

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Brienne Walsh, "REVIEW: 'Subliming Vessel: The Drawings of Matthew Barney,'" *Modern Painters*, August 29, 2013.

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© Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

by Brienne Walsh, *Modern Painters*

The feel of "Subliming Vessel: The Drawings of Matthew Barney," an exhibition curated from the Morgan Library's archive, is so sober that you almost forget that Barney's most famous work, the five-part *Cremaster cycle*, 1994–2002, is a film that mythologizes the development of the muscle at the base of the penis that raises or drops a man's testicles to regulate their temperature. Indeed, the exhibition, divided into two galleries, looks more like a biographical show of the personal effects of a deceased artist at a university library than it does a contemporary art exhibition. But it also lends gravitas to an artist whom Peter Schjeldahl, in a 2006 review in the *New Yorker*, dismissed as a "star for attaining stardom." The ephemera show that behind the surreal, often provocative imagery—for example, the oft-derided scene in which Barney and his wife, Björk, cut off each other's legs in *Drawing Restraint 9*, 2005—there is a learned man who is meticulous about his research.

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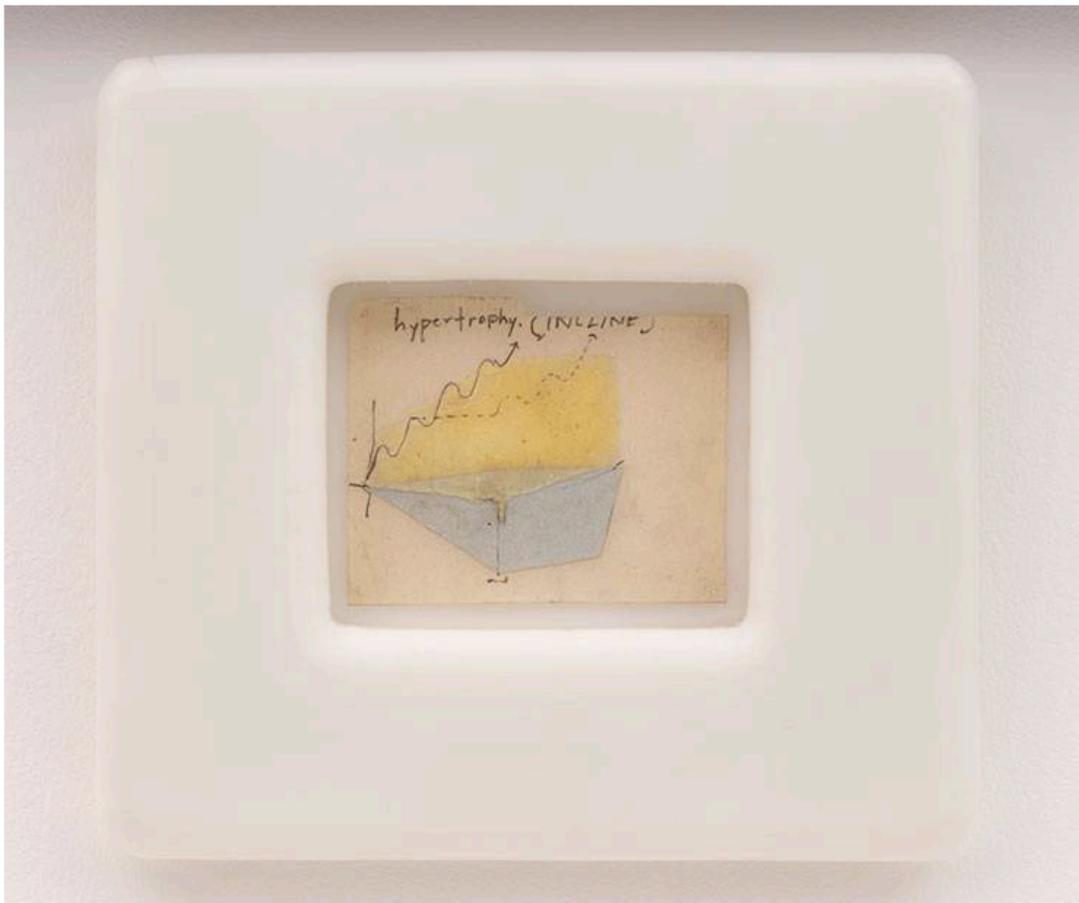
The larger space includes a plethora of Barney's drawings in self-lubricating plastic frames and 12 glass cases full of ephemera. The cases are cabinets of curiosities that show the research materials used to construct the narratives of seven of Barney's films, including *Cremaster Cycle 3* and theyet to be released *River of Fundament*, 2008–13. The forthcoming seven-act opera dramatizes, in the tradition of Egyptian deities, the life of a Chrysler Crown Imperial as it dies and is reincarnated into different automobiles. Along with incredible objects culled from the Morgan Library, which include a copy of the more than 2,000-year-old Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and original drawings by Michelangelo and Francisco de Goya, copies of novels written by Norman Mailer and Ernest Hemingway make up Barney's research material. Images of Houdini appear frequently, as do photographs of football players, sketches of the human body in motion, references to Egyptian mythology, and the artist's notes jotted down on index cards. Barney is clearly obsessed with America in the Golden Age, when Detroit was the center of the automobile industry, film stars were silent, and skyscrapers like the Chrysler Building were popping up all over New York. To remind you that he's still Matthew Barney, lewd images—like poop coming out of an anus—are thrown in like little shock bombs.

You'd need a day to really pore over the materials in the cases, but a cursory tour around the perimeter of the room is enough to get to know the drawings. Barney has stated that his work is an inverted pyramid that starts conceptually with drawing and ends with drawings being made from the narrative work. Ironically, though, many of those in the show, including *Guardian of the Veil: Thoth*, 2007, look like sketches of characters in a fantasy novel drawn by a particularly skilled boy.

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To underscore the importance of drawing in his work, Barney left the elements of his latest live performance, *Drawing Restraint 20*, 2013, in the corner of the second gallery. They include a barbell, bumper plates, a paper marked with ink footprints, and an arc drawn on the wall, underneath which he has written notes about his weight-training regimen. Part of a series he began in the late 1980s, in which he constrains himself with weights in order to make a set of self-imposed resistances while he draws, this latest iteration of the project looks like it was created by a deranged weight lifter once chained to the wall. The absence of Barney's image in the installation seems significant, especially in light of the fact that in recent years, his presence has diminished in the art world. Perhaps that's why the exhibition feels like one by a deceased artist rather than one still creating work. Barney has become something of a ghost.



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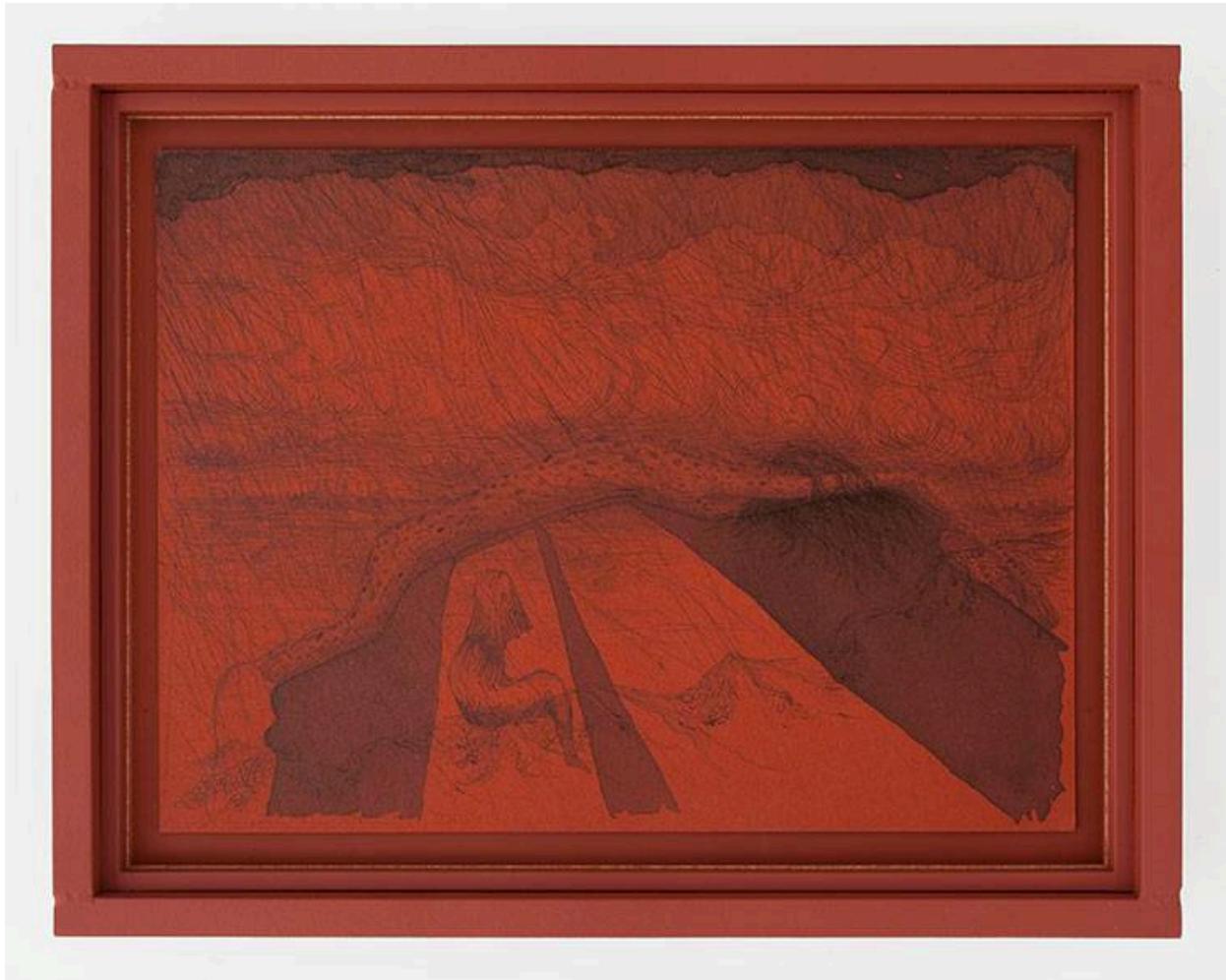
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