

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jeffrey Kastner, "Matthew Barney: Gladstone Gallery," *Artforum*, December 2011, 250.

## NEW YORK

### Matthew Barney

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Reviewing Norman Mailer's ill-fated "Egyptian novel" *Ancient Evenings* in the *New York Times* back in 1983, critic Benjamin DeMott judged the mytho-historical epic a product of "a powerful imagination . . . working with stunning intensity," but one fatally compromised by the "preoccupations and obsessions of a late 20th-century mind." Mailer's book provides the broad conceptual framework (as well as the title) for Matthew Barney's newest project cycle, a gargantuan multipart "site-specific opera" created with the artist's regular collaborator, the composer Jonathan Bepler. The most recent act—a sprawling, profoundly Barneyesque enterprise—famously involved, among other astonishments, twenty-five tons of molten iron being poured into a pit along the Detroit River for the delectation of a bargeload of freezing art-world hotshots. Nearly a year later "DJED," Barney's recent show at Gladstone Gallery's Twenty-First Street space, debuted artifacts from and related to that spectacle—and made a compelling case for the intensity of the artist's imagination and his obsessions, reconfirming his unique ability to route the latter through the former in ways that don't hamper but rather deepen the effects of both.

As far as echt American auteurs go, I've always associated Barney more with Melville than Mailer (and not just because of the shared interest in things cetacean suggested by 2005's *Drawing Restraint 9*). The same dizzying Melvillian density of information and symbolism that gave the *Cremaster* cycle, 1994–2002, its fearsome sui generis grandeur is built into the new work, which imagines the stages of death and rebirth from Egyptian mythology not with the human body as vehicle but instead with something rather more literally vehicular—the American automobile. Indeed, the Detroit performance featured the wreckage of a car (a 1967 Chrysler Crown Imperial, a ride familiar from the final installment of the artist's *Cremaster* cycle) first dredged from the Rouge River and then sacrificed to a smelter; the show's title work and centerpiece is built around artifacts produced by that industrial transubstantiation.



Matthew Barney,  
*Secret Name*,  
2008–11, cast lead,  
polycaprolactone,  
copper, zinc, 21 1/4" x  
14" 11" x 10" 8 1/2".

A central motif in the ancient Egyptian religion, the *djed* was typically rendered as a pillar of sorts, one whose columnar/phallic/treelike form has been interpreted as symbolizing not only the backbone of Osiris but also stability and potency. Here that sense of upright constancy and force has slumped and melted, as Barney reconceives the figure in *DJED*, 2009–11, a 47,000-pound floor-based tripartite array:

an enormous ovoid form like a petrified puddle that trails off into two rivulets; another smaller, vaguely spermatazoan figure swimming off to the side; and a cast of a car's undercarriage, which suggests a monstrous insect flipped helplessly on its back. For all its chaotic energy, this work was relatively orderly in comparison to the adjacent *Canopic Chest*, 2009–11, a hulking lump of cast bronze containing yet more car parts and dotted with strange protuberances like tarry wildflowers sprouting on a slag heap. *Canopic Chest* was also topped with one of the show's few moments of artifactual preciousness—the dimly gorgeous suite of drawings that ringed the galleries notwithstanding—a gleaming bronze crowbarlike tool that suggests some sort of ceremonial scepter. The form was recapitulated in *Sacrificial Anode*, 2011, which shared the smaller, upstairs gallery with perhaps the show's most visually rich work, *Secret Name*, 2008–11. Once again featuring the heavy metal of the other works, the sculptural array also included the "soft" plastic more usually associated with the artist, here used to create a shallow, Goberesque bathtub form whose lower half appeared to have been eaten away by some kind of microbe.

In contrast to the artist's many gallery shows presenting props from his various *Cremaster* films, "DJED" contained works that felt less like things produced *for* another operation than produced *by* it. In this respect, they recall the very first works that brought Barney to the art world's attention, the initial installments of the "Drawing Restraint" series, 1987–, in which the exigencies of process were at the very core of the artifacts' production. The constraints may have changed, but the artist's central methodological preoccupation has remained constant: He continued to set formal and conceptual challenges for himself that, in the overcoming of them, produce experiences of extraordinary poetic force.

—Jeffrey Kastner