

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Campagnola, Sonia, "Matthew Barney", *Flash Art*, October 2008, p 136

REVIEWS

MATTHEW BARNEY LOS ANGELES

Matthew Barney's *REN* is the first of a series of planned one-shot live performances that are to be documented and edited into individual films. Situated in the outskirts of Los Angeles, this publicly attended spectacle lasted about two hours. Again collaborating with composer Jonathan Bepler, Barney this time took inspiration from the novel *Ancient Evenings* by his muse Norman Mailer (Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* inspired *Cremaster 2*, in which the author also appeared as Houdini).

Based in Egypt at the time of the pyramids, *Ancient Evenings* tells of the passage of the soul to the afterlife; *REN* is set in an old car dealership — located near a freeway, suburban chain stores and parking lots — refurbished as a Chrysler showroom with ramps, display cars, employee pictures, logos, flags and pennants. The alien quality of the venue was the perfect trope to initiate this metaphorical narrative — think of something emphatic and ritualistic, somewhere between a rock concert and a bacchanal.

Spectators gathered at the top of the ramp, in a corner formed by taco trucks; a drum-and-bugle corps appeared and marched up towards the audience where it stalled, forming a corridor; the taco trucks moved on the sides, literally and symbolically clearing the passage for a burned-out 1967 Chrysler Imperial (as seen in *Cremaster 3*). On the car's roof lay a body, like a corpse, covered by potatoes, and at the back a big globe filled with septic liquid was enchained. Like a coffin in a procession, the car was carried with ropes down the ramp by dozens of Latino workers.

With a pop look but a solemn tone, with moments of action and stasis, the performance continued in the showroom where a ranchera singer introduced the theme of collapse with a mariachi song. The ultimate act of aggression was manifested in a sexual and sadistic climax of demolition that was at the same time repulsive and compelling: an excavator struck the Chrysler until it was reduced to a mush that mixed with the septic

chemical and various trash.

The epiphany arrived in an underground garage occupied by derelict cars. Here a young naked woman wearing a mask slowly turned while numerous locusts wandered about her head and at her feet. A seemingly endless shroud was extracted from a tube extending from her vagina, in a menstrual gesture symbolizing both life and death. Vanishing into the dark end of the garage, she closed this lysergic parable of civilization in decline. In a review of *REN*, the *Los Angeles Times* admonished Barney for his vanity and extravagance; but the truth is, I've never experienced something as excessive and astonishing as this live vision of our times.

Sonia Campagnola

MATTHEW BARNEY and JONATHAN BEPLER, *REN*, 2008. Performance. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photos: Ivano Grasso (left)/Chris Winget (right).

