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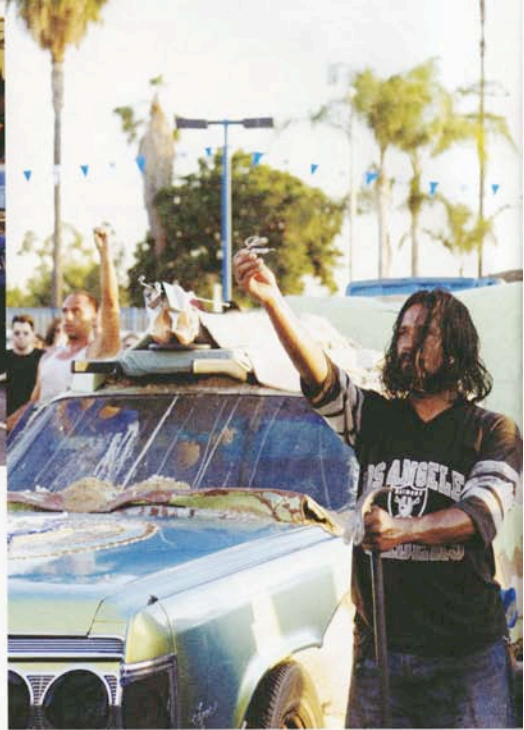
THIS SUMMER, ARTIST MATTHEW BARNEY TOOK DEATH FOR A TEST RIDE. AND IT GOT GREAT MILEAGE. COMPOSER JONATHAN BEPLER SUPPLIED THE WICKED DRIVING MIX. BY CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

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MATCH FOR THE PROJECT.”**
—JONATHAN BEPLER

On May 18, 2008, at approximately 6:30 P.M. PST, at a defunct RV dealership south of Los Angeles, artist Matthew Barney and composer Jonathan Bepler took their audience on a psychic road trip into the afterworld.

A few hundred guests, many having flown from New York City for the occasion, stood on the dealership rooftop overlooking a lot filled with Sebrings, Chargers, and Rams. No one had the slightest clue of what to expect. More than one person looked up to the sky. “Maybe something will drop down from above,” one guest speculated. Since this was a performance by Matthew Barney, creator of the body-and-mind-distorting *Cremaster Cycle* film series, that guess seemed as plausible as any.

The performance was the first in a series that Barney and Bepler plan to present over the next few years, exploring the seven stages of the after-

life according to Egyptian mythology, as described in Norman Mailer’s 1983 novel, *Ancient Evenings*. Stage one is the loss of one’s “ren” or “secret name,” and “Ren: Chrysler” was the title of this particular performance. It wasn’t the first time Barney has used Mailer for source material. *Cremaster 2* (1999) was centered around Gary Gilmore, the killer antagonist in Mailer’s nonfiction book *The Executioner’s Song*, with a cameo by the author himself as Harry Houdini.

Bepler, Barney’s Berlin-based collaborator, created music for four of the five *Cremaster* movies and is plenty familiar with Mailer territory. “Matthew and I got together to work on something small for the Manchester Opera House as part of a group show last July,” he says. “We got a hold of *Ancient Evenings* as a basis for a libretto, and we started kicking around ideas. It soon became

clear that we had a full-length piece on our hands. Then, after a bit more, we saw that each act of this work could be its own piece. So ‘Ren’ is the first stage of this longer work.”

Bepler’s music set “Ren” in motion. From different directions under the freeway, ranks of a Southern California marching band descended on the lot playing a funeral symphony on snare drums, bass drums, cymbals, tubas, and bugles that echoed in somber surround sound across the car lot. “When I first arrived at the site, I was shocked at how loud it was,” Bepler remembers. “I mean it’s a few yards away from the I-5! It’s really beautiful, and I think having the musical groups physically approach from afar, their sound emerging from the din, worked nicely.” After playing Bepler’s composition, the band raced up the driveway to the upper deck and formed two neat rows

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in front of the audience. Suddenly a badly wrecked lime-green 1967 Chrysler Imperial appeared—the very one that had starred in *Cremaster 3* (2002). *Cremaster's* amputee star Aimee Mullins lay half-buried on the car's roof, while smashed into the trunk was a demolished port-a-potty, with its gigantic white septic ball sticking out of the back like the abdomen of a spider. The car was hauled with ropes to the lower lot by 50 greased-up men looking like California day laborers; there it soon traded places with a gleaming gold Pontiac Firebird inside the glass showroom. Inside the group drummed on specially built Chrysler logo "pentadrumms," then Oaxacan singer Lila Downs sang a dirge from the balcony with a mariachi band.

Here the real death orgy began: An excavator, fitted with a special head called a "Slashbuster," began to grind through the Imperial's hood,

chassis, and finally, the port-a-potty. Metal flew against the windows, flames spit from the engine, and the septic ball erupted with harsh-smelling port-a-potty contents. The *Cremaster 3* icon was reduced to wreckage. Afterward, in a garage, the Firebird was covered with a plastic sheet, Madagascar roaches were released, and the naked sex-performer Mouse marched the entire crew in a procession through a gate.

Any questions?

Plenty. But Barney's experiments don't come with easy answers. Was it the 1967 Chrysler Imperial or the entire *Cremaster* series that was passing into the afterlife here? Or was it the symbolic death of American car culture? The only thing clear was that we were having a good time as Barney cemented his return to live performance. And although many of "Ren's" symbols still belonged to his familiar

iconography, new themes and imagery emerged. "I have been wanting to work with a drum and bugle corps for some years now," Bepler noted. "Matthew likes them, too. Some of the ideas of 'Ren'—the ideal American West, ceremony, passage, devotion, ferocity, conformity, youth—made the band a perfect match for the project."

It was a strange ritual, sleaze meeting sublimity, as American myth and Egyptian lore hooked up at a car dealership amid the strip malls of Southern California for a violent, otherworldly sound and image-scape. For one evening, nearby Disneyland found dark competition in Barneyworld. Most of us preferred the "Ren" ride.

ABOVE: MATTHEW BARNEY AND JONATHAN BEPLER'S REN, 2008, LOS ANGELES, CA. PHOTOS (OPENING SPREAD AND THIS PAGE): CHRIS WINGET. PHOTOS (OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT): KELLY THOMAS; IVANO GRASSO. SPECIAL THANKS: REGEN PROJECTS, L.A.

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