

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

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## MATTHEW BARNEY GLADSTONE

No need to wait 2,000 years to see how archaeological relics from our time might appear to ancient history buffs of the future. "DJED," Matthew Barney's recent show, featured an imaginative group of three massive, heavy-metal abstract sculptures made of cast iron, bronze, copper and lead, plus a smaller piece in zinc, that suggest what discoveries from a long-forgotten Industrial Age might look like. Among the odd but vaguely familiar interrelated sculptures—*DJED*, *Canopic Chest* (both 2009-11) and *Secret Name* (2008-11)—one can discern fossilized fragments of cars, such as a flattened-out chassis, a broken axle and smashed wheel



Top, Matthew Barney: *Canopic Chest*, 2009-11, cast bronze, 73½ by 165 by 243 inches.

Left, *River Rouge: Crown Victoria*, 2011, ink on paper in painted steel frame, 11¾ by 14¾ inches.

Both at Gladstone.

Harry Houdini died, Detroit looms large in Barney's idiosyncratic cosmology.) With musical accompaniment, the car gets dragged through the streets of Los Angeles in the first act, and in the second it is dumped into the Detroit River. Dredged out of the water in the third act, the car gets melted down and cast in iron in a huge outdoor smelting arena in front of 200 guests Barney invited to Motor City for the performance. The results were on view here.

Weighing more than 25 tons, *DJED* features the squat iron underside of the Chrysler lying on the floor. Adding to the eerie effect of the piece, Barney left in place the graphite support blocks and rivulets of iron that meander from the car chassis like tentacles. One area of the iron runoff forms a generalized image of the *djed*, an ancient Egyptian symbol signifying stability, in the shape of a sectioned pillar and associated with Osiris's spine. *Canopic Chest* was the most stunning piece in the show. Titled after the vessels used for mummified organs, the evoca-

tive work recalls an ancient burial mound of rough-hewn cast bronze topped by a glittering, polished bronze was.

It is not necessary to know the details of Barney's elaborate Egyptian yarn in order to appreciate his achievement in these new works. *Secret Name*, for instance, is only remotely related to the narrative. Also displayed in the upper gallery, it is a rather minimalist composition featuring a huge irregular rectangle placed on the floor and a long, winding rope, both cast in lead, with some areas covered in smooth white plastic. On one level, its dense and intense formal rigor appears as an homage to Richard Serra, one of Barney's heroes. At another glance, the composition has an almost whimsical quality that calls to mind certain pieces by Richard Tuttle, albeit made of more durable materials.

Accompanying these majestic objects, a dozen small drawings by Barney are relatively modest meditations. Contained in simple Venetian-red steel frames and executed on rust-red paper, Barney's line drawings are surprisingly delicate and florid, evoking morphing figures and landscapes. They appear as talismanic objects with their own distinctive set of attributes, related to the metal pieces only in terms of suggesting the movement and sensuousness involved in the various sculptural processes. One imagines Barney quietly working on them during *Ancient Evenings* rehearsal breaks.

—David Ebony

casings. The smallest and most recent work, *Sacrificial Anode* (2011), displayed in the second-floor gallery, consists of a row of what appear to be corroded gray metal crowbars leaning on a white plastic beam. In fact, the forms are based on the *was*, an ancient Egyptian royal staff, a symbol of power, which in antiquity was made of a dried bull's penis and later was cast in precious metals. The shape reappears in all the sculptures.

Just as the San Francisco-born artist previously showed objects and set pieces culled from his epic five-part film *The Cremaster Cycle*, the imposing objects in this show have roles in the first three acts of Barney's still-in-progress seven-part opera, *Ancient Evenings*. Based on the eponymous 1983 novel by Norman Mailer, and with a score by Jonathan Bepler (a longtime collaborator), Barney's theatrical production commenced in 2007. The three acts realized so far were performed at different times and locations: Los Angeles, Detroit and Dearborn, Mich. In a nutshell, the story centers on an ancient Egyptian mythological journey of the soul through life, death and rebirth. Principal characters include the deities Osiris, Isis, Set—and the late conceptual artist James Lee Byars. Don't ask.

In Barney's extravaganza, a 1967 Chrysler Imperial is the stand-in for the soul, and the Detroit River substitutes for the Nile. (As the birthplace of the Chrysler Imperial and the city where