

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Andy Battaglia, "An Artist's River Journey Into a Writer's World," *The Wall Street Journal*,
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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

An Artist's River Journey Into a Writer's World

*With Norman Mailer's 'Home' Afloat
And Some Zombies, Matthew Barney
Brings 'Ancient Evenings' to Life*

By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Drifting this week down the East River, against the clamor of boats at work on the waterway, is a surreal sight: a barge outfitted with a mysterious replica of Norman Mailer's New York home. The structure stands nearly four stories tall, maintains a sculptured state that took more than three weeks to assemble and requires a tugboat crew to move. It cuts a striking profile beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, with waves lapping lightly upon its floating foundation.

That is where the barge was stationed at sundown on Thursday, in service of a project by the fantastical artist Matthew Barney. The midriver orientation came near the end of the second of two epic film shoots for the day, which began with an early-morning journey along Newtown Creek, the waterway that separates Brooklyn and Queens. For "River of Fundament," a long-gestating project initiated in 2007 and slated to conclude some time next year, Mr. Barney directed a waterborne

camera crew to film the barge in floating motion against strangely beautiful backdrops.

"These guys don't mess around," he said to the driver of the camera boat, while waiting for another barge to pass. After that, a hulking drawbridge was raised, stopping traffic overhead, and the floating Mailer home entered its imaginary realm. Among the features in the earthly background were cranes crushing metal at a recycling center and mounds of dirt being moved near a sewage-treatment plant.

"River of Fundament" is loosely based on Mailer's 1983 novel "Ancient Evenings," about Egyptian mysticism and lore. The book baffled critics upon its release in 1983, but its meditations on reincarnation and rebirth found new form in Mr. Barney decades later. The idea of repurposing it was brought to his attention by Mailer, who, before his death in 2007, had played the role of Houdini in Mr. Barney's storied art film-cycle "Cremaster."

With Mailer, Mr. Barney formed a special bond. "I became interested in the hybrid



Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler/Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels (2)

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nature of what he did, in mixing a journalistic practice and a literary practice with his work as a film director and his relationship to politics and entertainment, and how it all became one field of activity over the course of his career," Mr. Barney said. "He never rested in one comfortable place and I respect that."

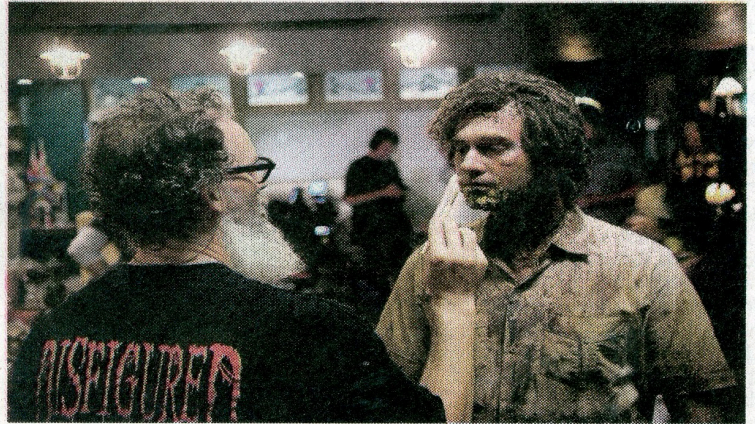
An eclectic cast and crew has been assembled for "River of Fundament," including marquee movie stars like Paul Giamatti and Maggie Gyllenhaal as well as avant-garde figures like the musician Joan La Barbara and Aimee Mullins, a striking actress, model and athlete with two prosthetic legs. Shooting for the project, which revolves around a wildly complex, phantasmagorical plot and involves staged scenarios and aspects of live performance art, began in 2008 in Los Angeles and picked up again two years later in Detroit. The New York incarnation began in August, when Mr. Barney moved operations to his warehouse studio in Long Island City, Queens.

There, he and a large crew had spent six months constructing a model of Mailer's

brownstone apartment, with Mailer's own books and belongings on loan from their actual home in Brooklyn Heights. Among the consultants was John Buffalo Mailer, one of the late writer's sons and an actor in "River of Fundament"—in a role playing in part as a reincarnation of his father. "I've been lucky enough to know two geniuses in my life," Mr. Mailer said. "My father is one and Matthew Barney is the other. I think my dad is up there dancing a jig he's so happy about how Matthew has taken the ball and run with this."

In line with Mr. Barney's alternately primeval and supernatural vision, the making of "River of Fundament" has so far included some unusual events. Actors at a shoot in the studio a few weeks ago created scenes while made up like gold-streaked zombies. An earlier episode involved Mr. Mailer cutting open a cow carcass and finding a surprise fetus inside. Others made use of rotting pigs and two 12,000-pound blocks of salt. For a big shoot to take place this weekend, a gold 1979 Trans Am waits at the ready to be sub-

Above, the replica of Norman Mailer's home traveling to the Brooklyn Bridge; below, Matthew Barney readies John Buffalo Mailer for a scene.



merged in Newtown Creek and disinterred with a crane.

For the later of two shoots on Thursday, the crew was summoned for a scene with Joan La Barbara, in the role of Mailer's widow, on the balcony of her floating home and singing words of Walt Whitman to the Brooklyn Bridge. "The Brooklyn Bridge is this iconic element connecting two worlds," she said. "It's an enormous generational leap full of

romanticism and hope and visions of the future, and it's all there in this huge structure."

Afterward, back on land, minds moved to the rest of the shooting schedule, which continues into next week and then breaks for a few months before a large-scale performance planned for next spring. To the crew on-call for a shoot soon to come, producer Mike Bellon offered a bit of advice: "Bring your alligator repellent."