

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jerry Saltz, "Imported From Detroit," *New York Magazine*, September 23, 2011.

Imported From Detroit

Matthew Barney's epically mystic Egypto-industrial detritus sculpture inspires and transports.

By **Jerry Saltz** Published Sep 23, 2011



Barney's *Canopic Chest* (2009-11).

(Photo: Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels)

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A lot of people recently suffered for Matthew Barney's art. Alas, I was not one of them, although I was supposed to be. A year ago October 1, my flight was canceled, so I missed *KHU*, a sprawling, multi-sited, outdoor, all-day performance Barney staged in Detroit at who knows what astronomical cost for a hand-picked audience of around 200. Detroit was the perfect setting for this tale of woe and reincarnation, an economic and spiritual city of the dead and would-be rebirth. It also rained apocalyptically that day, and Barney's performance included a freezing barge ride down the Detroit River, where the audience witnessed, among other things, a crane dredging up a 1967 Chrysler Imperial. There was also actress-athlete Aimee Mullins as Egyptian goddess Isis seated semi-naked on an engine block filled with live, writhing snakes. In the spectacular finale, five enormous customized furnaces poured molten metal, including parts of the Imperial, into a fiery casting pit that drained into a mold of a massive Egyptian Djed, an ancient symbol associated with Osiris, whose own body was cut up into pieces before it was retrieved and reassembled. But I missed all of this. Arriving in Detroit the next day to deliver an unrelated lecture, I was regaled with tales of the harrowing extravaganza, including the assurances of two women that Barney's performance was "more intense than childbirth."

After a five-year hiatus from the gallery scene here in New York, Barney is back, with, among other things, a huge sculpture that is the result of the Detroit spectacle. The sight is typically visionary, Boschian, and ambitious. Yet unlike his previous outings, there are no live animals in the gallery, no long, elliptical videos with scenes featuring aquatic Asian sprites or the artist as a satyr with seven Jacobean doves lifting his scrotum heavenward. There are no phantasmagorical sculptural objects made of bizarre materials like white tapioca or "self-lubricating plastic." This is Barney basic, the artist he really is and, I think, has been beneath the trappings all along. What we see at Gladstone aren't leftovers and docu-fragments from Detroit; we see enormous sculptures that show Barney thinking and, as it were, drawing and dreaming in bronze, iron, and lead. As he recently told filmmaker David Cronenberg, "My interest is the process of making something." Barney is first and last a sculptor, a maker, who uses narrative, myth, architecture, biology, pageantry, history, geography, geology, music, mayhem, and video to create a palpable sculptural universe.

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The largest of the three sculptures on view at Gladstone is *DJED*, a three-part floor-bound cast-iron ensemble generated by the iron-pouring Detroit finale. Weighing around 47,000 pounds, it includes a long ovular black pond or ossified swamp with two rivulets extending from it. This is the solid lake formed by the Detroit pouring of molten iron with mixed-in parts of the Chrysler. The two channels lead to a stem shape with four cross-members. This is the eponymous Djed. The size of an automobile, it actually contains the cast remains of a car. It is immense wreckage, industrial mummy, afterbirth; imposing, engulfing, strange. Nearby is what Wallace Stevens may have meant when he wrote of a "gigantic, solitary urn, a trash can at the end of the world," where "the dead give up dead things." A hillock or burial mound of black cast bronze, *Canopic Chest* is named after vessels for storing the body's internal organs used in Egyptian mummification. Discernible in this mass are the front end of a car, a casket with four rough-hewn jars, and, on top, a *was*, the ancient Egyptian symbol of power—a deity's scepter. It looks like a polished bronze crowbar.

Barney's primitive, gluteal masses conjure alpha artists and romantics like Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Cy Twombly, Richard Serra, and Julian Schnabel, as well as newcomers like Sterling Ruby and Jessica Jackson Hutchins (who once-upon-an-art-school may have been influenced by Barney). They are sculptural copulations of material and everyday objects that seem removed from the temporal flow. I started to think of them as three-dimensional visual verbs that engulf, contort, widen, thrust, assert, gather, and lift. Cast into some sort of mythic flux, they spark with inner life, a crazed narrative enzyme that generates sculptural structure, tangible story lines, celebrations of and grapplings with the body, and a *Gesamtkunstwerk* necropolis, all with no need of video or explication. The show also features twelve wonderful Giacometti-meets-northern Renaissance little drawings, including Mullins on the engine block, a snake entering or exiting her; mating male aardvarks; and an anus opened by a crowbarlike tool and a mystic triple phallus. There's a gnarly little one of Norman Mailer's face in a treelike Djed. His visage is Barney's acknowledgment of Mailer's almost unreadable, mostly unread 1983 epic novel, *Ancient Evenings*, and the fact that much of Barney's current work is supposed to be based on the book's complex plot set in ancient Egypt and chronicling the seven stages through life and rebirth. Echoing this is the show's final sculpture, *Secret Name*, a gorgeous white-and-gray cast-lead-copper-and-zinc work in the form of a disintegrating hieroglyph seemingly sitting on a stylized throne with a coiling ropelike life-force nearby. It is an island of meaning unto itself.

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None of this should seem outlandish, suspect, or surprising. In fact, it makes perfect symmetrical sense. After spending almost a decade making the ravishing five-part *Cremaster* series—named after the muscle that lifts and lowers the testes and that essentially dealt with the prenatal drama of male and female sexual determination within the womb—Barney, now 44 and a father, is expending his considerable sculptural intellect and energies on considering the narrative epic of the soul's journey into the afterlife. The truth is Barney had me at hello. I fell for his work the first time I felt immersed in his mystic-twisted mundo of imagination. Twenty years on, I am happily still in his magical hands on this new sculptural mystery tour.