

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jason Farago "Interview: Matthew Barney," *Even*,  
Spring, 2017

## , Even

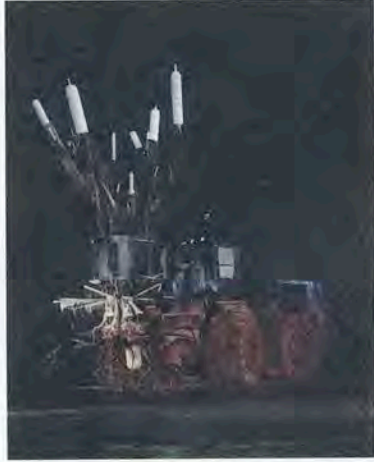
## , Interview

# Matthew Barney

A quarter-century ago, a young artist fresh out of Yale threw on a blue swimming cap and a white jockstrap, rigged himself into a harness, and propelled himself across the walls of a SoHo gallery by means of ice picks. The performance became a central component of the *OTTO Trilogy*, a juggernaut in recent art history in which the 24-year-old Matthew Barney combined sculpture and performance, athletics and aesthetics. This past autumn, those early works were re-presented in a revelatory exhibition at New York's Gladstone Gallery,

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and their freshness was as surprising as their force. If the early works now seemed to prefigure the hermetic systems of the *Cremaster Cycle* and the performative feats of *River of Fundament*, they also had their own undeniable potency, strange and sublime.

Barney was born in San Francisco in 1967 and grew up in Idaho; he returns to the American west with some frequency, and he's preparing to shoot a new film there. On a rainy morning he guides me around his large riverfront studio, where a half-dozen assistants are restoring older works and preparing new ones; two 20-foot tree trunks, these too equipped with harnesses, tower in the space and await rehearsing dancers. When we sit down in his library I notice a small reproduction of a painting taped to the wall: Titian's *Death of Actaeon* (c. 1559–1575), in which the hero who gazed on Diana has been turned into a stag and is being mauled by his own hounds. Barney is himself a poet of bodies transformed, and what Ovid said about them could apply to his own early performances and sculptures: "All things are but altered, nothing dies." × *Jason Farago*

*DE LAMA LÂMINA: De Lama Lâmina.*  
2004. C-print in self-lubricating plastic  
and Brazilian rosewood frame.  
© Matthew Barney. Courtesy Gladstone  
Gallery, New York/Brussels.

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- × Your art from the late 1980s and early 1990s, from before the *Cremaster Cycle*, has often been treated two ways—or at least I'm guilty of this. The works grouped under the umbrella of *Drawing Restraint* have received continued attention, as early cases in a long-running series. But the standalone works from the early 1990s have received less. Why did you decide to revisit them now?

It had come up from time to time as an idea, to present this body of work again. Both Barbara [*Gladstone*] and I agreed that there was a black hole in terms of its understanding. Even the archives at the gallery are pre-internet. And also it hadn't yet been reinterpreted. These were site-specific exhibitions and installations, but I had always been interested in reinterpreting these works, which I've done over the years in different group exhibitions. I thought the idea to reinterpret the work in its total state would be a really compelling thing to do. In fact, we had to do that in this case, because we were bringing it to the gallery in Chelsea, whereas it was initially made in the gallery in SoHo. So already there was this need to translate, which I think I was interested in.

- × There were three parts to the project, correct?

*INCLINE* and *DECLINE* and *OTTOshaft*. *OTTOshaft* was something like a halftime show, or that's the way I thought about it in those days. The elements of *INCLINE* are different from the elements of *DECLINE*. The refrigerator is different, the bench [*cast in petroleum jelly*] in the refrigerator is different.

- × Was it conceived as a trilogy from the beginning?

It was conceived as a trilogy after the first parts were built but not yet exhibited. Curiously, it started in the same way that *Cremaster* would later be built. *Cremaster* started when Art Angel invited me to England to look for a location to do a project. I started looking around, and I had been thinking about connecting a number of locations as a single work, after making this project, actually.

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- × So in both cases a single work coheres across multiple spaces, even over a number of years.

Yeah. I became curious about that idea in England, and then finally I went to the Isle of Man and started thinking about how that site could become a work. It was already in the process of writing that piece that the form of the *Cremaster Cycle* fell into place. It's typical for me, I think, that it's a little bit more organic....

- × That organic generation is precisely what I want to ask you about, because it came through much more clearly in the recent show at Gladstone. In your exhibitions and films, one senses a generative system undergirding everything. And yet, in the studio, something has to come first, right? Experimentation, trial and error; often drawing, in your case. At what point does that begin to cohere into a larger, more generative system?

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I guess it's different from project to project, but I would say that there is always some form of experimentation. Whether it's in the writing and research, or in the object making. With the materials, with tests. I think what's often happening is the materials are being asked to do something they don't really want to do. You have to figure out what the limits are. That sort of experimentation is easy to quantify, and the other sort, the experimentation in writing, is a little bit more about wandering and seeing things, getting lost, and then trying to connect dots among partially researched fragments.

I think what was really liberating for me was a piece called *Field Dressing* (1989). It was a student work I did at the end of my time at Yale, and it was a two-room installation with a two-channel video. There were two characters. One climbs up and down this space, and at the bottom of each passage through the space, he fills a different orifice in his body, from this petroleum jelly form that is frozen on the floor. The main character is carrying these cast weights, and he's moving up through a stairwell, and then he places the weights onto a rack that sits on a fragment of gymnasium flooring. The other character is just wearing a wedding gown. It's a kind of a wedding

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ceremony, of sorts. I think that was the first time that I really started playing with this kind of binary system, which the *OTTO Trilogy* really fleshed out: a binary system that ends up getting at a kind of non-binarity.

- × It's funny how that happens, actually. It's quite Hegelian: by putting things in opposition, you're breaking down their distinctions until they bleed into one another, they exceed one another.

And this is one of the reasons why the sculptures and videos needed to be extended beyond the first exhibition, *Facility of INCLINE*. It needed to have these other stations, to play itself out as a bigger narrative. Eventually that triangulation happens in *OTTOshaft*, where the characters truly get outside of the trappings of this structure of the piece.

- × *INCLINE* and *DECLINE* feature one other actor, whereas *OTTOshaft* is the first time in your career that you worked with a larger cast. I suppose that passage from two characters to more than two is also a passage from something more performative to something more scripted or dramatic, right? And if *OTTOshaft* paves the way for more narrative cinema, then is it fair to say that there's a relation between the artistic goals of that kind of excess and the shift in media?

*OTTOshaft*, for sure, is one of those moments. There are certain thresholds that were crossed that allowed the work to grow in scale and complexity, by aligning itself with other forms. It suddenly became a form of cinema, while it continued to be a project of sculpture. Another threshold was *Cremaster 5*. The video that I had access to had a wider aspect ratio; before it was a square. *Cremaster 5*'s setting of the opera house also affected the lighting that I was used to using. Before I had been filming with a kind of flatness which had been more in the realm of broadcast sports. It suddenly brought me into a very different language.

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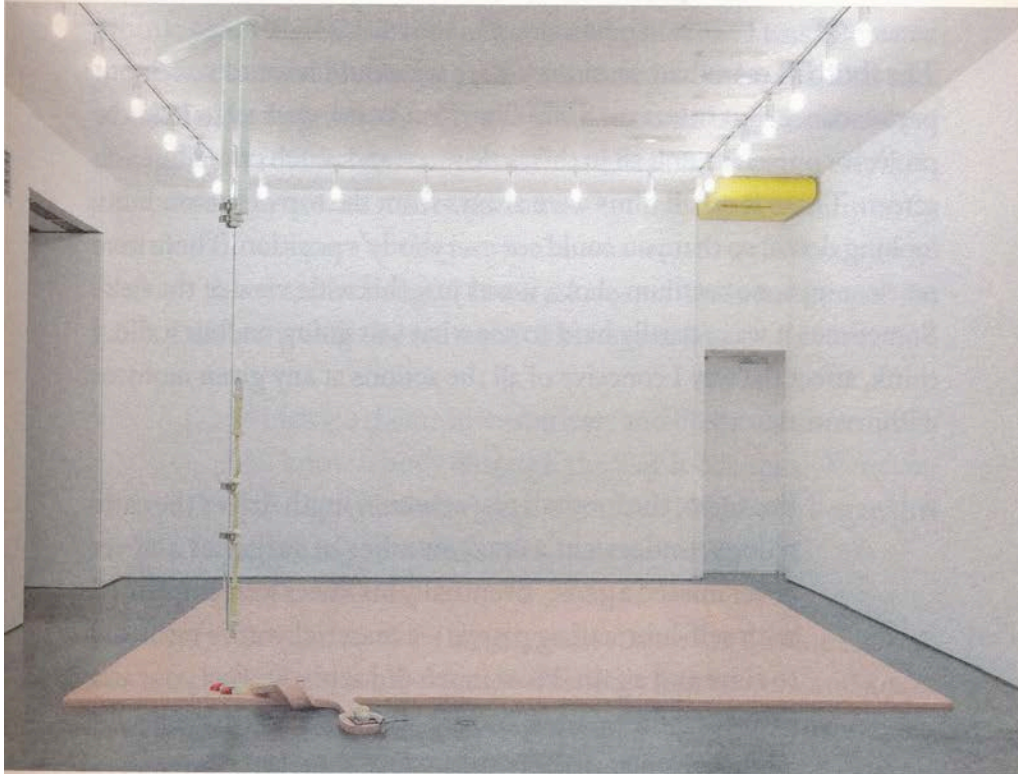


Left: *BLIND PERINEUM*. 1991. Video, silent. 89 min.

Right: View of "Matthew Barney: Facility of DECLINE." 2016. Gladstone Gallery, New York. Photo: David Regen. © Matthew Barney. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York/Brussels.

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The Gladstone Gallery is a contemporary art space located in the heart of New York City. It is a multi-level gallery with a focus on modern and experimental art. The gallery is known for its diverse programming, including exhibitions, performances, and events. The space is designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing for a wide range of artistic presentations. The gallery is a key cultural institution in the neighborhood, providing a platform for emerging and established artists alike.



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- × I was in William Wegman's studio a few months ago, and we were talking about how he and artists of his generation first discovered video, around 1970. Joan Jonas, for example, got her first video camera in Japan. But Wegman found video in college, in his college's sports department. The people with the earliest access to video weren't artists, they were athletes: students practicing their golf swings, for example.

The football team had sessions where we would have to watch our performance, but it was on 8mm film. You know, we had to load the projector ourselves, and sit in this little room and watch our failures on screen. These football films were always from the top of the stadium, looking down, so that you could see everybody's position. There were no close-ups, no medium shots; it was just this wide view of the field. Sometimes it was actually hard to see what was going on, but it did, I think, affect the way I conceive of all the actions at any given moment within a work.

- × Jim Otto, the football player whose myth drives the early trilogy, underwent a crazy number of surgeries and yet never missed a game. Eventually his knees were implanted with self-lubricating plastic—a material you've returned to time and again. How much did athletics fuel your use of non-traditional media, the plastic, the petroleum jelly, all this viscous stuff?

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Self-skinning rubbers, thermoplastics, foams, and all those things were part of this external prosthesis that you're always wearing as an athlete. But the other aspect was the horror films I was interested in. I wanted to create a work that functioned like a landscape, or like an architectural situation, but also like a body. So favoring materials that either had the literal ability to go inside a body, or that suggested that aesthetically...

- × ...that had the appearance of something that could emulsify, or could reconstitute a body, right? And that could



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undo a body's characteristics. You'd done modeling as a student, of course, and in these early works you appear in drag a few times: quite glamorous poses, in high heels. Exceeding boundaries of gender, taking on a character or a personage, seemed to be another kind of training. Bodies' limitations, bodies' excesses, bodies' abilities to transform.

I think, again, that at the root of it was a leap in scale. I was interested in gender, but also in eroding difference across the board. This idea of asking the larger body of the project to go through a number of changes that could only take place if none of these things were fixed. Of course they are, in reality. At the end of the day it was my body. I think that was part of the tension; I was wanting the body to go through these scale changes. I was asking my body to become the gallery within which the narrative was happening.

- × Which is a theme in western art and literature since Ovid: you know a body through the way it changes. Were you looking at historical precedents at all when you began this early body of work?

I think my relationship to art history didn't come until a little bit later, when I was 24. Early on, the thing I was really fixated on—and lots of people were, because of the AIDS epidemic—was horror narratives. Where the viral body is invisible. The antagonism is within; it lives in the architecture of the narrative, and it can't be seen.

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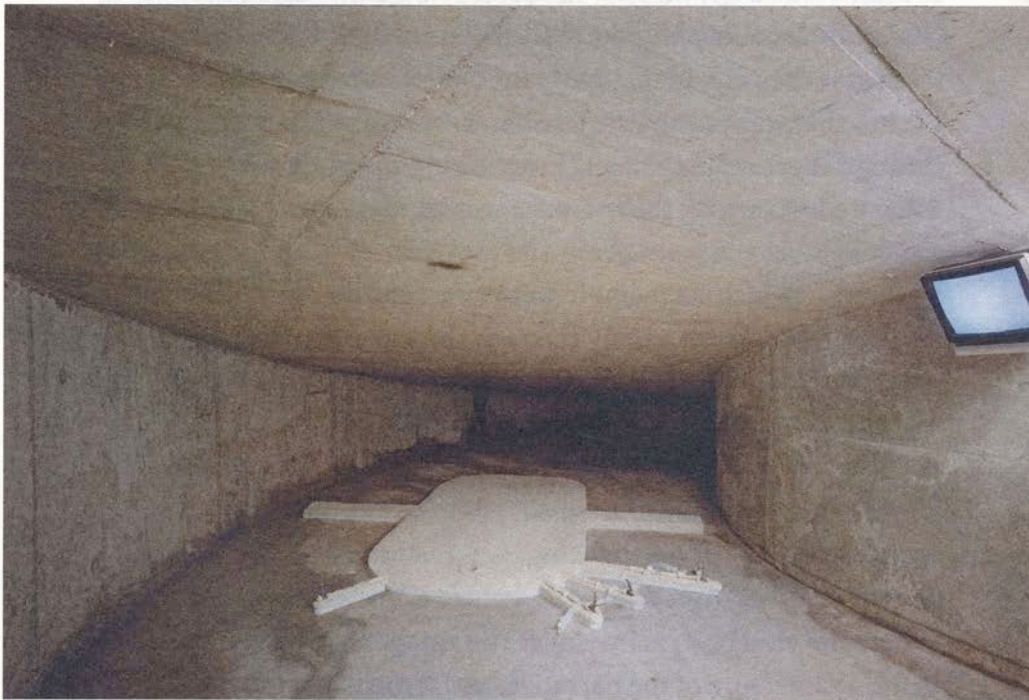
- × Am I right that you did pre-med at college and let it go?

I did for a couple of years. *[Laughs]* I did a lot less of it than I think has been implied.

- × Were you also going to galleries and museums in New York while you were a college student?

Sure, yeah.

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**OTTO**shaft *HYPOXIA → HYPERTROPHY → HUBRIS*,  
*FASCIA: The Jayne Mansfield Suite*, 1992. Mixed  
media with cast tapioca, speculae, and self-lubricating  
plastic. Installation view: Documenta IX, Kassel, 1992.  
© Matthew Barney. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone  
Gallery, New York/Brussels.

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- × Did you encounter work that had a formative influence about how you conceived of bodies? Robert Gober, for example, who was also thinking about how bodies exceed their limits, though in a much more abject key.

I definitely saw those early shows of his: the bag of donuts, the drains, and of course the sinks. Also [Bruce] Nauman was really present at the end of the 80s, and had lots of gallery shows. *Clown Torture* (1987), and especially *Learned Helplessness in Rats* (1988), were really informative to me, in terms of how a video could relate to an object without there being a one-to-one correspondence.

When I would look at art in books, particularly European work, like [Joseph] Beuys, I felt as if I was looking at fragments of documentation from something, and then putting together the narrative in my head. I became interested in that as a way of dealing with narrative, and dealing with the moving image, actually. The documentation of the action could function as a suggestion of what *would* happen, rather than a documentation of what had actually happened.

- × Just after 9/11, you wrote a small text for the *New York Times Magazine* about your first days in New York, and you make this analogy, which has always stuck with me, between the vertical expanse of New York and the horizontal expanse of Idaho. Can you tell me about your oscillation between these places? Places that are awesome but can also be intimate.

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My initial entry point into New York was through the vertical landscape, and how it felt to be inside the matrix of the city. It felt comforting and familiar to me. You have these conditions in the landscape in the west, where on one side you have a kind of horizontality and openness, but then you come up against a mountain front, and then you go into the ravines of that mountain system, and you're held. It has a very similar feeling, and it's very comforting to me. I think it was on an emotional level that I connected with New York, through its extreme landscape.

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Now, when I go back to Idaho, all of my time back there is really outdoors. When I go back, I'm going to places where I can be outside and be close to the landscape, which is not really the part of Idaho where I grew up. It's a couple of hours away.

- × The horizontality of the Utah salt flats, which you filmed in widescreen at the end of *Cremaster 2*, does seem to get echoed in the verticality of the Chrysler Building that stars in *Cremaster 3*. There is an articulation of Americana through space that is absent in *OTTOshaft*.

There's a number of differences. I think mounting this show made me very aware of what you're saying, that there's a different relationship to mythology. In a way, I think I abandoned my own body, in exchange for a mythological body.

There is a taste of that, though, in *OTTOshaft*, with the parking garage. The architecture of the garage [*in Kassel, Germany*], the elevator shafts. In these spaces I could create a narrative of adjacency, where one story could take place simultaneously across these four spaces. That kind of opened the door to going outside, which I was really eager to do in *Cremaster*. I had studied with Alice Aycock, and I always had an interest in land art, certainly in terms of site and non-site. Rather than to go into my body and bring out a form, to literally go into the landscape was an exciting step.

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- × Now, the work that followed the *Cremaster Cycle* is this little-known Brazilian film [*De Lama Lâmina (2004)*], which took that process even further: here you had not only a landscape, but performers in that landscape who were only sometimes participants in your artwork.

Basically, we entered a float in the Carnival in Salvador, and then we tried to film within that environment over the course of the evening. We did a little bit of pre-filming during rehearsal, but I think that, as a production, we got lost in a situation we had no idea how to control. I would say that, more than any other project, in that one my interest in getting lost bit me back.

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- × But it did prefigure *River of Fundament* (2014), I suppose. The processions that get turned into cinema.

Yeah, for sure. Also what happens when you introduce an audience into a situation. The degree to which you can relinquish control, without completely giving up the form of the piece. I gave up control largely in *De Lama Lâmina*, whereas in *River of Fundament*, it was more to do with setting up a situation where we could be held accountable as a narrative, from beginning to end, and then improvise through every problem we would come up against. Those scenes in LA and in Detroit were, in complexity, something like carrying out a feature-length film over the course of one day. They were really complicated things to do, and a lot of things didn't work, but a lot of things did.

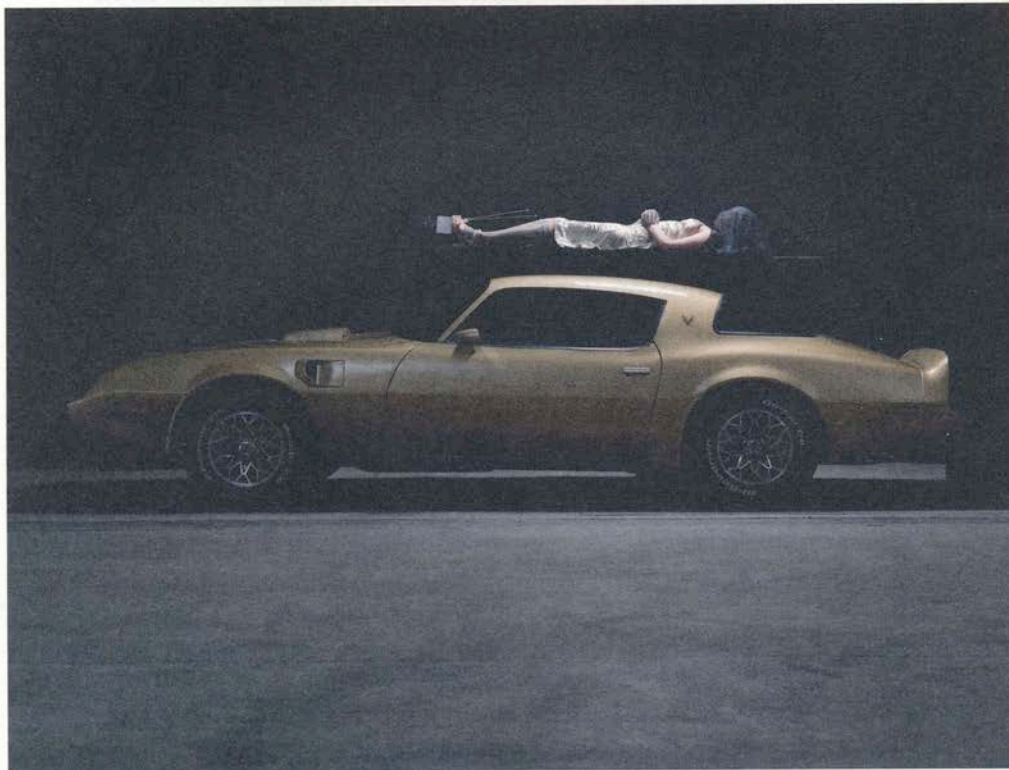
- × I suppose that's one reason I found the reintroduction to your early work so illuminating. As early as 1990, you were thinking about how a work of art can arise from a system that's partially open and partially closed. The production of your most recent works does echo that. There are moments that are strictly scripted, rehearsed, shot in multiple takes; then there are less controlled sequences, where rules can't be imposed in such a strict way. Certainly in *River of Fundament*, the shifts between those registers read very clearly.

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Those moments are both standalone performances for the small group of people who were there, and then parts of the film. Particularly Los Angeles was not set up as a film shoot, it really wasn't. Privilege was given to the live viewer, and we went out of our way to eliminate the presence of a film production. Our footage was often behind the perspective of the live viewer, which is a terrible formula, cinematically. Watching somebody watch something is a *terrible* thing to look at.

- × Can I ask about collaboration? Your own body and your own actions were so central to the early work. But by the time you get to the later *Cremaster* films, you seem to be

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Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler. *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT: REN*. 2014. Production still.  
Photo: Chris Winget. © Matthew Barney.  
Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York/Brussels.

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more and more part of a constellation of other people, such as Jonathan Bepler [*the composer of River of Fundament and many other works*].

Certainly collaboration makes it possible to go deeper. With Jonathan, for example, I think it took the length of our relationship to get to a point where something like *River of Fundament* could be made. Peter Strietmann [*Barney's director of photography*], whom I've worked with since I was straight out of college, same thing. Having a mature relationship enables the scale.

But then the *Drawing Restraints* have always been a way of pulling things back into a studio scale. And I made a lot more drawing out of *River of Fundament* than I ever had before.

- × Preparatory drawings? Or drawings within the same generative system as filmmaking and sculpture?

There are two modes of drawing for me, I guess. There's the preliminary drawings, which are to do with mapping—

- × The ones that function as storyboards, almost. There was a beautiful one in the Gladstone show [*Stadium (1991)*], the early drawing that maps the three parts of the trilogy in an arrangement that looks like a reproductive system.

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And I've always done that as a preliminary form of drawing. Then there are drawings that are made after. Even after the sculpture's been made, often. It's the last thing that happens. Drawing is both the beginning and the end.

- × You are about to begin filming a new work, in the place you grew up. Is there any reason that, at this point in your career, you're thinking about Idaho again? And given the election we've just had, do you look at it differently?

This will be the third production I've done in Idaho now. Fourth, really. We did the prologue and epilogue of *River of Fundament* there:

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the opening at the Hemingway house, and the salmon spawning. I have a place out there, but not a studio. Things could be made there, but I haven't really used it that way yet.

It's changed a lot since I was a kid. It certainly had an oppressive element to it, as a place to grow up. It is a very conservative environment, culturally, religiously. Southern Idaho and northern Utah are effectively the same place. It has been that way for me and continues to be that way for me: it's both generative, and it also provokes something in me as well. I'm in love with it; I'm in conflict with it at the same time. To go back there now.... That conflict might be more extreme this time. I'm not sure. I'll see how it feels.