

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Linda Yablonsky. "Artifacts: Matthew Barney." *New York Times Style Magazine*. September 26, 2011.

Artifacts | Matthew Barney

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY | SEPTEMBER 26, 2011, 12:30 PM

Up to now, **Matthew Barney** has been a master of goo. From his first appearance in a New York gallery — 20 years ago this month — petroleum jelly was his sculptural material of choice. Later he went in for tapioca and a thermoplastic that is equally gelatinous before it cools.

All of the signature sticky stuff is gone from "DJED," Barney's current exhibition at the **Barbara Gladstone Gallery**, his dealer from the start. This time, Barney, 44, pressed his pedal to the metal to make three funereal works in iron, copper, bronze and lead. Oddly enough, they still look icky, though less like jelly than fossilized lava flows and mummified car parts.

"Canopic Chest," the first work confronting visitors to the show, is a grave site of sorts. Cast in bronze, it looks like a slag heap with the dashboard of a car embedded in one side and its engine block on the other. A golden crowbar crowns the top, surrounded by shredded, lanternlike posts.

Like the other works on view at Gladstone, it refers to ancient Egyptian burial practices, in this case the alabaster containers for organs removed from bodies undergoing mummification. Here they are car parts, relics of an operatic narrative that Barney and his frequent collaborator, the composer Jonathan Bepler, based on "**Ancient Evenings**," a 1983 novel by Norman Mailer, one of Barney's personal gods. (Harry Houdini is another.)

The story charts the seven-stage migration of a man's soul from its deceased body to its rebirth as an enlightened spirit. It is based on the myth of Isis and Osiris, the incestuous brother and sister who conceived Horus after Osiris was killed and dismembered by Set, god of destruction, only to be made whole and reincarnated by Isis.

Are you with me so far? Hang on. It gets complicated.

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The title work in "DJED" is the chassis of a 1967 Chrysler Imperial forged from molten steel last year during a live performance in Detroit. That was "KHU," the third installment of an epic, seven-part opera in which the mulched Imperial (Barney's Osiris, manufactured the year he was born) is reconstituted by Isis — an F.B.I. agent played by his "Cremaster 3" star Aimee Mullins — first as a 1979 Pontiac Firebird, and then as a 2001 Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor.

If you think Detroit's Big Three automakers have little to do with Egyptian myth or Mailer (or Houdini, for that matter), then you are not thinking like Barney, but few people do. That is one reason Barney is the singular artist he is — someone for whom weaving connective tissue between the historical and the personal, sex and death, ambition and immortality is all in a day's work. Or actually in several years' worth.

Barney's "Ancient Evenings" went into production in 2007 in the form of drawings, sculpture, theater and documentary film. Act I was "REN," which was set in a car dealership fabricated outside Los Angeles. Its central scene featured the ravishing of the already totaled Chrysler (see Barney's "Cremaster 3") by a 20-ton excavator outfitted with a lethal rotating blade. That's when the golden Firebird made its appearance and descended to the netherworld, a dusty body shop behind the ruined showroom.

In Detroit, Barney continued the story, which is not so much about the road to eternity as it is about the moving of heaven and earth to make art. For Act II, "Sekhem," Barney dressed as the late James Lee Byars, a Detroit-born artist known for staging his death in a golden room, and drove the Firebird over the Belle Isle Bridge while sealed in the car. It might help to know that Houdini once jumped off the same bridge in shackles, and escaped from them. (Barney fans may recall his performance of a similar act in the penultimate scene of "Cremaster 5." Reincarnations, secret names and arcane rituals all play a part in that series — everything's connected).

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In "KHU," Agent Isis investigates the remains of Osiris, the decimated Chrysler she dredges from the Detroit River, only to be arrested herself later and carried off in the Crown Victoria.

All of this took place last year in ghostly Detroit under the watchful eyes of 200 shivering witnesses from New York whom Barney invited to sail down the river on a barge while he filmed the proceedings. The performance ended at the abandoned McLouth Steel Mill, temporarily a sculpture studio where Barney staged the casting of the Imperial chassis in five fiery furnaces on the site. The result is now on view in the gallery as the mummified "DJED," which lies on the floor beside its cast-iron runoff, which looks a bit like the flattened hull of a sunken ship with two desiccated iron stirrups extending from it like dangling legs.

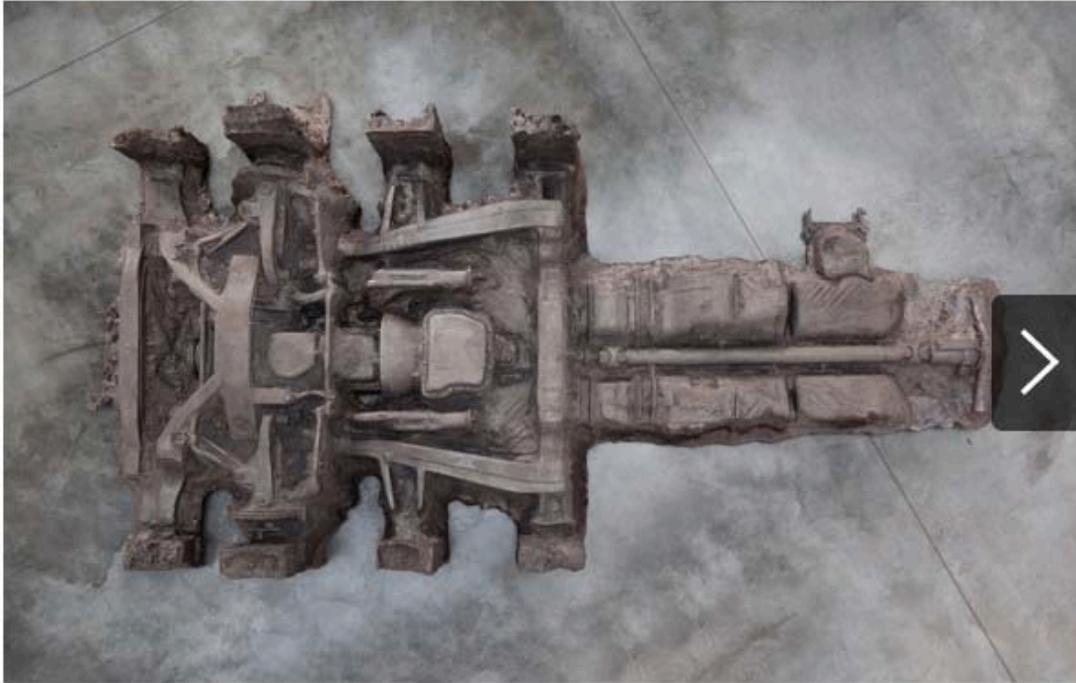
Upstairs in the gallery is another mournful object, an elliptical, eaten-away sarcophagus that Barney cast in lead after "REN," when the car's insignia, or "secret name," was removed.

Is it necessary to know all of this to get a handle on the show at the gallery? Actually, no. The sculptures are so evocative of death and transformation that viewers can fill in their own blanks. After all, part of the fun of engaging with Barney's art is working out the arcane symbolism in the elaborate puzzles he constructs. This one is just more complicated, and enduring, than ever.

*"DJED" continues through Oct. 22 at the **Barbara Gladstone Gallery**, 530 West 21st Street. (Barney will stage the next four parts of "Ancient Evenings" in New York over the next few years.)*

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Matthew Barney's "DJED." Photographs courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels



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"Canopic Chest"



Smelters get to work in Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler's performance piece "KHU."

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"DJED" is forged live at the "KHU" performance in Detroit.