

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Darragh McNicholas, "MATTHEW BARNEY Facility of Decline," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 4, 2016



MATTHEW BARNEY *Facility of Decline*

In a photograph from 1899, a twenty-five-year-old Houdini looks toward the camera with a calm but teasing smile. He is naked save for a loincloth, and his body is trussed with chains weighted by padlocks. The manacles snake around his neck, arms, and feet, pulling him forward into a bow. To the right is a picture of Jim Otto, the 256-pound Raiders player who underwent so many surgeries due to his football career (seventy-four in total) that he should have been fast-tracked for a medical license in orthopedics. He has a Cro-Magnon superciliary arch and holds his Raiders helmet aloft like the head of a decapitated victim. Juxtaposed in the introductory pages of *OTTO Trilogy*—the catalogue that accompanies Matthew Barney's current exhibition at Gladstone Gallery—the two are in cosmic tension.

If the two are Barney's mythical deities, their gallery is the universe. In *Repressia* (1991), bone-white plastic anchors form tracks along the ceiling above an expansive wrestling mat. In *Transexualis* (1991), a walk-in cooler houses a cast petroleum jelly decline bench. These and other sculptures on view, most from 1991, are perplexing in the same way that the Giant's Causeway must have been before the invention of explanatory myths. Video performances, looped on televisions throughout the gallery, provide that mythology.



Matthew Barney, *OTTOblow*, 1991 (video still). Color video, silent, 3:27 min. © Matthew Barney. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Video: Peter Strietmann.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In *OTTOblow* (1991), Otto (played by Bob Wysocki) charges forward in his black Raiders jersey toward Houdini (played by Barney). Mid-sprint, Otto forms a fist, preparing to strike. Houdini's nude abdomen flexes in anticipation before the thick piston of Otto's forearm drives into it. Houdini suffered a similar punch in 1926 and died days later in a Detroit hospital. In *OTTOblow*, however, Otto starts what resembles a healing ritual; he traces Houdini's petroleum jelly-caked abdomen, settling on the navel and fingering it. However violent their rivalry, they are like all great antagonists: codependent, mutually constituted.

Even as the exhibition's videos contextualize certain sculptures, others gain their force through direct physical presence. *DRILL TEAM: screw BOLUS* (1991) splays across the gallery floor like a giant squid. A barbell is loaded with eight forty-five-pound York-brand weights, all cast in the analgesic cream Cramergesic. A flesh-colored prosthetic-plastic locker is flattened beneath it; a gel pack traces the outline of the work recalling a hospital IV, and Otto's black-and-white home and away jerseys, piled in the work's center, confirm its subject. It's a monument to Otto's ambition and force (the barbell would total 405 pounds if it was cast iron and not analgesic cream), even as it's a haunting reminder of the harrowing physical consequences of that kind of self-denial. The work uses uncanny materials that have profound impacts on anatomy—as substitutes for limbs or joints, as salves—in ways that simultaneously preserve and undermine the very identities of our bodies.

Elsewhere, vaginal specula and sternal retractors open various artificial tissues, like that of the polymer wrestling mat in *Repressia*. In a film related to the sculpture, Otto and Houdini reenact the motions of the snap between the football center and quarterback respectively. In typical Barney fashion, the video moves to a faux pearl issuing from a vagina and landing in the aforementioned sternal retractor. In an oneiric turn, an orange clay disc shatters against the woman's (Houdini's) buttocks, imitating the issuing of a penalty flag in football.

Barney's focus on orifices, on materials that become flesh, on human activities and human beings metamorphosing into psychosexual abstractions makes his work particularly handy for those with a penchant for gender theory or psychoanalysis. Maggie Nelson, whose essay "On Porousness, Perversity, and Pharmacopornographia" appears in the *OTTO Trilogy* catalogue, brilliantly integrates Angela Carter's remarks about pornography's tendency to abstract things to the "probe and the fringed hole," or Leo Bersani's observations about homophobia during the AIDS crisis feeding on the "intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman." Nelson mentions that Barney discovered the writer J.G. Ballard around the time he discovered Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, a Freudian who argued that "regression to the anal-sadistic phase eroded differences between the sexes."

The relationship between Barney's work and many of these thinkers is undeniable—"required reading"—as Nelson put it, but shifting focus to writers like J.G. Ballard offers considerable insight into the comic modes in which Barney's work sometimes operates. In his essay "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," Ballard slips into the same obscene surrealism as Barney. The essay is framed as a report from an experiment wherein patients are asked to "construct the optimum auto disaster victim by placing a replica of Reagan's head on the unretouched photographs of crash fatalities." Like Barney, Ballard is expert at stretching a narrative thread to its breaking point. The study is chaotic, nonsensical: Reagan's "facial tones and musculature" are characteristic of "homosexual behavior," intercourse with "Reagan" using "assembly kit photographs" was "uniformly disappointing" if vaginal, but increasingly successful in "auxiliary, buccal, navel, aural, and orbital modes." At first, the essay seems like an excuse to poke fun at Reagan—"65% of male subjects made positive connections between [his] hairstyle and their own pubic hair"—but it accumulates a peculiar plausibility. Ballard creates a phantasmagoric

GLADSTONE GALLERY

American car crash of dark psychological experiment, sublimated sexual fantasy, politics, and celebrity.

Gladstone's press release makes a point of emphasizing that the exhibition is not a repetition of the show of his early work, but a mirror for it. Indeed, viewing the work there, now, comes with a sense of dramatic irony; we know what comes next. Nonetheless, these early works hone in on some of Barney's densest and most poetic ideas.