores so as to avoid having to face — pun intended — the difficulties and complexities of the lives of others. Meanwhile we continue to sink our souls deeper into the screen in hand, the task ahead, the day's impending end.

It is this feeling, this type of knee-jerk reaction, lowering the lids of one's eyes rather than confronting strangers, that Gruyter and Thys bring to the fore. And yet, at the same time, they allow the viewer to further indulge such inattention. The sculptures are there and yet the space feels empty. It is not a particularly fun show to look at, but rather perhaps to reflect upon a week or so later. Strangely, in the adjoining large space, filled with white folding chairs, a large projection of a video titled *Die aap van Bloemfontein [The Ape from Bloemfontein]* (2014) is colorful, historical and somewhat narrative-based. Here ancient and weathered-looking busts gradually morph into real people, though still as random and indistinct as those in Gruyter and Thys's drawings, while a voice-over dialog between two pieces of fruit drags, meaninglessly, on and on.

by Courtney Malick