

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "Matthew Barney: Redoubt review — artist's film will make you see things anew," *The Times*, May 17, 2021



FIRST NIGHT | VISUAL ART

Matthew Barney: Redoubt review — artist's film will make you see things anew

Hayward Gallery, London SE1

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

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A still from the film Redoubt, the focal point of Matthew Barney's new exhibition

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The film that lies at the heart of the latest Hayward Gallery exhibition is more than two hours long. I freely admit that in ordinary circumstances the prospect of watching it would be far from enticing. Arty videos too often turn out to be tedious.

Yet these are not ordinary circumstances because this film, *Redoubt*, has been made by Matthew Barney. And Barney is the artist who, over the course of eight years from 1994 to 2002, created [*The Cremaster Cycle*](#), a series of five fantastical feature-length movies so unfathomably strange and spectacularly inventive that even when I watched all of them in two days I barely so much as wriggled in my cinema seat. Barney is an idiosyncratic master who, even as he baffles and perplexes, lures you ineluctably into his weird and wonderful, mesmerising worlds.

His latest offering, however, marks a departure from past extravaganzas. *Redoubt* is low key. Barney takes off into the wildernesses of the Sawtooth mountains in Idaho, not so far from Boise, where he grew up. Their forests of pine and expanses of snow provide the setting for a meditation on the myth of Diana and Actaeon as, inspired by a controversy as to whether wolves should be reintroduced to the area, he makes a film about hunting.



Virgins, 2018, by Matthew Barney

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There is only a handful of characters: a camouflaged female marksman, her pair of balletic handmaidens and a bearded forest ranger with a taste for engraving (played by Barney) are the most prominent. None of them speaks. Only the magnified sounds that they make — the rustle of their clothes, the drip of the water they wash in, the click of a gun chamber lock, the crunch of footsteps in snow — disturb an impressionistic musical score.

The film — bar the odd moment of excitement (when, for instance, a wolf pack invades a parked trailer and rips the furnishings to shreds) — moves at an unrushed, ruminative pace. It is about the relationship between man and nature, between reality and mythology, the cosmological and the earthly, the primal and the artistic. The themes are as potentially broad as they are wilfully obfuscated. The best you can do is relax into the flow. Treat it as a wildlife documentary, if you like, or a paean to the loveliness of sublime landscapes, or a visual disquisition on extremist survivalist movements.

In the Hayward Gallery it makes the focal point of a wider exhibition of engravings and sculptures that tease out its narratives. Entire tree trunks have been cast in metal. Their scale is striking, but their minute intricacy is mesmerising. Electroplated copper engravings reflect the work of the engraving ranger of the film.

I can't pretend to be able to unpick it. Those, and there are many, who dismiss Barney's work as vacantly pretentious are unlikely to reform their opinion. Those, like me, who find his pieces entrancing will continue to take him on trust. But as you emerge you will discover that you have found a new way of seeing; that you are starting to look at the world as a hunter does.

The senses feel exquisitely sharpened. At one moment the eye sweeps great barren expanses, at the next it is dwelling on the tiniest detail. You are scanning a world

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where a shadow could be your quarry; where your quarry could be your killer; where your killer could be a flittering glint of light amid leaves. And you have to hunt down your own meanings in this wild domain.

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