

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## A Most Punishing Tour

Matthew Barney goes solo,  
with Norman Mailer as guide.

By RANDY KENNEDY

The studio of the artist Matthew Barney in Long Island City, Queens, sits amid a collection of cookie-cutter warehouses where the most infernal sight is usually a chained guard dog, no Cerberus he. But at various times over the last several years, the studio was transformed into a version of a netherworld so hellish that even Mr. Barney, who has a stomach for such things, approached his limits. There were, for example, the dead pigs being devoured by maggots. And the eviscerated cow carcass, lying in a shallow pool. "That water was really pretty nasty by the end," Mr. Barney recalled recently.

The tableaux were created for "River of Fundament," a movie almost six hours long that is the most ambitious undertaking by Mr. Barney since the "Cremaster" cycle, the symbol-saturated films made beginning in the mid-1990s that established him as one of the most important artists of his generation. As with those films and much of his work since the early days of his career, the new film functions on its own but also as a dynamo for spawning, shaping and superimposing meaning onto a body of sculpture. That body, about 85



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works and more than seven years in the making, is on display for the first time in the United States, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The exhibition opened Sept. 13 and is to be the only American stop for the work, shown first in

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Matthew Barney with pieces from his "Water Cast" series at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.



Art

# A Most Punishing Tour

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Munich and Hobart, Tasmania.

The film and sculpture are structured around a creative reading of Norman Mailer's 1983 novel "Ancient Evenings," set mostly in 13th century B.C. Egypt, a monumentally ambitious book that was pummeled by critics, though sometimes with grudging respect for Mailer's attempt to haul the Book of the Dead into contemporary letters. Harold Bloom called it an "extravagant invention" but added, "I don't intend to give an elaborate plot summary, since if you read 'Ancient Evenings' for the story, you will hang yourself."

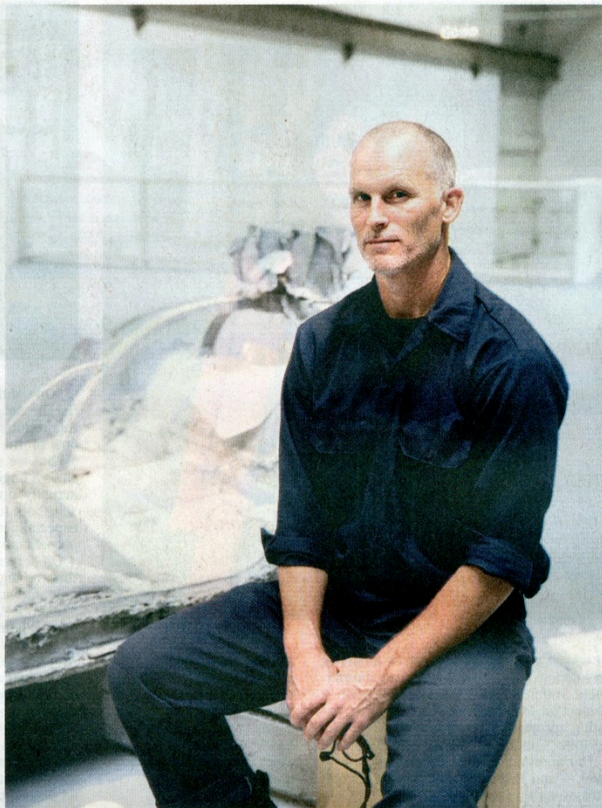
It's probably wise advice to follow when talking about "River of Fundament," too. Mr. Barney may have never met an elaborate liturgy that didn't interest him — "Cremaster" is structured around Masonic rites, Celtic myth and Mormonism, among other belief systems — and his work has been deeply shaped by anatomical metaphors. "River of Fundament" finds both sweet spots, centering on Mailer's deeply carnal version of Egyptian cosmology in which the dead seeking reincarnation must pass through a river of feces — a stand-in for a colon, in which sustenance is processed into waste that has the power in turn to fertilize new sustenance.

Mr. Barney said he labored to pare the sex and scatology that Mailer piled onto almost every page. But the film — arranged around live performances filmed in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York — still goes much further than the "Cremaster" series in forcing the viewer to confront the corporeal, featuring, among other things, defecation, urination, anal sex, a gurgling colostomy bag and a scene in which a bird emerges from a vagina. The film's story may be Egyptian, but the adjectives it most readily conjures are Latin: excremental, cloacal, mephitic.

And since its release last year, its critical reception — while not Mailer bad — has not been particularly kind. "The hokey and

Clockwise from right, Matthew Barney with his piece "Crown Victoria" at the "River of Fundament" exhibition in Los Angeles; "Boat of Ra" (2014); "Drawing Restraint 6" (1989); "Cremaster 3: Five Points of Fellowship" (2002); "Trans America" (2014); a scene from the film "River of Fundament" (2014).

**'It does push the limits of what people can take.'**



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they seem much more about Mr. Barney trying to find a way to give himself permission to use bronze, a material he has never worked with. "Before this I don't think I would have ever been interested in using bronze because of its — well — loadedness," he said. "It just carries so much historical weight."

Other pieces are made using a veritable periodic chart — zinc, lead, copper, gold, silver, iron and sulfur. And wood also appears for the first time ("I told a friend of mine once that if I ever did a piece in wood he should shoot me") in a ship-like sculpture based on a movie-set facsimile of Mailer's Brooklyn Heights apartment, a kind of spiritual limbo where much of the Pharaonic plot unfolds.

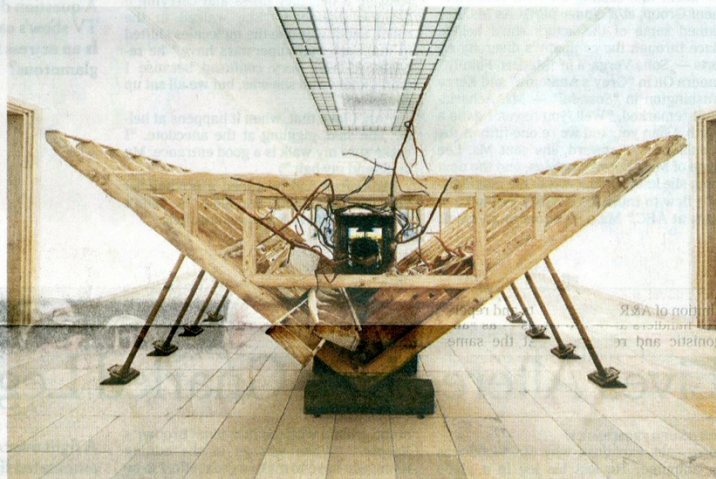
"For me the work is like going to the underground — it's really archaeological," said Philippe Vergne, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. "I think he has in many ways brought something to the history of sculpture and of filmmaking and narrative that was not there before."

For the show — curated by Okwui Enwezor of the Haus der Kunst in Munich and coordinated in Los Angeles by Lanka Tattersall — the museum constructed a large, completely enclosed movie theater inside the Geffen, where screenings of the film, which Mr. Barney made in collaboration with the composer Jonathan Bepler, will take place several times a week. Mr. Barney said he very much hoped visitors would see the sculpture before or after seeing the film, despite the film's length and the uncompromising subject matter.

"I think it does push the limits of what people can take, but it should be like going on a journey that affects you physically," he said. "By the time you're finished, you should be tired enough that you're seeing the scenes in the third act in a very different way." (When I saw the movie alone in a screening room in New York, Mike Bellon, the producer and a veteran Barney studio hand, walked in as the lights were coming



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the high points are hopelessly intertwined," Jed Perl wrote in *The New Republic*. *The Hollywood Reporter* said: "Barney owes us more inspired imagery in exchange for six hours of lives that we are not likely to wrest back from the rulers of the Underworld."

In much the same way that the movie is about human life in its most elemental and sometimes violent states, the sculpture that grew out of the movie seems — more than anything Mr. Barney has made before — almost primordial, as if some of it were cast up by the earth itself. In two extensive interviews, one at his studio and another at the Museum of Contemporary Art's sprawling Geffen Contemporary space in Little Tokyo just after installation was completed, Mr. Barney, 48, said that for several years he felt he had worked himself into a conceptual corner making sculpture tied closely to the narrative of his films and that he couldn't see a compelling way to continue. His last major piece was "Drawing Restraint 9," a Japanese-influenced story about characters aboard a whaling ship, made in collaboration with Björk, his romantic partner for many years (from whom he had a highly public split in 2013; her newest album "Vulnicura," which she calls a "complete heartbreak album," is about the breakup.)

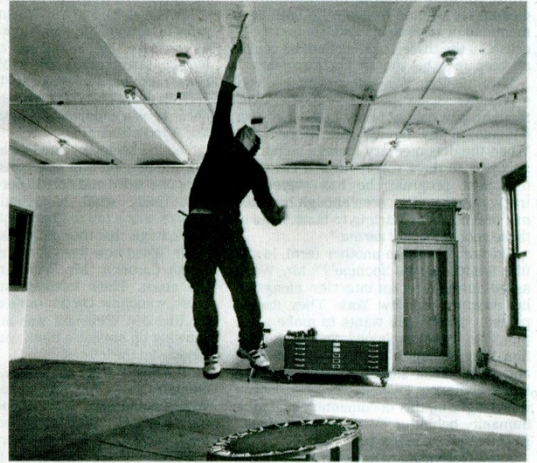
The highly unlikely way out of the creative corner for Mr. Barney ended up being "Ancient Evenings." He had cast Mailer in the "Cremaster" series, and Mailer, who died in 2007, became not only a mentor but also a kind of peculiar American demiurge in the Barney pantheon. Mailer asked Mr. Barney to read the Egyptian book, something he resisted at first partly because he felt that the material seemed too close to work he had already done and partly because he tends not to read fiction. "I don't really read for pleasure," he said.

But the book, set at a time when Egyptians were making great advances in metal working, casting and the development of alloys, gave him a way to begin thinking about materials and the history of sculpture in ways he hadn't previously — in effect, to think about a project in which sculpture would drive filmmaking more than it had in the past. "In many ways, the real leads the artificial in 'River of Fundament,'" Mr. Barney said one damp summer morning in his studio, wearing heavy black boots, Dickies work pants and a pristine Detroit Tigers cap. "I've always had an interest in colliding the natural and artificial, but I think what makes this work different from what I've done before is that the natural is foregrounded."

Across the way sat a piece bound for Los



MAXIMILIAN GELTER



CHRIS WINGET



MATTHEW BARNEY VIA GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS

Angeles that illustrated the point. It looked like a liquid metal explosion frozen in mid-bang, which is pretty much what it is. It was made at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington, a highly regarded contemporary-art-making space, using a new — and highly volatile process — in which molten bronze is poured into a pit filled with a mixture of clay and water. The metal protests violently as it cools, resulting in forms that look like an Abstract Expressionist atom bomb but also like a species of underwater fern. "The thing I like about these is how they almost border on a hippie sensibility," said Mr. Barney, whose work has probably never once been described as bordering on a hippie anything.

"There is some control over the form, but very little," he added appreciatively. In interviews, Mr. Barney is often deeply uncomfortable with questions about the meaning of his work or about his own life in anything other than metaphorical terms. But he is more expansive about the new project, at least about his artistic motivations, particularly filming in Detroit, with its visions of an American netherworld. "The first visits there were the most important to me in figuring out what the project was going to be about," he said. "It's a place where you see every layer of history exposed, like an open wound."

The water-cast sculptures relate to the movie in that they can evoke the Nile or the tears of Isis that flood it annually. But

up and said, only half-jokingly: "I'm glad to see you're still here.")

While Mr. Barney's work still has affinities with that of 20th-century and contemporary artists like Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra and Lynda Benglis, you get the sense — underscored in the exhibition by the addition of two ancient Egyptian pieces borrowed from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art — that he is more and more drawn to the premodern than to the art of his time. (Mailer once described "Ancient Evenings" as having "no tone of the present.")

Shaun Caley Regen, whose Los Angeles gallery gave Mr. Barney his first solo exhibition in 1991 and is now showing a selection of water-cast sculptures, said: "I think there's a clear line between what he was doing in the early '90s and what he's doing now, but it's gotten much more operatic, more epic. He's totally out of any place he's ever worked before."

You also get the sense — as vast as the scope of the "Cremaster" project was — that Mr. Barney is swinging for the fences with "River of Fundament," risking failure far more than he has in the past, with the shade of Mailer as his defiant guide. "One of my big reasons for being drawn to Norman was what I thought of as his willingness to fail, to risk a kind of failure that was useful to the rest of us," he said. "Knowing Norman, I'm sure he would roll over in his grave to hear me say that."