

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# MONA and David Walsh welcome Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*

DAVID SEFTON | THE AUSTRALIAN | NOVEMBER 22, 2014 12:00AM



SAVE



Matthew Barney's *Boat of Ra* (2014) Source: Supplied

**AT the gates to a bleak industrial estate on the banks of the Hudson River, looking across at Manhattan, stands a terrifying guard dog that can be placated only by repeated use of its name. This fact is just one of a detailed set of instructions with which I've been issued to find this place, a sprawling studio/warehouse belonging to one of New York City's most enigmatic and intriguing personalities: artist Matthew Barney.**

The media archives on Barney, one of the world's most influential artists, make for intimidating reading. He speaks only to journalists who know his work intimately, and he doesn't suffer fools. One particular interview had made me want to throw myself into the Hudson rather than cross it in a taxi to speak to him myself.

Barney is best known in the US for his six-hour epic film project *River of Fundament*. In my capacity as artistic director of the Adelaide Festival, I was responsible for commissioning and hosting this year the Australian premiere of the work. Described by Barney as an opera in three acts, and made in close partnership with long-time collaborator composer Jonathan Bepler, the film is based on Norman

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, itself an epic, if intractable, novel about Egyptian rites of passage; a book often referenced, seldom read.

Yet despite the process of securing the film and many years following his work, we have never met. And I admit to a slight case of nerves.

So it is a pleasant surprise, as I am ushered into his huge studio — it better resembles a tractor factory than an art studio (and I've seen a few) — to be greeted by a welcoming and approachable Barney, 47, who on this wintry New York Sunday sits down to talk about his latest work, and why it is being shipped to, of all places, Tasmania.

The answer to that question, Barney reveals, is simple: David Walsh.

Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart will from this weekend host *River of Fundament*, one of the biggest international exhibitions in its short history. A huge retrospective of Barney's sculptural and cinematic work, the show will also include the eponymous film on which the exhibition is based.

*River of Fundament*, which includes more than 100 pieces, has been seen only at Munich's Haus Der Kunst, and will be presented in a way that only Walsh's self-described "subversive Disneyland" could pull off.

Walsh visited the German exhibition last year and thought it was a perfect fit for his museum.

"I had encountered Barney's work only six years before, my aesthetic migration from antiquities to contemporary art having begun in my early 40s," Walsh says.

"I'd attended the 2007 Venice Biennale and having left Venice en route to the Basel art fair, we found our connecting flight cancelled in Munich. So Olivier, one of MONA's curators, decided we would drive to Basel via Bregenz, where he knew there was a stunning museum.

"At the time, the Kunsthau Bregenz had four works of art on display — one per floor — in an exhibition called *Mythos*, and one of the works, *Cetacea*, was by Barney. It led me here."

Barney himself emphasises that the relationship is one of shared interests.

"I did a two-day visit to MONA when (American drone metal band) Sunn 0))) played," says Barney, who is also a proficient musician. "I'm definitely interested in the opportunity to work with the Egyptian material (at MONA), and David Walsh is willing and interested for there to be an 'intervention' with the work in the gallery — things I could never get away with in a more conservative institution. There's an

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

adventurousness with David which is really helpful for this kind of exhibition.”

What exactly does he mean by “intervention”?

“For example, one of the things we’re doing is taking a sarcophagus from his collection, putting it in a case and casting large zinc plates with holes which are poured into an open sand mould. These will sit on top of the sarcophagus, which will be viewed through holes in the metal.

“And there are heads, so to speak, which were made by taking hot zinc and dumping it into water. When the hot metal hits the water it blows the metal apart, so you have these metal explosions at the scale of a human head resting on top of the zinc plates.

“It is not that we’re putting the sarcophagus in any danger but I think it would be an intervention that would be difficult to propose in any other institution.”

The MONA show is a big move into Australian art space for Barney. Aside perhaps from a one-off film with Icelandic pop pixie and now ex-wife Bjork set entirely on an Icelandic whaling ship (*Drawing Restraint 9*), *River of Fundament* is his most ambitious work.

So given his critical acclaim in film circles, does he describe himself as a filmmaker who makes art, or an artist who makes films? He is unequivocal.

“I’m a sculptor,” he says. “The video originally came from an interest in making installations that included video and object. I think in different ways it’s always been about making narrative sculpture and using the storytelling as a way to give rise to the objects. And the storytelling has taken different forms — with *River of Fundament* there’s an aspect of live performance, an aspect of cinema and it ended up being more of a hybrid.”

MATTHEW Barney rose to prominence in the New York art scene of the 1990s, moving rapidly from semi-abstract gallery work that encompassed performance, sculpture and video to becoming the auteur of the ambitious *The Cremaster Cycle*, the trilogy of films that cemented his reputation.

He became known for ritual, performance, music and an uncompromising attitude to physical and visceral art-making. The culmination of his early work was a huge exhibition at the Guggenheim based on the *Cremaster Cycle*. The show established Barney as one of the art world’s most original voices.

The reactions to Barney’s work can often be as extreme as the work itself but it’s clear there is nothing lurid, gratuitous or pornographic in what he does. Startling? Definitely. Confrontational? Often. Shocking? Occasionally. Intentionally hilarious? More often than one might think.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

The MONA exhibition features a range of his work, and up to 70 additional pieces of MONA's own collection have been incorporated into it. Eight of the largest works in the show were created in the making of the film.

Barney's work is dramatic in size — a testament to the dimensions of this cavernous studio — and the logistics in transporting some of his work to the banks of the Derwent are mind-boggling. Some 143 crates have been shipped from Munich and New York within six 13m containers. There are also 24 airfreighted crates of smaller objects and works on paper.

The largest work is *Rouge Battery* (2014). Made of cast copper and iron, it weighs six tonnes. The smallest is *Phallus* (2014), which tips the scales at 350g.

The exhibition also features *The Boat of Ra*, a replica of the attic of Mailer's Brooklyn home, which comprises 400 items and took gallery staff a fortnight to assemble.

And then there's the film that started it all. *River of Fundament*, which will be screened in MONA's Cinematheque, began life in Barney's head in its earliest vision as a work for the stage, then as a series of filmed site-specific live events all over the world of which only two (Los Angeles and Detroit) ever took place as such. Its outing in Australia met with a range of views and reviews. "Some of those were pretty spicy," Barney says with a smile.

The film — almost certainly the only film to feature Maggie Gyllenhaal, Debbie Harry, Salman Rushdie and Elaine Stritch — is a kaleidoscope of images and ideas that, from the starting point of Mailer's book, recasts central Egyptian characters from mythology as classic cars that must die and be reborn and travel through the Lands of the Dead.

As was famously noted of the source novel: "If you're looking for a plot, you've come to the wrong place."

Not for the faint-hearted, the film clocks in at 5½ hours. It's punctuated with staggering live filmed scenes and features fairly strong imagery drawing on historical characters, some of whom are recurring themes in Barney's work, such as Harry Houdini.

So, why the abiding fascination with the famed escapologist?

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

“I think it’s a combination of several things,” Barney says. “I appreciated that he insisted his practice was a physical one, not a metaphysical one; and at the same time he had this passion for and pursuit for finding a medium who could help him reach his mother, who had died. And so he believed in magic but he insisted that he was an illusionist, that he was basically an athlete. It was physical but he believed in the idea of transformation.

“As a sculptor it’s something I can relate to — I think anybody who makes sculpture can relate to the potential for transformation. I was also interested in the way he — and a number of other performers — were right at the forefront of so-called ‘physical culture’. For the first time the body was being exposed and although there was a lot of exposure it wasn’t necessarily sexual ... yet.

“So for me, even when the imagery gets very explicit in my work, I’m interested in finding ways of something being extremely explicit or violent or visceral in that way in spite of itself — for it to be serving back to the narrative and functioning in a more abstract way, in spite of its full frontal exposure. I think there’s something about Houdini that’s like that — that it isn’t what it appears to be. I like that about him.”

Houdini of course was, like Barney, an artist of scale and wonder. The importance of scale in Barney’s work cannot be underestimated.

“The scale thing is a way of remaining out of control, which is important to me — to have something that can potentially fail, something that’s not completely in my grasp. I think as you move on you get better at making things, so you need to up the ante on some level. That’s why, rather than doing it technologically, I’m more interested in physicality and scale and endurance.”

And does it terrify him?

“Definitely.”

In fact, Barney reveals that, in one respect, he is scaling back: he has just re-edited Act 3 of *River of Fundament* and the final version is now 10 minutes shorter. As we speak, he is still finishing a sculpture for the exhibition and will shortly launch a website featuring his work. Hobart, then, can expect the very latest of Barney’s oeuvre.

With those final revelations, the conversation comes to an end. Barney stands and shows me to the door. It’s now bucketing down with rain, mercifully having driven the guard dog indoors, and Barney’s journey of rivers — from the Hudson to the Derwent — is almost complete.

***River of Fundament* is at MONA until April.**