

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

David Ebony, "MATTHEW BARNEY: New York—Brooklyn Academy of Music,"  
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Matthew Barney  
and Jonathan Bepler:  
*River of Fundament*:  
Ron, 2014, production  
still by Chris Winget.

## MATTHEW BARNEY

New York—Brooklyn Academy of Music

Epic and outlandish, Matthew Barney's new film *River of Fundament* (2014) is in some ways his most accessible and engaging work. However, it isn't exactly entertaining in the sense of a typical movie-going experience. Five years in the making, the film clocks in at just over five hours long. Written and directed by Barney with musical composition and direction by his longtime creative partner, Jonathan Bepler, the film is tightly composed in the manner of an opera. Its three acts encompass three basic narrative themes interwoven throughout the film, all heightened by Bepler's soundtrack, which ranges from atonal electronic sounds to quasi-liturgical choral passages.

One theme centers on ancient Egyptian mythology, with fanciful interpretations of the journey of the soul from life to death, the underworld and rebirth. Some of the sequences, such as several in which characters cross a river of feces in order to be reincarnated, directly correspond to episodes described by Norman Mailer in his 1983 novel

*Ancient Evenings*, set in pharaonic Egypt. An imaginative reenactment of Mailer's wake, a dinner party of sorts, shot in the writer's Brooklyn apartment, serves as the second motif. Attending the dinner, a stellar cast—including Salman Rushdie, Fran Lebowitz, Luc Sante, Dick Cavett, Deborah Harry and Elaine Stritch (some of Mailer's real-life friends and acquaintances), as well as artist Lawrence Weiner and Mailer's son John Buffalo Mailer—speak and sing about episodes in Mailer's life, his writing and the mythological and historical figures in *Ancient Evenings*. Barney himself appears here as Ka—the ancient Egyptian name for the human soul's vital essence. Elsewhere he plays Osiris (the Egyptian god of the dead) as well as the late artist James Lee Byars.

The wake scenes perhaps come closest to conventional narrative, until Act II, when the dinner party seems to degenerate into debauchery and mayhem. For instance, a nude female guest urinates on the dining room table while doing a back bend, and a couple engages in a rather pro-

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longed demonstration of anilingus. In fact, the apartment itself becomes unmoored. In several of the film's last scenes, presided over by actress Ellen Burstyn as Hathfertiti from *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer's home is re-created on a barge cruising down the East River, with the Manhattan skyline looming in the distance. Why not?

The third motif is the automobile, which Barney has used in the past as a symbolic representation of the soul. Footage from three outdoor performances that Barney filmed over the past several years, in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York, feature cars as ritual objects. A 1967 Chrysler Imperial, a 1979 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am and a 2001 Crown Victoria Police Interceptor are driven and dragged by hand through the streets in rather spirited funeral processions, accompanied by brass bands and hundreds of costumed extras. Battered, dumped in rivers and eventually melted down, the cars also serve as a metaphor for the demise of the Industrial Age. In one of the film's most spectacular moments, cascades of lava-like molten car metal stream from an enormous furnace down a hillside in the midst of a torrential rainstorm.

As in the past, Barney graphically explores bodily functions and their resultant fluids. He demonstrates a preoccupation here with alchemy, especially the transformation of shit into gold. Near the beginning, Barney renders semen as mercury flowing along cracks in a floor. In its highly stylized, Surrealist-tinged examination of nature, sexuality and the frequent absurdities of life, *River of Fundament* at times recalls early films by Luis Buñuel and Peter Greenaway; it also corresponds to Barney's own *Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), although the new film is the artist's most ambitious foray into cinema.

Anyone can appreciate *River of Fundament* as a sumptuous and adventurous spectacle; however, the film demands considerable intellectual participation and a surprising emotional commitment to comprehend its depths.

[*The exhibition "Matthew Barney: River of Fundament" is on view at Haus der Kunst, Munich, through Aug. 17.*]

—David Ebony