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Why Baltimore Persists as a Cultural Beacon

The city (population 600,000) has produced an eclectic variety of artists, including John Waters, Joyce J. Scott, David Simon and Abdu Ali.

Three of the most iconic bards of Baltimore (from left): the writer and director John Waters, the novelist Anne Tyler and the television writer and producer David Simon. Each broke important ground in defining the city to a larger audience. Credit: Credit Photograph by Matt Lipps. From left: New Line Cinema/Photofest (Divine); Michael Kraus/Shutterstock (flamingo); Pressmaster/Shutterstock (spray can); Zoonar GMBH/Alamy (motorcycle); New Line Cinema/Photofest (John Waters); © Ullstein Bild-Fotografische/The Image Works (suitcase); Ansonsaw/Getty Images (thread); Geraint Lewis/Alamy (Anne Tyler); Peter Alvey/Alamy (coffee); Joseph Sohm/Alamy (Bromo Seltzer building); Mike McGregor/Contour/Getty Images (David Simon); Ale Flamy/Getty Images (gun); akg-images/Interfoto (tape recorder); Michael Burrell/Alamy (flip phone); IhorL/Shutterstock (handcuffs)

By Andrew Martin
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"HEY, WHERE THE [EXPLETIVE] are we anyway today?" asks one of the troupe members of Lady Divine's Cavalcade of Perversions in the opening moments of John Waters' raucously disgusting 1970 film "Multiple Maniacs." The answer was the front lawn of Waters's parents' house in the Baltimore suburb of Lutherville, Md. Much of the film, like many in Waters's oeuvre, spills out across the streets of Baltimore; the final sequence recalls the gleeful opening of "A Hard Day's Night" (1964) turned on its head, with crowds of young people charging down city blocks in flight from the rampaging drag queen Divine. (Just before this, Divine is sexually assaulted by a giant lobster, one of the more disturbing non sequiturs in a film that consists of almost nothing but them.)

In the world that Waters established in "Maniacs," and deepened, if that's the word for it, in "Pink Flamingos" (1972), "Female Trouble" (1974) and many more, Baltimore is an unfathomably weird place: aggressively grotesque, sexually abject and cheerfully violent. It is a city where anything — see lobster attack — can happen. One watches his proudly queer, exhibitionistic stock company the Dreamlanders in these early films (a contemporary review of "Maniacs" in the Baltimore Sun notes that the "heavily Baltimorese" accents are the funniest thing about the movie) and cannot help but wonder admiringly, and at times nervously, about the psychology of the city that produced it.

The drag queen Divine chases crowds of young people down Baltimore city blocks in the final sequence of John Waters's 1970 film "Multiple Maniacs." © 1970/2016 John Waters, courtesy of Janus Films/The Criterion Collection

WATERS'S FILMS along with, in very different registers, the writer Anne Tyler's psychologically acute family novels and David Simon's sprawling television epic of urban corruption, "The Wire," represent the triumph of an intensely local vision. In the work of these three artists, each of whom broke important ground in depicting Baltimore to the world at large, there is a deep allegiance to the city's particularity, a burrowing into the character of the place. Their work feels different in kind both from that produced in larger cities like New York and Los Angeles and from that originating

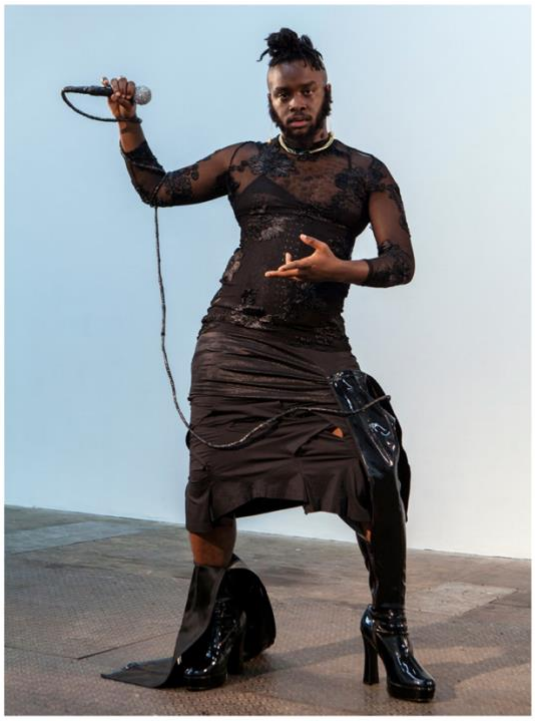
from smaller, intellectual hubs such as Providence, R.I., and Oxford, Miss. Together, they stand as a kind of trio of city bards, fiercely loyal to a complicated area that defies cliché and casual explanation. A deep variant of the strange runs through the water in Baltimore, and the fact that such an eclectic group of artists has committed its life and work to an otherwise relatively inconsequential midsize city is rare in today's cultural landscape.

I was born in Columbia, Md., a suburb of Baltimore, and though I have no claim to being a city native, I travel to Baltimore and its surroundings every year or two. In that time, I've come to understand the city's character as being shaped by its contradictions, geographically and culturally, which have always defied categorization. I also see a city that inspires an underdog identification, perhaps in part because of its nebulous identity — Baltimore is worlds away, psychically, but not much of a drive (when the traffic abates) from both the seats of power in and around Washington, D.C., and the rural coastal communities of the Eastern Shore. When I spoke with Dan Deacon, the electronic musician who has been a central figure in the city's D.I.Y. music scene for well over a decade, he cited a speech from an episode of "Homicide: Life on the Street," the 1993 to 1999 television series based on David Simon's pre-"Wire" book about crime in Baltimore, to articulate the city's neither-here-nor-there quality. In the scene, a murder suspect tells a detective he's got the "homegrown look": "That not too southern, not too northern, not on the ocean but still on the water look."

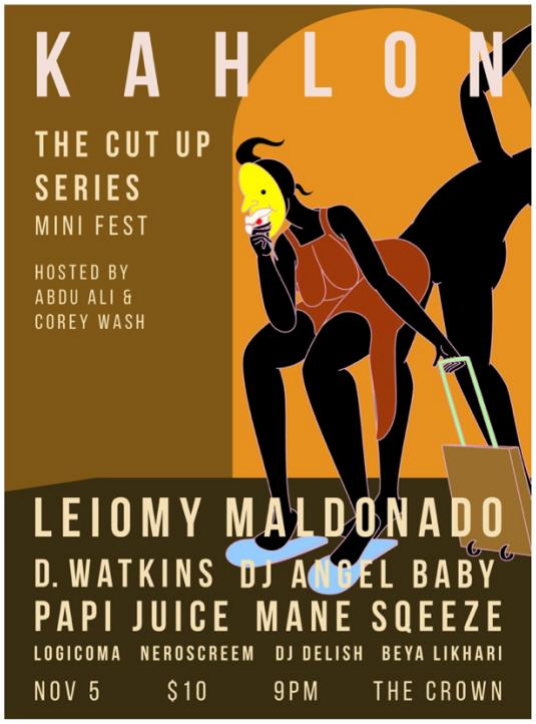
The visual artist and MacArthur fellow Joyce J. Scott in her Baltimore home. Scott's work often incorporates delicate, traditional beadwork and confronts the horrors of the country's racial history.
Credit: Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

One hears something of this in-betweenness in John Updike's review of Tyler's novel "Earthly Possessions," from 1977, in which he notes that "she is at peace in the semi-countrified, semi-plasticized, Northern-Southern America where she and her characters live." Tyler, who has set most of her 22 novels in Baltimore since moving to the genteel Roland Park neighborhood in 1967, writes about the city as though it were a small town, capturing the interconnected fates and yearnings of her working- and middle-class families. When I wrote to Tyler asking how the city has influenced her fiction, she responded, "For me as a writer, the value of Baltimore has been the character of the city itself — the fact that it is a character, with its own distinctive quirks and foibles that color every story set there."

Updike saw Tyler's work as part of a Southern literary tradition, noting that "she holds fast, in her imagination and in her person, to a Baltimore with only Southern exits; her characters, when they flee, never flee North." "The Wire," on the other hand, surely the most high-profile depiction of the city in the 21st century, fits more naturally into what might be considered a Northern tradition, one in which the unruly, labyrinthine nature of urban life is central to the show's conception of the city. Simon and his collaborators' layered storytelling humanizes the police, drug dealers, politicians, teachers and journalists who call the city home, placing the city's poor and powerful on equal narrative footing and delving deeply into the causes of the city's profound racial and economic inequality and injustice. As the primary lens through which many nonresidents come to know the city, it might, perhaps, give the casual viewer the impression that Baltimore consists mainly of drugs, murder and political corruption. (In Gary Shteyngart's latest novel, "Lake Success," a group of German tourists take a "Wire"-inspired tour of West Baltimore — the war on drugs has officially become a theme park.) Simon's gimlet-eyed take on the city is always one of dichotomies and revelations: The drug dealers are philosophers, the police brutal poets of vulgarity. Nothing is ever just one thing.



The musician Abdu Ali.
Credit: Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.



A 2016 flyer for the Kahlon concert and party series, co-founded by Ali in 2013. Credit: Theresa Chromati

THOUGH THESE THREE represent only the most historically visible of the city's artists, the current vein of work being produced, much of it by the city's majority black population, is fueled by many of the same conditions that have long made Baltimore a site of such originality. The longstanding availability of cheap space in which to work and experiment combined with the interconnected collegiality of its arts communities has fostered this energy, even as Baltimore's residents, artistic and otherwise, struggle with the city's dire political conditions. This paradox — the devil's bargain of a city that operates as a laboratory for bold visions in exchange for social and economic precariousness — is at the heart of the city's creative life.

The option to leave for somewhere bigger, more "important," is always present, which makes staying a conscious act of loyalty. (Adam Jones, the Orioles' most popular player for the last 10 seasons, once quipped that his favorite place in Baltimore was the airport; fans forgave him.) But the best way to understand the city's strangeness — its ability to be not a lesser New York or a quieter Atlanta — is the richness of its underground, a place that feels very much alive in Baltimore. The work of the musician Abdu Ali, for example, combines the influences of punk, rap and Baltimore club (the city's explosive, ecstatic brand of hip-hop inflected house music) to create something bracingly new. A gender nonconforming artist, Ali spoke about the need to recognize the contributions of women and queer artists to the city's musical history — particularly the pioneers of Baltimore club, such as Miss Tony, who recorded tracks and spun records in drag through most of the '90s, and K-Swift, one of the city's most popular young D.J.s at the time of her death in 2008 — while also expanding the scope of what's possible in the city. In 2013, Ali co-founded a concert and party series called Kahlon, which had the

explicit goal of putting alternative and experimental black, L.G.B.T.Q. and women-identified artists on the same stage. As a Baltimore native, Ali noticed that too many of the shows they were going to, often dominated by straight, white artists, "didn't reflect what the city really is, and what brings the charm to the city."

"It's the only city left that's cheap enough to have a bohemia," John Waters told me, still willing, on a hectic day, to fulfill his lifetime role as ambassador to Baltimore's creative byways. "It used to be people said, 'I moved here,' and people said, 'Why?' And now, when I say I have an apartment in New York, people say, 'Why?' It's the opposite of what it used to be." (As if his committed relationship with the city needed any more emphasis, a huge exhibition of his visual art, "John Waters: Indecent Exposure," opened at the Baltimore Museum of Art last fall.) In the wake of the family-friendly musical adaptations of "Hairspray" (1988), including a live television version two years ago that reached more than 11 million viewers, it's easy to forget how subversive much of Waters's work remains. "Pink Flamingos" has not been tamed by time; if anything, it might be even more shocking now, removed from its immediate post-60s context of ritualized taboo breaking. The entire movie feels like looking through a keyhole into a very particular, and quite varied, fetish party. A large woman in a baby crib relentlessly demands eggs; a man flexes his anus (in close-up!) in time to "Surfin' Bird"; a live chicken is crushed between a couple as they have sex. Divine is treated throughout as a kind of dominatrix deity, responding to all dissent with violence. There are many places in America, one imagines, that would disinherit the person who produced such scenarios, or at least treat them warily. But Waters has become a synecdoche for the city — the embrace of queerness, of "perversion" of all kinds, a stand-in for Baltimore's willingness to accept all comers and to make art out of whatever's around.

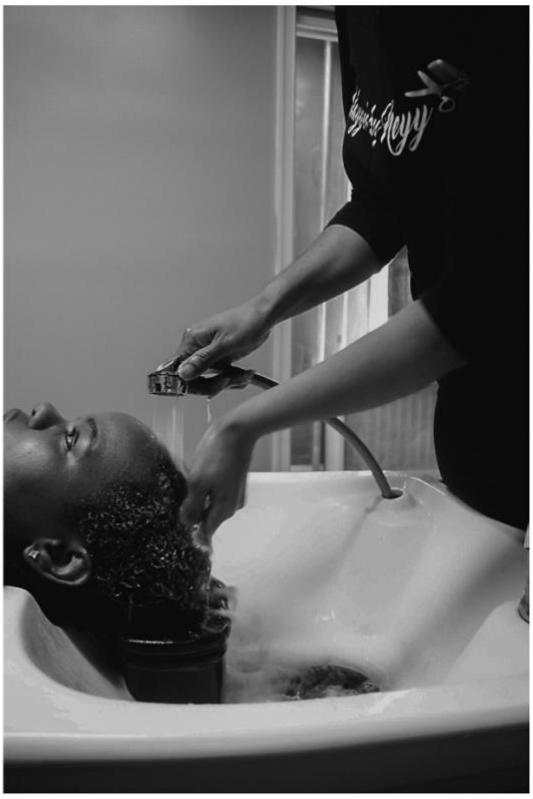
A clip from "In the Jungle" (2017), a film written and directed by the Baltimore-based artist Stephanie Barber, featuring Cricket Arrison and M.C. Schmidt.

Something of the early Waters spirit — the handmade quality, the risk taking, the defiance — feels present in much of the work now produced in Baltimore. Stephanie Barber makes elliptical and playful films that leap from dense conversations about the artistic process into unexpected bursts of song and dance. "There's an ability to fail here that there might not be in other cities, and I mean that in the most beautiful, radical way," she told me. The notion of risk as being essential to the creative process is palpable throughout her work — her 2017 film "In the Jungle" metaphorizes the artist's journey as a scientist's lonely and dangerous fieldwork in an endearingly kitschy jungle — and the city allows her and others to enact that risk in ways that would be impossible in a city with a more glaring national spotlight. Her films, like Waters's, though with a wry delicacy that couldn't be more different than his approach, speak a secret language.

But the lack of spotlight in the city also presents difficulties for artists, for whom a robust critical discourse is both a sign of success and an encouragement. Deacon described an indie music scene — which has produced nationally known artists such as Beach House and Future Islands — where "there's a lot of potential energy" that's been somewhat hampered by the loss of the city's underground warehouse show culture, as well as the shuttering of City Paper, the city's alternative weekly, in 2017. But he also noted that the arts community has made significant steps toward addressing its blind spots in recent years, particularly regarding race and inclusion.

POLITICS, AND PARTICULARLY the city's cruel racial politics, both recent and past, are never far from the surface in discussions about Baltimore today. Black communities were the victims of residential redlining beginning in the 1930s, creating generations of wealth disparity and inadequate services. In April 1968, the city, like others across the country, boiled over into violent unrest following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., leaving six people dead, about 700 injured and widespread damage to businesses and property. Over the following decades, white flight led to a significant population decline, with many businesses following the city's middle-class residents to the suburbs. In 2015, Freddie Gray, a black man arrested for illegal knife possession, was gravely injured while in police custody and died a week later, setting off protests calling for the investigation and prosecution of the officers responsible. The protests immediately following Gray's funeral became violent, resulting in nationally broadcast images of burned police cars and businesses. In the following months, the city saw a spike in homicides (the reasons for which remain disputed); over the following year, the officers involved in Gray's apprehension and transportation were charged with crimes related to his death, but after the initial trials resulted in three acquittals, the charges against the remaining three officers were dropped. If it were ever possible to work and live as an artist in Baltimore while ignoring the city's pervasive racial injustices, large and small, that time has long passed.

Shan Wallace's "Hair Dresser at Salon Infiniti Uses a Flat Iron to Curl a Customer's Hair" (2018). Credit: Courtesy of the artist



Shan Wallace's "Beautician Thoroughly Rinses Water Through Client's Hair" (2018). Credit: courtesy of the artist

The sculptor Joyce J. Scott and the photographer Shan Wallace represent two generations of Baltimore visual artists, both committed to depicting the city's African-American history and its present-day existence through their respective mediums. Scott, 70, creates beautiful, troubling sculpture and jewelry, which often incorporates delicate traditional beadwork and confronts the horrors of the country's racial history: Her piece "Lynched Tree" (2011-15) is a large, amorphous sculpture that depicts a body hanging upside down by the legs from the ceiling, spilling chains, beads and bones onto the gallery floor below.

Wallace, 27, is part of the new guard, a photographer whose work shifted after attending a rally held in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012. She photographs, she wrote to me, "the essence of this city, the black communities, the resistance and resilience of black people." She gives the subjects of her work copies of the photographs in order to demonstrate "the value of archiving with the goal of empowerment." Her work draws its force from its insistence on the beauty and significance of everyday life among communities that have not historically been recorded with such careful attention.

Baltimore has thus far resisted the overdevelopment that has sanded off some of the weirder edges of other cities with thriving arts communities like Austin, Tex., Portland, Ore., and, most notoriously, San Francisco. Rather than lamenting the bygone days of some artistic peak, the city is able to point to a living lineage, a continuity that is

renewed with each new generation. I think of Ali and their peers like Butch Dawson and Jpegmafia, for example, responding directly to the legacy of Baltimore club, a genre that remains largely unknown outside the city. Rather than tearing things down and starting new, the artistic tendency of the city is to create layers, riffing on what came before and changing it in the process.

In the course of writing this essay, I was surprised by the number of people who, even as they protectively warned me against essentializing or pigeonholing the city, posited Baltimore as a microcosm of the country as a whole. On some level, I understood what they were telling me — don't ignore the complicated history, the glaring inequality, the struggle to make beauty out of darkness. But Baltimore also feels, in its insistence on maintaining a local culture through community and self-identity, like a holdout from an older tradition, one that can get lost under new construction. The city will change, one hopes — socially and economically — for the good. But, with any luck, it will continue to be the odd, ambitious place where murderous drag queens roam the streets. You still can't do that in D.C.