

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Andy Battaglia, "Wolves at the Door: Matthew Barney on Animals, Alchemy, and Art in His New Film and Exhibition, 'Redoubt,'" *Art News*, February 28, 2019.

## ARTNEWS

ARTISTS — NEWS

### Wolves at the Door: Matthew Barney on Animals, Alchemy, and Art in His New Film and Exhibition, 'Redoubt'



The Engraver in Matthew Barney's *Redoubt*, 2018.

HUGO GLENDINNING/@MATTHEW BARNEY/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS, AND SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON

Deep into *Redoubt*—Matthew Barney's new film about animals, alchemy, and the astronomical alignment of earthly bodies and heavenly stars—a pack of wolves wanders into a house and tears it to shreds. A lot of enigmatic action leads up to the disembowelment, much of it quiet and subdued. The mostly wordless movie is set in central Idaho, in remote hinterlands marked by mountains and trees that seem to stand in wait of whatever ghastly or graceful happening might transpire in the wild. Barney stars as one of the main characters, a U.S. Forest Service worker who boasts a burly beard and takes up landscape drawing by unconventional means. Choreography figures in the storyline, first through movement barely discernible as dance and later in forms that turn more conspicuous.

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Other characters at the film's core are Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, and two nymphs (identified as "Calling Virgin" and "Tracking Virgin") who accompany her in the matter of translating animalistic endeavors into cosmic terms. And then there is a figure known as the Electroplater, who transforms Barney's landscape drawings into emanations in metal by way of a process involving voltage shot through a cathode sunk in a chemical bath.

All together, the component parts make for a mesmerizing movie and a premise for making related artworks—large-scale sculptures and processed copper plates hung on walls—for the sake of consideration in the waking world. Both feature in "Matthew Barney: Redoubt," an exhibition opening Saturday at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut.



Trailer for the feature film *Redoubt*: ©MATTHEW BARNEY

"I've tried to avoid doing retrospective exhibitions and instead have made project shows, which always feel like new territory for me—how the dots can be connected within a body of work, how relationships between narrative and objects can be explored," Barney said while installing the exhibition last week. "It's hard to do retrospectives without feeling like you're trying to sum up or reduce, whereas project exhibitions feel more expansive. I always learn how a body of work could grow, where there's room to explore more.

The new work connects in certain ways to the sprawling mix of cinema and sculpture that figured in Barney's *River of Fundament*, a nearly six-hour film (premiered in 2014) and many-parted series of artworks that accompany it. But it marks a divergence as well. Where *River of Fundament* tended toward enormous performative spectacles and epic gestures, with otherworldly visions in the service of summoning ancient Egyptian gods and specters from a novel by Norman Mailer (*Ancient Evenings*), *Redoubt* is more measured and contemplative, grounded over its two-hour run time in a way that channels its strangenesses into subtlety.

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Matthew Barney, *Diana: State Two*, 2018.

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After opening with a long, slow zoom on a carcass of some kind rotting in snow, the film pans back to survey barren landscapes that stoke a sense of rapture as well as fear. As the small cast of characters enters, they do so as creatures overwhelmed by the landscapes around them, never less than wholly subsumed. And the landscapes reveal themselves as the true star on screen, as Barney's character—named the Engraver—takes up a practice of drawing their likeness onto metal plates that reveal hints of gleaming copper beneath.

In a process that proves increasingly integral as the film goes on, the Engraver takes his drawings—etched onto surfaces coated with black asphaltum that gets removed with each and every mark—to the house of the Electroplater, where they get dipped into pools of chemicals and transformed into a state hovering somewhere between drawing and sculpture, with lines that intensify and surfaces that come alive.

“I started electroplating during *River of Fundament*,” Barney said while up at Yale. “For those works it was more to do with the idea of having a thin gold layer over top a base metal—I was interested in the aspect of veneer that electroplating could provide, a veneer of gold over something much more crude.” But while playing around with a process that was new to him at the time, “I started seeing some anomalies if the plating carried on for too long,” he said. “Nodules would form along the edges. I started asking the plating company how to harvest those anomalies. They worked with us a bit, but I realized I needed to set up a plating facility in my studio to really explore.” And explore he did, with amenities at his home base in Long Island City, New York, suited for a process that involves tubs filled with sulfuric acid, copper sulfate, and other additives (brighteners, levelers) as well as variables owing to temperature and time. “It’s not an incredibly precise art. In fact it’s really hard to get the same thing to happen twice,” Barney said. “It’s usually used for making a micron-thin coating over something, where you calibrate your tank and put it in for a minute. But mine are in the tank for hours or days. The copper starts to erode and go into the solution, and then is attracted to the exposed lines on the plate. It’ll keep building up and up that way. If you move the anode, the block of copper, closer to the cathode, it’ll burn the surface—an electrical burn.”

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The practice evoked other artistic processes in a sort of inverse form. “In the beginning the proposal felt like printmaking, but almost the opposite of what a print is, in creating a positive growth out of a line,” Barney said. “But it has evolved and become much more layered and physical than the first iterations. There’s also a relationship to photography, in terms of chemistry and unrepeatability.”



Matthew Barney, *Cosmic Hunt: MultiCam Virgin*, 2019.  
©MATTHEW BARNEY/COURTESY SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON

Barney said his turn to metallurgy—a long way from the resins and polymers and foams he favored in earlier works like *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002)—owed to both formal and narrative designs. “At the time of *River of Fundament*, it was new to me. At the end of that we started experimental water castings”—a process that involves pouring molten metals into slurries of water and bentonite clay until they harden into splashy fractal-like forms—“and this felt like a continuation of that research. On the other hand, the new film is very different. It’s an American narrative, a kind of portrait of a region.”

Attentive and intensely present while fielding questions over a kale salad topped with salmon, Barney—at lunch at Heirloom restaurant in New Haven, not far from where he made his name as a budding undergraduate art student at Yale—spoke of *Redoubt* as a sort of paean to where he grew up. Born in California but raised for the most part in Boise, Idaho, Barney has engaged the Gem State (so-named for the abundance of mineral riches in the mountains there) in his work before. Scenes from the surreal blue-turfed football stadium of Boise State University are more than a little memorable in the *Cremaster Cycle*, and parts of *River of Fundament* take up residence in Idaho, at Ernest

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Hemingway's old home in Sun Valley and in the waters that connect different parts of the state. (The *River of Fundament* film ends with footage of salmon spawning, fighting currents that provide a kind of counterpoise to the life they so valiantly try to seed.)

But *Redoubt* is about Idaho through and through. "It all takes place in one area—it doesn't have the kind of juxtaposition of films I've made in the past," Barney said. "Central Idaho has strong contradictions that I was interested in exploring."

The movie's purview ranges beyond mere geography, taking up hunters and the hunted and ways they become characters in constellations in the sky. But all of that begins on the ground. "One of the stronger memories I have of Idaho was the debate that carried on throughout the '80s about reintroducing wolves into the wild," Barney said. "On one side you had the voices of people who used the land—hunters, ranchers—and on the other you had voices of conservation. Arguments were fierce. When I was a teenager you would hear about fights breaking out in town hall meetings and people being dragged out of rooms. The wolf subject couldn't be mentioned in a bar."



Wolves in Matthew Barney's *Redoubt*, 2018.

HUGO GLENDINNING/©MATTHEW BARNEY/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS, AND SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON

The politics of the situation interested him less than the mythic undercurrents of it all. "It took some years to figure out how to work in and around a political debate without making a political work," Barney said. But he found ways to channel the dynamic through different dimensions. The strains of dance that recur throughout *Redoubt*, choreographed by Eleanor Bauer (who also plays the "Calling Virgin" character), were inspired by the landscape and lives lived there. "We spoke about the static nature of hunting, of posting up somewhere

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and sitting, waiting, listening, looking,” Barney said of conversations about the kind of movement that would suit the film. “The movement of the Virgins early in the film wanted to address the notion of looking and listening, to try to think about the way sound travels in that landscape. You might have something miles away that you hear—it sounds quite clear, though you understand it’s a long way away. That kind of dynamic we talked about a lot.”

Interaction between characters was integral too. “We also talked about the tradition of contact improvisation”—a method of dance pioneered in the ’70s by Steve Paxton and others of his ilk—“and how energy created by one body is transformed by another body and put into balance,” Barney said. “It’s like in martial arts, when the force from one body is used by the opponent to shift the momentum of an attack. Conceptually, contact improvisation was an interesting way of thinking about how the Virgins could be both the predator and the prey. Their role could fluctuate and not be fixed.”

The particulars of Idaho figure more concretely in the artworks that are part of *Redoubt*. The exhibition at Yale—which after closing in June will travel in September to the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing and, in 2020, to the Hayward Gallery in London—features 40 electroplated works sourced from original drawings from the film processed in different ways. But a series of much larger sculptures commune with their points of origin directly, by way of trees that were cut down after forest fires scorched them in the wild.



Matthew Barney, *Diana*, 2018.  
©MATTHEW BARNEY/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS

“The core, which looks like coral, was cast inside a tree,” Barney said of *Diana* (2018), a 14-foot-long work that commands its own room in the show. “We took a tree and hollowed out the inside by using a computer-driven

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mill, and made that cavity a copy of the outside of the tree but slightly smaller. It's kind of like a miniature of the tree poured inside the tree itself."

As the molten metal oozes during casting (in this case liquified copper and brass), "the exterior is incinerated in the process. All the crevices and valleys were part of the topography of the tree. The texture was created by the molten material passing over the surface of the wood and burning it before it hardened. This all takes place in a second or two."

A kind of copper jacket surrounding the piece evokes the metal casing used in shotgun shells, and cut into various surfaces are etchings of a camouflage pattern worn by Diana in the film. "This is Kryptek," Barney said of a hyperreal design meant to disguise itself. "It was developed for the military but the military passed on it, and then it became popular for hunting." (Other patterns that crop up in works in the show are A-TACS and MultiCam.)

Another work features remnants of a tree that did not incinerate during its making: *Basin Creek Burn* (2018), a sculpture with metal-encased wood that sits on a giant gun rest made with polycaprolactone ("a prototyping plastic I've been using since *Drawing Restraint 9*," Barney said, referring to his film from 2006). "There was a helical crack going down the length of the tree, so I dug into that crack and created a kind of slot, and then we put a combustible fin of material that spiraled around. Then we poured metal down the tree and it incinerated the spiral fin, replacing it with metal. This was the first piece we made in the group, and there was a lot of anxiety over whether the tree would just combust."



Matthew Barney, *Basin Creek Burn*, 2018.  
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Accompanying the film and exhibition is a *Redoubt* catalogue with essays of enterprising kinds. "It's structured like the film, into different hunts," Barney said of a book devoted to texts "largely by specialists, not really art-historical perspectives." Essays pertain to subjects including wolf behavior, forest fire ecology, and other topics not often take up in museum publications.

"Having been a student here," Barney said of Yale, "I knew there's a forestry school, a dance program, a deep level of scholarship in the print department—all that could be an opportunity to put together a different kind of catalogue

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and a show that could have a different relation to scholarship. I wanted the essays to be objective and not take the sort of subjective approach that art essays often do. The development of the show in general benefitted a lot from that.”



Calling Virgin and Tracking Virgin in Matthew Barney's *Redoubt*, 2018.  
HUGO GLENDINNING/©MATTHEW BARNEY/COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS, AND SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON

Discussion of the book led back to a subject that had come up often: wolves and their mysterious ways of being in the world. Near the end of the *Redoubt* film, when the animals ransack a house in which the Electroplater and the Engraver do their work, one of the beasts seems to drink from a tub filled with electroplating chemicals. (“That was just water, tinted blue,” Barney laughed.) And then they rip through whatever is in front of them—all while a solar eclipse commences overhead.

The finale was filmed during the big celestial event in 2017, during which parts of Idaho fell into the Path of Totality. “We filmed it in the summer following the winter we were there,” Barney said. “It was one of the most stunning things I’ve ever seen—so incredibly opulent and so fleeting. It comes and goes in two minutes, and you realize there’s no way you’re going to be able to take it in before it’s gone.”

The wolves proved elusive too. “Wolves are weird. It’s hard to not to relate to them as a kind of dog,” Barney said. “But as soon you’re near, they don’t feel anything like dogs at all. They approach you and use their noses the way an ape would use their finger. They locate you, check you out, and move on. There isn’t any aspect of an intention to please.”

He paused, won over by wolf lore. “It’s special to be around them.”