

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ross Simonini, "Black Water: Combustion and digestion in Matthew Barney's latest work,"
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Black Water

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Combustion and digestion in Matthew Barney's latest work

Matthew Barney
BA performance,
RIVER OF FUNDAMENT,
2014

In 1999, Matthew Barney cast the writer Norman Mailer as Harry Houdini for his film *Cremaster 2*. After seeing it, Mailer declared Barney a 'genius' and, years later, asked him to consider his novel *Ancient Evenings* (1983) for a film adaptation. In 700 pages, the book tells of a mischievous sorcerer who attempts to manipulate the process of reincarnation in a perverse, scatologically minded Ancient Egypt. Readers and critics found it long, cumbersome, inscrutable and needlessly profane, but Mailer held the book to be his masterpiece, and Barney was its hope for a new life.

After Mailer died in 2007, Barney began to interpret the film through a series of performances: the first, *Guardian of the Veil*, which played at the Manchester Opera House in 2007, served as a sketch for the sprawling, eight-year project *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*. The film that eventually resulted is not an

adaptation of *Ancient Evenings*, but a collaging of the myth of Osiris, Mailer's biography, the history of the American automobile, and fragmented perspectives on Mailer's novel – in particular an insightful review by Harold Bloom.

Compared to Barney's early work, *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* has a satisfying and manageable narrative, with a beginning, middle and palpable, metaphysical resolution. The film's spine is a hallucinatory wake for Mailer and, for the scene, Barney fastidiously reconstructed Mailer's three-storey Brooklyn Heights penthouse apartment and cast all sorts of cultural figures to play themselves, including Debbie Harry, Larry Holmes, Fran Lebowitz, Salman Rushdie, Luc Sante and Lawrence Weiner. The wake devolves and is periodically interrupted by episodic performances staged in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York, moving from east to west

and back again, through the loci of the American automotive industry.

With two intermissions, the film is nearly six hours long, a staggering but not unprecedented length. Some predecessors include Bela Tarr's *Satantango* (1994), a portrait of Hungarian village life, which is seven and half hours long; the Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985), which is nine; and Barney's own five-film 'Cremaster Cycle' which, in its marathon-viewing entirety, is seven hours long. Duration is central to of all these films, and in *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* the audience experiences the disorienting unsteadiness of time as the story drifts from diurnal life into the riverine underworld, where characters age decades and die multiple deaths in a single evening.

Endurance has been one of Barney's primary subjects since his earliest videos, in which he restrained himself with athletic equipment

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OPERA



Matthew Barney, *KHU* performance, *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*, 2014

in order to produce faint, strained pencil drawings. His previous films are shorter in duration but stylized with agonizingly patient shots of inert sculpture and wordless actions by wooden characters. *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*, on the other hand, moves almost at the rate of a conventional narrative film. The editing is relatively propulsive; the dialogue is plentiful (if a little difficult to parse) and the presence of dramatic actors – including Ellen Burstyn, Paul Giamatti, Maggie Gyllenhaal and Elaine Stritch – gives a tumbling, emotional momentum to the characters that is almost entirely absent from the artist's previous works.

Barney's casting often posits explicit connections between actors and their roles, sometimes relying on non-actors, such as Richard Serra in *Cremaster 3* (2002), for their biographical resonance. In *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*, he wisely cast John Buffalo Mailer, Norman's spitting-image son and an actor who has also appeared in *Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps* (2010) to portray the first reincarnation of his father, hulking around a replica of his childhood home.

In some ways, viewing *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* as cinema is unhelpful. Film is its medium, but opera is its form, and it often vibrates with the intensity of Richard Wagner, whose final opera, *Parsifal* (1882), also ran at around six hours. The film had its world premiere in February at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, and its European premiere in March at the Munich Opera House, framing it squarely in the history of staged performance. The film's sensibility reflects this: Barney's interest is not the close-up subtlety that has come to distinguish film as distinct from the stage, but in the broad and loose strokes of live actions.

The ever-present and galvanic music of *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* comes from a similar sensibility of real-time improvisation. Jonathan Bepler, Barney's longtime collaborator, composes an unwieldy mass of sound that moves through the film like a storm. Many of the instrumentalists appear on screen, among the actors. It's an unusual choice that works, displaying the film's massive ensemble of experimental music luminaries: Joan La Barbara and Phil

Characters speak of dung with gravitas; they wrap it in gold, consume it for its magical properties.

Minton, two of the indisputable masters of extended voice techniques, produce tones of growling, farting death; Mick Barr, an avant-metal guitarist, builds up bright, percolating ukelele textures; Lonnie Smith, a jazz veteran, plays sparse organ clusters; and one of the film's stars, Milford Graves (Bepler's teacher and a seminal figure in free improvisation), beats on a dead cow, a suspended drum set, a vat of boiling tea and a suit of metallic bells.

Throughout the film, Bepler treats genre like a costume, removing and exchanging styles as it makes sense for characters and locations. He winds through bittersweet arias, step dances, hip-hop, R&B, pop, marching band and mariachi, but always eddies around a howling, textural aesthetic that recalls composers such as Krzysztof Penderecki and Glenn Branca (with whom Bepler has worked). In many scenes, music emerges from noise – a crowd's chatter, a pig's squeal – and several instruments are constructed on screen, including one built from a tube inserted into a man's throat and anus. It's a fascinating approach to music, and it allows Bepler to marry sound to image in surprising and disjointed ways, without ever having to echo the narrative's emotional arc in that tired manner that has come to define film scoring.

Often, the music gives voice to materials (metal especially) and as with all of Barney's films, sculpture is the end to his cinematic means. Each of the film's performances is driven by the creation or destruction of sculpture, and objects are a distinct presence in almost every scene in the film. Cars are of central, alchemical importance, with different models – Chrysler, Pontiac, Ford – representing newly reincarnated characters. In an auto dealership, a car is torn apart with the spectacular violence of an action film and, at one of the film's several climaxes, vehicle parts are melted to produce a glowing, molten cast of an Egyptian Djed column (the symbol for Osiris's spine). Barney exhibited this work and a dozen others in an exhibition at Munich's Haus der Kunst, which ran concurrently with *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*'s European premiere. The most pervasive of the film's materials is excrement, which Barney has exchanged for his early favourites of plastic and vaseline. Much of the film takes place in the titular brown river of death, and characters emerge from the water caked in sewage, diarrheal beards clinging to their chins. So it follows

that the film is also abundant with anal play: defecation, anilingus, sodomy and, at one moment that recalls Georges Bataille, the insertion of a glass eye into an anus. Most of these scenes come directly from Mailer and the incestual, semen-drenched Egyptian myths he interpreted.

The film's reviews have focused heavily on the sex and shit, but Barney's cinematography doesn't. His fetishistic gaze is aimed (as always) at his sculptures, only one of which – a gothic, gilded latrine – is related to the fundament. His interest in shit isn't the same as that of Paul McCarthy, who plays around in it, or of Piero Manzoni, who sold his in cans as a form of abject authorship. For Barney, faeces is a complicated metaphor, both adolescently silly and gravely serious, an extension of the pseudo-scientific explorations of the digestive process in his early works, such as *OTTOSHAF* (1995) and *Unit BOLUS* (1991). In *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*, characters speak of dung with gravitas; they wrap it in gold, consume it for its magical properties and, over the length of the film, shit is revealed to be a surprisingly elegant expression of reincarnation: rotten waste giving rise to the fresh sprout.

Carrion, too, is a regenerative force of nature and Barney's work has seemingly always been a form of leftovers (his studio operates under the name Remains LLC). His drawings represent the product of a process of struggle; his installations are detritus from performances; and his sculptures often serve not as props, but as the physical outcome of his films. Even the story of *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* begins with the remains of *Cremaster 3*, the last film he completed before this new work. The first character and sculpture seen in *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* are the Apprentice (a masonic figure played by Barney) and the Chrysler Imperial, both brutally murdered/destroyed at the end of *Cremaster 3*. While *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* takes its mythology from Ancient Egypt, *Cremaster 3* borrowed the myths of the Freemasons, who, in turn, stole all their best material from the Egyptians. Where Mailer left off with *Ancient Evenings* – a book considered dead and forgotten – Barney picked up, revived and carried the ending as far as it could possibly go.

Ross Simonini is an artist, writer and musician living in New York, USA. He is interviews editor at *The Believer* and a member of the band *NewVillager*.