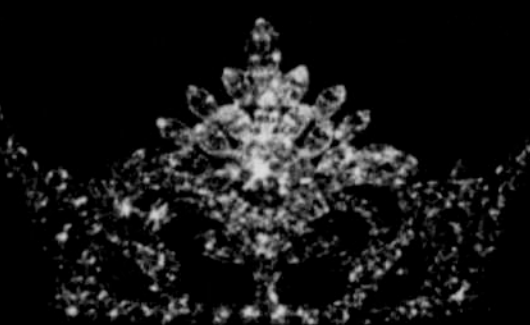


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film

Seeing Double

Twin experimental film legends come to Portland
by Gary Morris

When John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* was released in 1972, audiences and critics alike were shocked and enthralled by the "insanity" onscreen, proclaiming the film unlike anything they'd seen. And it's true that Waters, in his eternal quest to rub viewers' noses in bad taste, went over the top in scenes like Divine and that hapless toy poodle.

But *Pink Flamingos* was not quite the breakthrough it seemed. Waters himself credits two lesser-known but highly influential filmmakers as the inspiration for *Flamingos* and all his work: George and Mike Kuchar. The Kuchar brothers, separately and together, pioneered a highly personal, queer-inflected, campy, baroque, hilarious, strange, low- or no-budget style of experimental filmmaking in the early 1950s that became the template for many an underground moviemaker with more ideas than cash. Talents as disparate as Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, along with quirky mainstream artists like David Lynch, have rightly paid homage to the cinematic teachings of the irrepressible Kuchars.

George and Mike—you have to call them that; they'd laugh at the formality of "Mr. Kuchar"—defied the odds from the beginning, as the only known pair of twin gay filmmakers. Born in Manhattan in 1942 to working-class parents of Ukrainian and Hungarian extraction, the boys moved to a Bronx tenement at a young age. Both evinced artistic talent early on. Obsessed with Hollywood and their truckdriver dad's trashy novel collection, they received an 8mm camera for their 12th birthdays and immediately began turning their fears

Mike, "and we stuck the camera in a fast-running stream and ran it in slow motion, and it was like a flood. We had some friends dressed up in costumes which were really bedsheets."

A cheap camera, a fast-running stream, a few friends and some bedsheets—such were the ingredients of Le Cinema Kuchar then and now. A satirical edge was also evident from early on in Hollywood sendups with titles like *A Tub Called Desire* (1956).

George's vivid 1998 essay "Schooling" gives a good indication of the brothers' complex, witty sensibility and a feeling for what their films are like—equal parts flamboyance, terror and raging id: "After school my twin brother and I would escape to the cinema, fleeing from our classmates, urban urchins who belched up egg creams and clouds of nicotine. In the safety of the theater we'd sit through hour upon hour of Indian squaws being eaten alive by fire ants, debauched pagans coughing up blood as the temples of God crashed down on their intestines, and naked monstrosities made from rubber lumbering out of radiation-poisoned waters to claw the flesh off women who had just lost their virginity."

Wet Destruction was followed by hundreds of films (literally) in the comic chaos mode, torrid two-dollar melodramas based on Kuchar favorites such as Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind*. The titles are as notorious as the films themselves: *Corruption of the Damned* (1967), *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* (1961), *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966). Like John Waters' work, they featured a stock company of eccentric amateurs dying to strut their stuff in film after film. *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965) features "robot sex." In *Color Me Shameless* (1967) a woman ends her obsession with a "life-sized doll" by hurling it out a window.

Thundercrack! (1975) is pure Kuchar, written by and starring George but directed by George's sometime lover Curt McDowell. In one famous scene a sweating

George gets masturbated in close-up by an amorous "escaped gorilla."

Many of the films continued to feature their trademark shoestring special effects, which included floods, earthquakes and tornadoes rendered with stock footage, backyard assemblages and matte paintings by the talented duo. Musical scores were both reassuring and creepy, often lounge music backgrounding the zany doings onscreen.

In true DIY style, the Kuchars dealt briskly with any cinematic emergency. If a star didn't show, George would pinch-hit, even if the part called for an actress and a nude buttocks shot, as



The Kuchar brothers' films are equal parts flamboyance, terror and raging id.

in *Night of the Bomb* (1962). Looking and acting like cute nerds, the boys were fearless in their devotion to their artistry, insisting on making movies with nudity and sex and sacrilege, and topics ranging from the timely (the Cuban missile crisis) to the taboo (thalidomide babies). They were innovative exhibitors as well, setting up informal cinema clubs to show their work, which scandalized some of the attendees with its sexual frankness, anarchistic air, laughable plots and charmingly low-rent special effects.

In the 1960s the brothers began to work independently, with George refining the steamy camp melodrama and, later, working in a diary format that allowed him to drolly record the nuances of his daily life and his self-proclaimed favorite topic, Midwestern tornadoes. Mike, too, continued to perfect his own brand of unfettered filmmaking, and both focused on painting, cartoons and writing as well. In the early 1970s George began teaching at San Francisco Art Institute, where students acted as cast and crew to create new and dazzling digital Kuchar productions: comically surreal shorts and featurettes with titles like *Tempest in a Tea Room* (1990) and *Queen Konga* (2006), the latter utilizing black-and-white digital video for some extraordinarily beautiful effects.

Clinton Street Theater is devoting two weekends to the Kuchars spotlighting this later material, each weekend showcasing the work of one of the brothers, who will attend. These shorts promise to be among the highlights of Portland's summer cinema season. George is represented by such provocative titles as *Dangling Digitalia*, *Cinemaville* and *Orphans of Mars*, in which "three attractive teens on the planet Mars seek funding for an expedition into adulthood." Mike's program includes the likes of *Cupid's Infirmary*, *The Fornicators* and *Grip of the Gorgon*, tantalizingly described thusly: "Those snake-haired sisters of legend are alive and well, living in New York City and still turning men hard as stone!" Not to be missed. 10

Clinton Street Theater presents the Kuchar Brothers 8:30 p.m. July 25 and 26 and Aug. 1 and 2 at 2522 S.E. Clinton St. Admission is \$8.

GARY MORRIS edits and publishes Bright Lights Film Journal, located online at www.brightlightsfilm.com.



Mike (left) and George Kuchar influenced talents as disparate as John Waters, Andy Warhol, Jack Smith and David Lynch.

and fantasies into cinema. Alas, one of their first efforts—an untitled "transvestite movie," according to George—resulted not in audience acclaim but a whipping from their outraged mother, whose nightgown they'd "soiled" during shooting.

"That unfortunate incident," recalls George, "did not end our big costume epics. One month later Mike and I filmed an Egyptian spectacle on the same roof with all the television antennas resembling a cast of skinny thousands. Our career in films had begun."

Their first "official" film, *The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire*, appeared the same year, 1954. "We did matte paintings of the city," says