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Sebastian Smee, "Who wants to join the cult of video artist Matthew Barney?" *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2019

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Who wants to join the cult of video artist Matthew Barney?



Matthew Barney, "Redoubt," 2018. (Hugo Glendinning/Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery and Sadie Coles HQ)

Video is the medium in which the most ambitious, aesthetically successful and popular art of our time is being made. Painting, sculpture and photography are all doing fine, folks, so don't panic. But it's video — the medium that once meant unendurably long, grainy films with flimsy conceptual underpinnings — that is setting the agenda.

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Proof? Exhibit 1 is Christian Marclay's "The Clock" — an ingenious 24-hour film that functions, improbably, as a timepiece. A huge hit, "The Clock" also is an indisputable masterpiece. Other examples include Ragnar Kjartansson's "The Visitors" and recent works — take your pick — by Mika Rottenberg , Alex Da Corte , Anri Sala, John Akomfrah, Eija-Liisa Ahtila , William Kentridge , Pipilotti Rist, Arthur Jafa, and Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch .

Then there is Matthew Barney.

Twenty years ago, Barney, who turns 52 this month, was described by Michael Kimmelman in the New York Times as "the most important artist of his generation." If importance can be measured in terms of influence, Kimmelman's claim has been borne out.



Matthew Barney's "Redoubt," 2018. (Hugo Glendinning/Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery)

More than anyone else, Barney yanked video art out of the cul-de-sac it had created for itself. He reunited the medium with performance, sculpture, drawing and architecture, and made it a natural vehicle for the most ambitious new art.

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In the process, his influence spread beyond art. It is hard to imagine, for instance, Lady Gaga's groundbreaking early videos (e.g. "Bad Romance") without the macabre and queasy-making theatricality of Barney's "Cremaster" films.

If you weren't paying attention to contemporary art in 2002, you may struggle to understand the buzz that surrounded his "Cremaster Cycle" when it opened at New York's Guggenheim Museum. The cycle, described by the show's curator, Nancy Spector, as nothing less than a "self-enclosed aesthetic system," came in the form of five films totaling about seven hours, as well as an elaborate sequence of drawings, photographs and sculptures made from Vaseline, plastic and metal.

It was all way too much. And yet it was hard not to marvel at Barney's genius for finding coherent forms for the cascading flow of his ideas and his ability to make unfashionable subjects (Norman Mailer! The life cycle of bees! Freemasons!) feel urgently alive.

It helped that the films themselves, for all their excruciating longueurs, were ravishing. Barney filmed the "Cremaster Cycle" in a palace in Budapest; on the Isle of Man; in New York's Chrysler Building; and on the salt flats of Utah. His actors included Ursula Andress, the sculptor Richard Serra, the athlete Aimee Mullins and Mailer himself. He worked with chorus girls, Canadian mounties, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, helicopter pilots, bee trainers, heavy metal bands, orchestras, tap dancers and language coaches, as well as with all manner of prosthetic devices, costumes and makeup. You knew, watching them, that video art would never be the same.

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Many hated the “Cremaster” extravaganza, either because Barney’s imagery disgusted them or because the whole project seemed to groan under the weight of its own pretension. But if you were interested in contemporary art, you saw it, and the obligation to form a response suggested that something important had come into the world.

Barney followed the “Cremaster Cycle” with “Drawing Restraint 9,” a feature-length collaboration with the singer Björk, his partner for 13 years, set aboard a Japanese whaling vessel, and then with “River of Fundament,” a 5 1/2-hour film in the form of a three-act opera, with a score by Barney’s longtime collaborator, Jonathan Bepler.

Much of “Cremaster” hinged on Gary Gilmore, the protagonist in Mailer’s true crime novel “The Executioner’s Song.” “River of Fundament” took its inspiration, improbably, from “Ancient Evenings,” Mailer’s little-read novel about ancient Egypt. It wove in a story about the Oedipal rivalry between Mailer and Ernest Hemingway and the death and resurrection of the car industry in Detroit. It featured masturbation, anal sex, characters covered in sewage or emerging from rotting animal carcasses, and a pregnant woman giving birth to something nonhuman.

It was disgusting, dazzling and weirdly great — until it wasn’t. Barney’s work can lend new meaning to the phrase “high on your own supply,” and the final two hours of “River of Fundament” — at least for me — were close to unbearable.

There is today an unease surrounding Barney — a feeling that the early acclaim was too much or that his ambition was too great — but above all, a realization that giving oneself over to his aesthetic was like joining a cult.

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He has the charisma and quiet intensity of a cult leader. He is a sincere truth-seeker and a quick study. His art weaves narratives, allegories, images and symbols that roll over the viewer in waves. Mesmerized, pummeled, you are forced either to take the plunge — to believe — or to keep your head above water. If you believe, it's like baptism: You are absorbed into an intellectually stimulating subculture where everything makes more and more sense the deeper you delve. If you don't — if you think the work solipsistic, its relationship to reality fragile — you save yourself a lot of trouble. But you also miss out on the fun.



Matthew Barney's "Redoubt: Diana," 2018. One electroplated copper plate with vinegar patina and seven engravings. (Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery)



Barney's "Diana: State two," 2018. Electroplated copper plate in copper frame. (Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery)

With a running time of 2 hours and 14 minutes, Barney's latest film, "Redoubt," is like a string quartet compared with his full-scale symphonic work. It premiered last week at Yale University, where Barney was recruited to play football in 1985. (He enrolled as a pre-med and planned

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to study plastic surgery.) Screenings at the Yale University Art Gallery are accompanied by an exhibition of copperplate engravings, experimental electroplated copper reliefs and massive sculptures cast from burned-out trees. Barney sees these as important extensions of the imagery in his films. But the exhibition felt like wandering through a pristine museum presenting the public face of a recently sprouted religious sect: no expense spared, big ideas, bad art.



Matthew Barney, "Diana on Shooting Bench," 2018. (Matthew Barney/, courtesy Gladstone Gallery)

The film was much better; it's the least strenuous and most beautiful film Barney has made.

The word "redoubt" denotes a defensive military fortification or a grittily defended political or social position. ("American Redoubt" is a conservative libertarian movement, established in 2011, that seeks to establish Idaho, Montana and Wyoming as safe havens for conservative Christians and Jews in the event of catastrophe.) For Barney, who was born in San Francisco but moved to Boise, Idaho, when he was 6, it carries a more personal sense of isolation or withdrawal.

"Redoubt" was filmed in the Sawtooth Mountains, where he used to go on family trips as a boy and where Hemingway retreated and committed suicide (an event Barney uses to bookend "River of Fundament"). It was

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filmed during snowstorms, on moonlit nights and on crisp blue sky days, and features footage of wolves, elk, eagles and mountain lions. There's an abundance of animal carcasses, and spectacular images of trees, living and dead, burned and disfigured by lightning.

Like all of Barney's work, the film is about the cycle of creation, destruction and regeneration. It's also about ecological balance, isolation, violence and vision. Based loosely on the Greek myth of Diana and Actaeon, "Redoubt" is divided into six parts, or "hunts." There's no dialogue, but the visuals, along with Bepler's music, convey a story that Barney has said was inspired by the contentious reintroduction of wolves into the Sawtooth Mountains in 1995. Wolves had been all but eradicated, but their numbers have bounced back to the point where controlled hunting is now permitted.

Enter the Diana character, played by Anette Wachter (a.k.a. "3ocalgal," a rifle shooting champion and vocal supporter of the Second Amendment). She hunts the wolf, while the Actaeon character, a park ranger played by Barney, tracks her and her two companions, the virgins. Upon finding them, he sets up a tripod and a copper plate and draws them, before returning with his engravings to a trailer where another woman, who appears to channel energies emitted by the heavenly Lupus constellation, electroplates the engravings, submerging them in an electrified chemical bath.

Each time Barney's character creates an image, he is punished for his voyeurism (although not fatally, like Actaeon). The two virgins, meanwhile, seem to echo these events in slow, inventively choreographed, mutually supportive movements that take place in a hammock, around a campfire, in deep snow and up a tree.

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Matthew Barney, "Redoubt," 2018. (Hugo Glendinning/Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery and Sadie Coles HQ)

When Barney introduced the screening at Yale last week, he said he welcomed the prospect of showing his work in a learning institution, where his art would be used as a teaching tool. This appealed, he continued — and he spoke with the melancholy of an apostate — to “a kind of yearning one has to have a functionality to what one’s doing — for the works to have some function.”

I sympathize. And yet art is not, finally, a teaching tool, and may even need to be protected from this kind of instrumentality — from being co-opted by religious dogma, political imperatives or the academy.

Art, it’s true, can establish a world unto itself. For the dedicated viewer (or listener: one thinks of the cult of Richard Wagner), it can set up a seductive system of belief, beauty, challenge and consolation, a system that may be as powerful as — and no less bizarre than — the belief systems of the ancient Egyptians, the Mormons, the Native Americans or the Freemasons (all of which have played major roles in Barney’s work).

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But art created like a cult, or a teaching tool, can become too self-enclosed. Barney tries to avoid this. His endlessly curious intelligence reaches out to the world in all its complexity. But he is always harvesting reality for his own purposes — for the private cult that is each new Matthew Barney project.

No one, I suspect, is more aware of the implications of this than the artist. His whole body of work can be read as a knowing commentary on the hubris, the cosmic redundancy of artistic creation. (John Updike called it “taking the knife of criticism to God’s carefully considered handiwork.”) Why do we need to make art? Why can’t we simply let the world be?

Barney is beguiled by these basic questions, which is what makes his overreaching ambition so poignant. The more sensitively conceived, ingeniously elaborated and dazzlingly executed his work, the more bizarre, eccentric and nakedly pointless it appears.

This is intoxicating, to be sure. But it is a strange game to play.