

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jennifer Krasinski, "Matthew Barney at Gladstone: Gorgeous, Creepy, and Sublimely Strange,"
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Matthew Barney at Gladstone: Gorgeous, Creepy, and Sublimely Strange



DRILL TEAM: screw BOLUS (1991)

To re-create a moment in history — to present the past inside present context — is to hold it up for reconsideration, or reaffirmation. At least that's one way to think of Gladstone Gallery's remounting of *Facility of DECLINE*, Matthew Barney's 1991 solo exhibition, which launched the artist like a shot into the center of the art world. (It must be noted that the show's current iteration is not an exact re-creation; not all the original works are on view.) The exhibition is gorgeous, creepy, and sublimely weirdo, its videos, sculptures, and drawings looking perhaps even more daring and decisive now than they did then. It's also clearer now (to this viewer, at least) what a terrifically important body of work this is, not simply because it laid the foundations for Barney's epics to come (*The Cremaster Cycle*, 1994–2002, and *River of Fundament*, 2014) but for the particular ways the artist disrupted ideas of masculinity and — dare I say it — complicates current conversations about gender and sexuality.

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In 1991, the body as a subject was a smoking battleground, not an arena for sport, as Barney was conceiving of it. (One of the first works on view in the exhibition is a drawing titled *Stadium*, in which the artist entwines architecture and innards, his field emblems dancing alongside a phallus.) The AIDS crisis and the subsequent homophobic backlash meant that the body was under attack, not only by the virus, but also by the self-appointed virtuous. The year before, the grant monies of the "NEA Four" had been vetoed, the artists' works called out and cast aside for their unabashed sexuality. Politically and culturally — then as now — there were very clear lines drawn between the bodies that mattered and those that didn't.

It's interesting to think how straight, white masculinity was negotiating itself inside of that moment. Paul McCarthy's notorious performance video *Bossy Burger* came out in 1991 too, and, although a generation older than Barney, he embraced a kind of *masculinfancy*. McCarthy's men were messy, embarrassing, regressing from abject sexual desires, the seductions of pop culture, consumerism's insatiable gluttony, and other afflictions. He, alongside artists like Mike Kelley, peddled in losers, sad sacks, failures, their bodies covered in shame (although at times, their shame seemed to be worn like protective armor).

But Barney's body was shamelessly that of the winner, of the all-American male. He was exceptionally handsome and fit. He went to Yale, played football, and modeled to make ends meet. By all accounting, his was a body that *mattered*, so what could or should it articulate at this moment in time? For Barney, it seems the answer in part was to dive into the myths of masculinity, to pry open the male psyche (inherited as well as imposed), to rewrite its fantasies, to rewire and reimagine its systems, and to create his own worlds at the end of an empire. As artist/creator, Barney both lionized and broke down the male body, rescaling it, placing it in a constant, looping state of becoming and unbecoming itself.

Facility of DECLINE was the second part of a trilogy of works Barney produced between 1991 and 1992, which also included *Facility of INCLINE*, installed at the Stuart Regen Gallery in Los Angeles, and *OTTOshaft* at Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany. All three exhibitions pitted two American heroes — the escape artist Harry Houdini and famed football player Jim Otto — against each other in a strange sort of competition. Why an athlete and an illusionist? The two undoubtedly share an attitude of mind over matter, their bodies expressing (and perhaps repressing) the weight of certain masculine ideals. Houdini proved his mettle by having himself bound and cuffed, sometimes in death-defying acts. (His actual demise came after an unexpected punch in the gut that ruptured his appendix.) Otto earned his legendary status by never missing a game in his fifteen-year career, despite numerous injuries, surgeries, and a pair of prosthetic knees. These bodies were damned — restrained or pained — in order to become anointed.

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Still from *Radial Drill* (1991)

Nude but for a swim cap, sweat socks, and sneakers, Barney plays Houdini (for *DECLINE*, Otto is played by Bob Wysocki). The rules and goals of their engagement aren't made explicit; the narrative threads (such as they are) aren't pulled along by plot but rather by actions, gestures, movements. Barney's world is seamless but prismatic, our attention refracted across the videos and sculptures that double as props, the titles of which speak to densely detailed systems, cryptic symbols, and odd logics around which all plays out

Among the works on view is *BLIND PERINEUM*, Barney's now-iconic video action for which he crossed over the ceiling of the gallery above *Repressia* — a fleshy-pink-colored wrestling mat with two soft shackles protruding from it (also on view) — using a harness and ice-climbing screws. In it, Barney propels himself by the forces of muscle and will. By contrast, in *Radial Drill* Barney is dressed like Audrey Hepburn in a black, off-the-shoulder evening gown and a pair of Manolo Blahniks. We watch as he lifts the hem to show he's wearing the aforementioned shackles. Later, he swans around the room, pushing a blocking sled (title: *Anabol(A): PACE CAR FOR THE HUBRIS PILL (Equipe)-A.P.B.à00*) he has reimagined and refabricated in internally lubricating plastic (a material the artist favors). Perhaps this transformation has something to do with a tussle Houdini and Otto have inside a walk-in cooler Barney titled *Transexualis?*

In one of the exhibition's most memorable images (in *Radial Drill*), we see Barney, nude on all fours, his ass in the air, his anus waxed as Otto — pop! — pulls a pearl on a fishing line from it. Once upon a time, Robert Mapplethorpe famously stuck a bullwhip into his rectum, a devilish declaration of pride in a sexuality perceived by some as evil. (Who can forget Senator Jesse Helms's horrifying description years later of Mapplethorpe as "a known homosexual who died of AIDS"?) "To be penetrated is to abdicate power," wrote Leo Bersani in his landmark 1987 essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" which tracked the ways in which the AIDS epidemic grossly

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affected the rhetoric around homosexuality. It's not clear if Barney's ass play is for his pleasure or his humiliation, or performed as a gesture of abdication: His face isn't in view. Putting his ass out there (so to speak) was at the very least an act of defiance, a refusal to limit the body's symbolic and plastic potential. And what could be more now than that?