

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dorment, Richard. *The Daily Telegraph*. London. September 2007.

A visionary straining at the leash

Matthew Barney — perhaps the most original artist alive — has his first UK show this week. Richard Dorment was given exclusive access to his extraordinary creative process

The work of Matthew Barney is to contemporary art what Mount Eiger is to mountaineering, or what *Moby-Dick* is to the 19th-century novel: in terms of difficulty, scale, and the rewards for those who attempt to master it, it stands alone.

The analogy to mountain climbing and whales is apt. Since 1987, when he made his first video, *Drawing Restraint 1*, he has been making work in which he literally climbs the walls of studios or galleries. And 19 years later, his feature-length video *Drawing Restraint 9* was largely set on a Japanese whaling ship, with the character played by Barney transformed from a man into sea mammal.

Over the years, I've become a dedicated fan of this unique artist, gradually assimilating the abstruse symbolic language of materials, forms and actions he uses in his work, learning that no detail of a work by him can be overlooked for its contribution to the meaning of the whole. But, although I believe that Barney's visionary art can be compared to that of William Blake, he has never — apart from screenings of his *Cremaster* series of films several years ago — had an exhibition in London.

For this reason alone, a show of new and recent work by him opening at the Serpentine Gallery on Thursday is one of the most important cultural events of the autumn.

On Sunday morning, I was at the gallery to watch the artist make his 16th video in the *Drawing Restraint* series. Here I want to describe what I saw in detail as a way to introduce a British audience to Barney's art.

There were two parts to *Drawing Restraint 16*. Working in the North gallery, the high-ceilinged central space under the cupola, and wearing a harness around his waist and thighs, Barney first attached himself via a flexible elastic cord to two heavy oil drums filled with petroleum jelly (Vaseline) on the floor. He then climbed each of the four gallery walls, on each ascent making a drawing in the triangular spandrels in the corners under the ceiling.

Strapped together to increase their weight, the drums of Vaseline acted like an anchor, pulling him back towards the floor, forcing him to exert greater exertion because the higher he climbed, the more the resistance increased.

What is hard to convey in words is the sheer physical strength and mental focus required for each ascent. Not only are the cleats or footholds embedded in the walls for the climb very small, but once at the top he had to work with one hand, using a large

piece of graphite in a long bamboo holder to reach the top of each spandrel.

As if that weren't difficult enough, the length of time he is able to work before becoming exhausted is limited. Throughout, I could hear him panting and grunting, winded with the effort required to stay at ceiling height long enough to complete a drawing while simultaneously struggling against the tremendous force pulling him backwards. In the rest periods between each ascent his body language was just like a top athlete's. He hunched his shoulders, shifted his weight from one foot to another, and paced back and forth, concentrating on what he had to do next.

Through the extreme physical exertion used in making these drawings, Barney is here making an analogy between the great artist at work and the biological phenomenon of hypertrophy whereby weightlifters and athletes make their muscles grow bigger by placing them against resistance. Just as a muscle is weak until it meets an external force, so too at its highest level art needs to encounter resistance or constraint if it is not to become facile.

This is why Picasso always fought against his own facility as a draughtsman and why other artists have endured extreme physical constraints to create some of the greatest works of art — just think of Michelangelo lying flat on his back for years to paint the Sistine Ceiling.

And so, at one level, the first part of *Drawing Restraint 16* is a symbolic enactment of the process of artistic creation. For Barney, the making of form begins with what he calls "Situation", a state in which raw energy is unstructured and lacking in direction. This is symbolised by the petroleum jelly.

In the second stage of creation, which Barney names "Condition", the artist uses discipline and restraint to channel and give structure to that energy. This is the climb. Finally, in the "Production" stage of the creative process, form begins to emerge. This is the drawings in the spandrels.

For him, what is valuable in art is not so much the finished product as the tension between the desire to create and the discipline required to funnel that desire into the making of art. This is why petroleum jelly is such an important

symbolic material for Barney. Being formless, it can be heated or cooled, shaped and transformed, restrained in a mould or allowed to flow free like molten lava. The elastic tether is an umbilical cord that ties the artist to the formless and often destructive chaos of pre-creation.

I haven't yet mentioned the subject matter of the drawings in the spandrels. Each is inspired by a large-scale colour photograph hanging on the wall beneath it. These are stills from his 2006 video *Drawing Restraint 9*, the themes of which he will weave into this new work. Next to a photo of the whaling ship on the high seas, for example, Barney draws a line on the wall that extends from the skyline in the photo. This line then meanders along, rising upwards, breaks and then returns at ceiling height where it becomes a mountain landscape as it might appear in the background of a Japanese painting or print.

This brings us to the second part of the work Barney created at the Serpentine on Sunday. To understand what happened next, it is important to realise that there are two closely related aspects to Barney's artistic practice, the physical actions such as the climbs we just witnessed, and the complex narratives such as *Drawing Restraint 9*, which represent extended meditations on his own life, on mythology, history, politics, culture and religion. In the video, Barney and his real-life domestic partner, the Icelandic singer Björk, play the parts of the Occidental Visitors.

In the second half of the new work, Barney takes on the identity of this fictional character, who in the video is transformed from a man into a water mammal. At this point the elastic cord attaching him to the oil drums is allowed to slacken as he tapes his feet into fin-like "skis" embellished with his and Björk's faces as they appeared in the video. He then attempted to shimmy up a 7.5-metre pole in the middle of the gallery to make a fifth drawing on the rim on the cupola — a feat of athleticism so strenuous that after three attempts he was obliged to give up and admit defeat.

And then the cycle of creation begins all over again. At the bottom of the pole were two circular "weights" of the kind weightlifters put on barbells, but made out of petroleum jelly. With his fin-like skis, Barney squashes these into a formless and shapeless mass so that, once again, he ritually enacts the process whereby creation is seen as an eternal cycle of release and restraint, structure (the pole) and non-structure (the petroleum jelly).

The third stage in Barney's creative process is the production of form. That's what happens next when, removing his skis (and therefore no longer in character), he opens the drums full of petroleum jelly and uses his hands like a conventional sculptor to model the shape of a whale's tail at the bottom of the pole. Finally, he takes a flensing knife (a long-handled, scimitar-shaped implement used for cutting up whale meat) and cuts into the sculpture of the whale's tail, shapes it and gives it form.

Whew. What Barney does in *Drawing Restraint 16*, I think, is to weave together his two modes of working, the physical actions performed in real time, and the narrative fantasies that happen on video. Though there is much more to the Serpentine show than this one piece, it gives you some idea of the complexity and allusiveness of his art. Do go, but remember that what I've written here only skims the surface and that really to understand Barney's work you first have to understand his symbolic language. But that's what God made the internet for, and at the end of the day that's what art is all about — it's an adventure, a journey, the exploration of whole new imaginative worlds.

Matthew Barney, Drawing Restraint 16 is at the Serpentine Gallery, Kensington Gardens, London W2 (020 7402 6075), from Thurs to Nov 11.

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