

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Julie Belcove. "Forged in Myth," *Financial Times*, September 3/September 4, 2011, 12

12 LIFE & ARTS

FINANCIAL TIMES SEPTEMBER 3/SEPTEMBER 4

Arts

Forged in myth

Matthew Barney's first solo exhibition in New York for five years is part of his performance project 'Ancient Evenings,' mixing elements of Egyptian mythology, the US car industry and TV series 'CSI'. Julie Belcove meets him at his studio on the East river

A vaguely chemical smell hangs in the air of a working-class neighbourhood in Long Island City, Queens, on a hot summer afternoon. Here, on the bank of the East river, sits the warehouse-size studio of American artist Matthew Barney. Four years into his latest ongoing project, *Ancient Evenings*, a performance piece-cum-opera encompassing Egyptian mythology and the rise and fall of the US automobile industry, with a nod to *CSI* thrown in for good measure, Barney's mind is squarely on the works in progress inside.

As he opens the gate for a visitor, he hardly notices the jaw-dropping view of Manhattan's gleaming towers, seemingly just a short swim away. "I don't go to Manhattan any more, not that anything's going on in Manhattan," he says with the slight superiority of a recent Brooklyn transplant. "I commute between Queens and Brooklyn by going under Manhattan."

Barney will, however, stop on the island when his first solo exhibition in New York in five years opens at Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea on September 17. Derived from the first two acts of *Ancient Evenings*, which in turn takes its title and cue from Norman Mailer's 1983 novel of death and rebirth, the show of sculptures and drawings is bound to be one of the autumn season's big draws. A Barney event always is.

Like his *Cremaster Cycle* of films, which solidified his standing as an art star in the 1990s, and *Drawing Restraint 9* (in which he and his real-life partner, the Icelandic singer Björk, erotically transformed into whales), *Ancient Evenings* fuses age-old mythology with modernity.

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"It's always been a good experience for me to deal with a source mythology," Barney says. "It's almost restarting my system, coming back to something from time to time." In this case, Barney spins the Egyptian story of Osiris and Isis, the married siblings whose love transcended death, into a contemporary tale by casting automobiles as the murdered god-king and transposing the action to present-day Los Angeles and Detroit.

Rather charmingly, Barney believes most viewers will be familiar with the central myth but, since the sculptures – including a bronze cast of the underside of a 1967 Chrysler Imperial, replete with canopic urns, which Egyptians used to store the deceased's innards – will be on view without their narrative context, he has decided to produce a playbill containing a condensed libretto for the show.

Barney groupies will no doubt be thrilled – and his critics exasperated – that he has woven several *Cremaster* elements into *Ancient Evenings*, among them the Imperial, his own Apprentice character and the actress Almee Mullins, whose Isis is a forensic investigator searching for her husband/brother's remains as he is reincarnated into a Pontiac Trans Am and then a Ford Crown Victoria.

There will also be both thrills and exasperation that, although the live performances will not be repeated, Barney decided

to film them after all. "I am making a film out of this – secretly," he admits with a laugh. "Maybe the most positive thing in this for me is it has revived my interest in whatever I was doing – call it filmmaking."

He asks an assistant to play some of the footage. ("I don't know how to work it," he chuckles.) We watch, both transfixed, as Seth, Osiris's brother, smashes the windshield. The car drives along Detroit's depressed streets, skirts the shiny downtown and then, in slo-mo, crashes off a bridge into the river. "It's sort of more

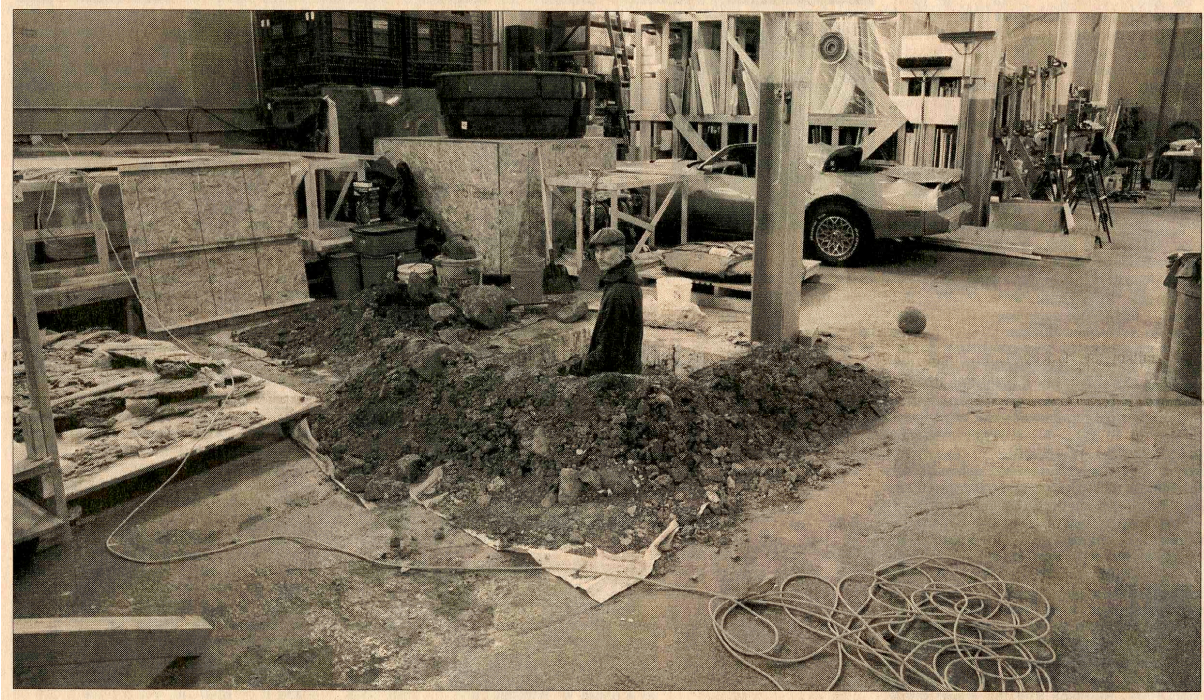
Barney still calls himself a sculptor: 'For me, performance has always belonged to the language of object-making'

narrative than some of the other things [I've done]," he says approvingly.

Not that this resembles standard-issue Hollywood fare, or even a highbrow indie. Take, for instance, the squad of gold-costumed figures wearing top hats, meant to evoke the mortality-obsessed conceptual artist James Lee Byars, who grew up in Detroit and died in Cairo in 1997. "For me, the narratives pile on top of one another to the point of becoming very abstract," he

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Submerged Matthew Barney
at his studio in New York

Ari Marcopoulos

says. "I have a kind of map to follow, which is relatively organic. A lot of time that's where humour comes in – where different layers come in and out of contact with each other. There's a potential for camp even, where it fails to deliver the seriousness it sets out to deliver."

Strikingly handsome at 44, Barney exudes a quiet intelligence. He undertook *Ancient Evenings* at the suggestion of Norman Mailer, who starred in *Cremaster 2*. "The last time I saw him, he asked me to read it," Barney recalls. "I had a little chance to talk to him about using it as a libretto before he passed away. I think he was game."

He teamed up with composer Jonathan Bepler, a *Cremaster* collaborator, to turn it into a live opera. Barney has experimented with performance since his college days at Yale. His sensational 1991 debut at Gladstone, which landed him on the cover of *Art Forum* at the age of 24, involved a film of him ascending the gallery walls like a rock climber. It helped to usher in a renaissance of the then-moribund genre.

"I think a lot of people were feeling that art was becoming an industry and that there was probably a yearning for a more direct experience, one that's not mediated through the market," he says.

Barney has generally steered clear of performing for a live audience but, after the elaborate production of *DR 9*, he wanted "a

more direct approach, less mediated" than film could offer. For *Ancient Evenings*, he invited about 500 people to observe Act I, performed in Los Angeles in 2008, and then about 200 for Act II in Detroit last October.

Barney often calls his performances "actions", in that they produce other, more tangible artworks. His many acclaimed films notwithstanding, he still defines himself as a sculptor. "For me, performance has always belonged to the language of object-making," he says. "I'm always blindsided when I see something that is more derivative of theatre. I'm just less interested in that. But it's a matter of taste."

That said, Barney's art is nothing if not dramatic. In Act I, the Imperial's nameplates were removed and placed in a cartouche before the car was ceremoniously shredded and heaved into the river. In Act II, as the ensemble floated downriver on a barge, albino corn snakes slithered into the car engine's cylinders, which Isis then sat atop, pants down, in full view of the audience and a brass band. Later, after what Barney describes as a "soap-opera-like" screaming match between Isis and her sister Nephthys, chunks of the car were fed into furnaces, watched over by the Byars characters. Rivers of the molten iron flowed into a mould, solidifying into an eight-ton sculpture of a car part that will be the centrepiece of the Gladstone show.

Volunteers from iron-casting clubs flew to Detroit from as far away as Europe to build and operate the five towering furnaces at an abandoned steel mill. Then, on the day of the performance, it rained, prompting Barney's team, who feared the water might cause explosions, to evacuate the audience midway through the scene. On the bright side, Barney says, "Detroit looks amazing under a heavy sky."

The city also provided a suitable note of melancholy. "Detroit is special in that you can see the layers of history," he continues. "You see the mineral wealth there. You see why Henry Ford did what he did there. You can see the grandeur of the heyday of the auto industry, and you can see failure too. I'm sure that was touching to people."

Still to come is the final act, which Barney plans to produce in New York next year but is not ready to preview. He does note: "Where we left off in the Detroit river we'll pick up in the East river."

For his next project, Barney isn't ruling anything out. Writing the libretto has inspired him to contemplate a book and even a feature film. "You know, things change," he says. "I didn't think I would come back to filmmaking as quickly as I have, so I feel like anything's possible."

*Matthew Barney is at Gladstone Gallery
New York, September 17 to October 22.
www.gladstonegallery.com*