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LAST CHANCE

Matthew Barney's Time Has Come Again

Misunderstood for decades, the sculptor and filmmaker is pushing ceramic to its limits. He's dancing. He's making the best work of his career.



By Jason Farago

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Something curious happened to Matthew Barney over the last 15 years: He became underrated.

The artist spent the 1990s crafting strange, gooey collisions of athletic resistance and body horror. His early "Cremaster Cycle" (1994-2002), an ever-growing system of films, sculptures and photographs culminating at the Guggenheim Museum when he was just 35, seemed to ratify his place at the pinnacle of new American art.

But he struggled, for nearly a decade afterward, with the immense "River of Fundament" (2007-2014), a lumbering marriage of ancient Egyptian myth and American car culture. Time passed. Tastes changed. Museums indulged in a Barney-phobic vogue for sculpture that was unmonumental, provisional and both physically and intellectually flimsy.

Barney's approach, though, like the petroleum jelly he sculpted in his early days, did not stay fixed. Quietly, he devised daring new methods of bronze casting. Privately, he invited younger artists to reimagine his early performances with



Matthew Barney's "Supine Axis," 2024, in his show "Secondary: object replay" at Gladstone Gallery. Credit...via Matthew Barney and Gladstone Gallery; Photo by David Regen

bungee cords and harnesses. Now in his 50s, Barney has been doing the best work of his career.



Barney at the Guggenheim in 2003 with “The Five Points of Fellowship.” Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The sublime “Redoubt” (2019) and melancholy “Secondary” (2023) rechanneled Barney’s early interest in sport and his gaze on the American northwest into new media, such as electroplates and ceramics. Both projects revitalized his multimedia practice by introducing the new element of dance — specifically of contact improvisation, which requires performers to rebalance their movements in response to their partners. What emerged has been more delicate, more subdued, more generous and more at liberty than any of his youthful plastinations.

The “Secondary” project is currently the subject of a major show at the Cartier Foundation in Paris. Here in New York, at Gladstone Gallery for a few more days, an exhibition of related sculptures and videos reveals the freer Barney you may have missed.



A detail of “Supine Axis.” The fragile red clay, fired in Barney’s studio as part of the research process of “Secondary,” is held together by plastic.
via Matthew Barney and Gladstone Gallery; Photo by David Regen

Its most impressive elements are large sculptures in terra cotta, a new material for him. “Supine Axis,” nearly 20 feet long, comprises a fragile, partly crumbled terra cotta drain pipe, barely supported by a plastic prosthetic armature and conjoined to terra cotta casts of lightweight dumbbells. The natural clay and the synthetic polymer are reconciled in one of Barney’s many sculptural collisions. Likewise, in the impressive “Power Rack / Iron Inversion,” a ready-made strength training apparatus melds with a clay version of the same.

Throughout, the ceramic behaves a lot like the petroleum jelly that Barney once used: moldable but also vulnerable, bearing the marks of external stresses, and often on the edge of collapse. A similar fragility appears in Barney’s drawings, notably an exquisite sheet of a tumbling football player, modeled after a famous engraving — by the Dutch Baroque master Hendrick Goltzius — of Phaeton, the boy in the myth who lost control of the chariot of the sun. Where Goltzius etched with sharp strokes, Barney’s pen is all softness and spume; the line of this allegedly “macho” artist has always been finer, more feminine, than people realize.



“Stabler Falling (after Goltzius),” 2024, a pencil drawing by Barney in a custom frame. via Matthew Barney and Gladstone Gallery; Photo by David Regen

“Secondary” is rooted in a dreadful 1978 episode in the N.F.L., when the Oakland Raiders defensive back Jack Tatum delivered a violent hit on the New England Patriots wide receiver Darryl Stingley, leaving him a quadriplegic. That collision was for Barney the starting point for a long process of experimentation — with

materials, with movements — in the Long Island City studio he was about to vacate. He invited in several dancers, who introduced another dimension of bodily frailty; they were all decades older than the football players they embodied.

Those improvisations continue at Gladstone, whose walls bear scrapes and slashes of metal and clay, the residue of the latest of Barney's "Drawing Restraint" performances, which stretch back to 1989. In a video here of the performance, Barney and the dancer Raphael Xavier (who plays Tatum in "Secondary") execute dance movements indebted to football practice drills, dragging and thrusting clay casts of weight plates that crumble as they manipulate them.



The walls at Gladstone display the residue of "Drawing Restraint 26," a performance by Barney and the dancer Raphael Xavier. via Matthew Barney and Gladstone Gallery; Photo by David Regen

On the screen, we watch Barney's clay-covered head collide over and over with the room's white walls; then, around the gallery, we see the unsettling impressions of impact. (Ken Stabler, the quarterback that Barney plays in "Secondary," was diagnosed after his death in 2016 with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the degenerative brain disease that has afflicted so many football players.)

Declining objects, declining bodies, declining societies: All these come into registration in "Secondary," which treats the human body and the body politic as forms under stress and strain. "Supine Axis" is both the athlete's fractured spinal column and the pipes beneath Barney's studio. The city is a kind of body. The sculpture is something choreographic.

Even as Barney imbues unorthodox sculptural materials — Vaseline and Teflon, zinc and sulfur, electroplated copper and now terra cotta — with narrative meaning and social significance, he continues always to push each sculpture to succeed or fail on its own physical terms. That devotion to the elaboration of materials used to be the project of every great modern artist. It is far rarer now than we might like.



The terra-cotta-marked walls of Gladstone Gallery, founded by the late Barbara Gladstone. Barney has exhibited at the gallery since his first breakout show, in 1991. via Matthew Barney and Gladstone Gallery; Photo by David Regen

Barney suffered for years from a mistaken public impression, on the basis of the “Cremaster Cycle,” that he was some Wagnerian individualist, obsessed with a singular grand vision. In fact, he has always been an impressively collaborative artist, relying on others — the artists Richard Serra and Elizabeth Peyton, the composers Jonathan Bepler and Arto Lindsay, the choreographers Eleanor Bauer and David Thomson — both to scale his art up and to let Barney step back.

Among his longest and most productive collaborations was with Barbara Gladstone, the art dealer who gave him his first New York exhibition in 1991 and later produced many of his films. She left a legacy of commitment to artistic

freedom when she died suddenly in June. The absent body of this show is Gladstone's as much as Barney's, an influence that was always discreet but never secondary.

Matthew Barney: Secondary: object replay

Through Friday at Gladstone Gallery, 530 West 21st Street, Manhattan; 212-206-7606, gladstonegallery.com.

Jason Farago, a critic at large for The Times, writes about art and culture in the U.S. and abroad. More about Jason Farago