

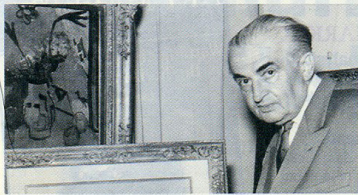
GLADSTONE GALLERY

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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FEATURES

Artist interview



A still from Barney's film "River of Fundament": In Mesa, molten slabs of cars are displayed alongside Egyptian relics (opposite page)

Matthew Barney:

EXPLODING the myths

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Seven years in the making, six hours long, and stiff with allusions to ancient Egyptian mythology, Matthew Barney's operatic new film "River of Fundament" wallows in excrement, bodily fluids, putrefied animal carcasses and bizarre sex scenes.

So it is fair to say that the tranquil Tasmanian port city of Hobart would not be the obvious venue for a special screening of "River of Fundament" and a major exhibition of associated works. But for the artist himself, who shot to fame through the "Cremaster Cycle" films, made between 1994 and 2002, accepting Australian art collector David Walsh's invitation to far-flung Hobart was a "no-brainer". So, late last year, the Sydney and Melbourne art world flew to Hobart to join Barney at a screening in Federation Concert Hall. Nearly everyone made it to the end of the film, fortified by two intermissions.

Mailer, the vital spark

The day after the screening, everyone squeezed into the quaint Odeon Theatre to hear Walsh and Barney in conversation. Then it was up-river to Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) to preview the sculptures, drawings and storyboards that were the by-products of the film's creation. "This is compelling, what's happening here [with 'River of Fundament' in Hobart]," Barney told the Odeon audience. "I've made projects in Bahia in Brazil, and the Isle of Man and a number of places that aren't central, and it's always been very satisfying for me to go to a place where the form is more visible, somehow. I do enjoy making exhibitions in a place where you are free from that and the thing we present can be seen clearly and there isn't a lot of distraction from it."

The vital spark for "River of Fundament" was the late American writer Norman Mailer's 1983 tome, *Ancient Evenings*, which Mailer urged Barney to read. The two became friends during the

The American artist has brought his epic, gruesome retelling of Egyptian legends, "River of Fundament", to Tasmania, where his sculptures fittingly commune with ancient works. By Elizabeth Fortescue

making of the "Cremaster Cycle", and Mailer even acted in the role of Houdini in one of the films. *Ancient Evenings*, widely held to be a literary *Titanic*, is a retelling of labyrinthine Egyptian myths surrounding reincarnation, and like Barney's film, it is not the easiest of works to get through.

Barney's film melds this narrative stream with constructed scenes of Mailer's wake (he died in 2007) featuring well-known actors such as Paul Giamatti and the late Elaine Stritch. The former athlete, now actress, Aimee Mullins plays the role of Isis. Barney, meanwhile, plays the role of Mailer's *ka*, or spirit. In one memorable scene, he

"I tried to rewire my way of working and to try something that was not so much within my comfort range"

is blindfolded and straightjacketed, and placed in the driver's seat of a gold Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. The car drives itself off a Detroit bridge in a metaphorical ritual of destruction and rebirth.

Mailer clearly remains a figure of fascination for Barney. But "River of Fundament" is not an adaptation of *Ancient Evenings*, Barney says. Rather, he was interested in the way Mailer's book discussed Egyptian mythology in a relentlessly American voice. "A decision was made relatively early to place the piece within the American landscape and within an American vernacular,

and part of that was the way that the novel reads," Barney says. "There's an Americanness to it that was at odds with the language of the mythology, so it became compelling to think about ways of setting the narrative in the United States."

Barney harnessed his project to the automotive history that is so essential to the grand American narrative, and three quintessential American vehicles became central characters in the film: a 1967 Chrysler Imperial, the Pontiac and a 2001 Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor.

In three epic sequences shot on location in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York City, the cars

underwent violent destruction and resurrection, set to the musical score of Barney's collaborator, the brilliant composer Jonathan Bepler. The first of these live scenes took place in Los Angeles in 2008 when the Chrysler Imperial was driven into a showroom and literally shredded by a 20-ton stump grinder. The second live shoot was in Detroit in 2010. First, the Pontiac (symbolising Osiris) met its watery death. Then Isis, in the guise of a police officer (played by Mullins), drove to a crime scene on the River Rouge in the Crown Victoria. At the scene, Isis supervised the dredging

of the Pontiac's engine from the muddy river, after which she mated with its head gasket. The Pontiac's remains were then melted in a massive furnace. The third live scene was filmed in 2013 at a naval dry dock on New York's East River where Horus and Set vie for the throne. In a parallel scene set in a taxi garage, the Crown Victoria's grille is used to make a crown for the victor, Horus.

Destruction in Detroit

Running parallel to these live-filmed extravaganzas are the scenes of Mailer's wake being held in his Brooklyn apartment. At the end of the film, the recreated apartment is mounted on a barge and nudged by tugboat down the East River.

Barney admits his stature in the art world has helped him to get various authorities to sanction his frankly outlandish plans. In Detroit, for example, he needed all kinds of permission to launch the Pontiac off the MacArthur Bridge – a scene that had nothing to do with special effects.

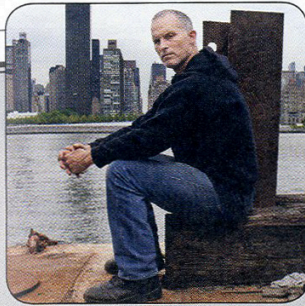
"Yeah, we did actually do that," he says. "The way that it's done physically is the car is catapulted off of the bridge using a device that's used on aircraft carriers to send planes up, or to bring them up to speed immediately. It's an air-actuated piston that turns a cable incredibly fast and it pulls the car up to speed in an instant and sends it off. There was a little ramp built and the car was thrown off the bridge."

It took years to organise the Detroit sequences. During the shoot, Barney and his crew witnessed the financial demise of Detroit, the spiritual home of the American automotive industry. "The more recent bankruptcies did happen during the production, which was quite meaningful to us as we were working there," he says.

Barney was feeling his way with live filmmaking, and his plans often went awry. He also imposed impossible deadlines on himself. In Detroit, he compressed what would have been a three-week shoot into just one day. "You start and

STILL COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART (MONA), HOBART, AUSTRALIA

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Digest Matthew Barney

Background

Born: San Francisco, 1967

Early life: age six, moves with family to Boise, Idaho; age 12, parents divorce and his mother (an abstract painter) moves to New York; Barney stays in Boise

Education: graduates from Yale, having paid for his arts degree by modelling, in 1989

Lives: New York City

Represented by: Gladstone Gallery, New York; Sadie Coles HQ, London; Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Milestones

1991: First exhibition at Regen Projects, Los Angeles. First solo exhibition at Gladstone Gallery, New York, featuring *Blind Perineum*, a video in which a naked Barney climbs across the gallery ceiling and walls with the help of ice screws.

Exhibits at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

1992: Features in Documenta IX, Kassel

1993: Is included in the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale,

1996: Receives Hugo Boss Prize, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

2002: Barney's daughter is born, from his long-term relationship with the Icelandic experimental singer, Björk

2003: The "Cremaster Cycle" is shown in its entirety at the Guggenheim in New York

2005: "Drawing Restraint 9", a feature-length film featuring Barney and Björk as lovers on a whaling ship, premieres at the Venice Film Festival

2011: Receives Golden Gate Persistence of Vision Award at 54th San Francisco Film Festival

KEY WORKS

"Drawing Restraint", ongoing

Matthew Barney was an undergraduate at Yale University when he began his "Drawing Restraint" series. As an athlete who had been recruited by Yale to play football, Barney was aware of the body's need to strain against an opposing force in order to build muscle. This led him to create a series of drawings while simultaneously strapped to various harnesses.

This turned the act of drawing into a full-body physical struggle. The series is embodied in film, drawings and photographs of Barney's performances (above, *Drawing Restraint 9*, 2005), and is ongoing. In November 2014, Barney directed a team of local athletes as they dragged a boulder-sized chunk of graphite around one of the galleries at the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania, Australia, intentionally marking the wall as they went.



"Cremaster Cycle", 1994-2002

Barney made his name with this series of five avant-garde, feature-length films that explore, via various themes, the processes of bodily creation. The films are named after the cremaster muscle that controls the ascending and descending of the testicles. The films are accompanied by sculptures, photographs and installations. The life of the executed American killer Gary Gilmore is explored in "Cremaster 2", and the construction of the Chrysler Building in New York is the theme of "Cremaster 3", in which Barney himself plays the Entered Apprentice (above).



Blood of Two, 2009

In 2009, Barney undertook a joint performance with artist Elizabeth Peyton for the inauguration of the Deste Foundation's Project Space Slaughterhouse on the Greek island of Hydra. In the performance, fishermen retrieved a glass case full of drawings that had been submerged in the sea for three months. The case was ceremonially carried to the slaughterhouse, accompanied part of the way by a dead shark that was placed on top of it, and also by live goats. *E.F.*



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BARNEY © TIMOTHY KNOX. DRAWING RESTRAINT AND CREMASTER CYCLE: PHOTOS: CHRIS WINGET; © THE ARTIST. COURTESY OF SADIE COLES HQ. LONDON. BLOOD OF TWO: PHOTO: HUGO GLENDINNING; © THE ARTIST. COURTESY OF SADIE COLES HQ. LONDON.

you don't stop until it's done, and certain things go as planned and other things do not," Barney says. "My role was to be in a control room in front of all the monitors for all the cameras and to react to what was going on. So it was more like live sports cinematography where you're directing in a very live way, reacting to what's happening."

There was near-disaster in Detroit, when the weather turned bad during the casting pit scene where the Pontiac is melted down amid a storm of sparks. "The audience had to be evacuated in the middle of the scene because of the amount of rainfall and the amount of moisture that was being trapped beneath the molten metal," Barney says. "In metal casting, moisture is your enemy. It creates a volatility where moisture is trapped beneath the metal, the moisture expands with the heat and it explodes the metal. So there was a lot of concern that anybody near that scene could be hit by flying molten metal, which didn't happen, but evacuating that many people quickly in a rainstorm was difficult.

However, what we captured on film was quite dynamic in that weather."

It was this live filming – the break with the more controlled techniques of the "Cremaster Cycle" – that excited Barney by its very unpredictability. "The challenge for me was that I tried to rewire my way of working and to try something that was not so much within my comfort range, and that was to do with performing live and having one chance to create a scene," he says.

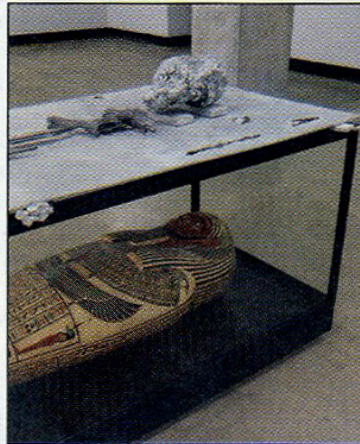
At the Odeon, Barney was asked by Mona's Elizabeth Pearce whether being "wholeheartedly embraced" by the art establishment clouded his vision, at the same time as it paved the way for

him to realise his boldest work. "Well, I'm not wholeheartedly embraced, that's for sure," the artist laughed.

The critical divide

Barney is right there. Since "River of Fundament" premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York in February 2014, some critics have savaged it as a marathon of self-indulgence or just plain revolting. Asked if criticism of his work stung him, Barney says: "At this point, [criticism] is expected. The work is demanding in a number of ways. I would expect it to divide its audience."

Barney's sculptures at Mona include massive slabs of molten automobile. They are displayed alongside sarcophagi and other Egyptian relics from Walsh's collection. "I was immediately interested in showing my work alongside the Egyptian collection," Barney says. "What ended up surprising me was the extent to which the museum would support an intervention with those works." Walsh allowed Barney to create metal sculptures to place on top of the glass vitrines



housing sarcophagi from the collection. Barney speculates that Mona is the only museum in the world that would permit him to set up a relationship between his work and ancient objects "in a more or less non-hierarchical way".

It is hard to imagine what audiences would make of the Barney exhibition without first seeing the film. Luckily, Mona has permission to screen it on set occasions. Audiences should gird themselves to witness Egyptian gods and nobles wading through rivers of faecal matter, giving birth in the back seat of cars, having their penises encased in gold leaf, or being pleased underneath the dining table with, of all things, a whole lettuce.