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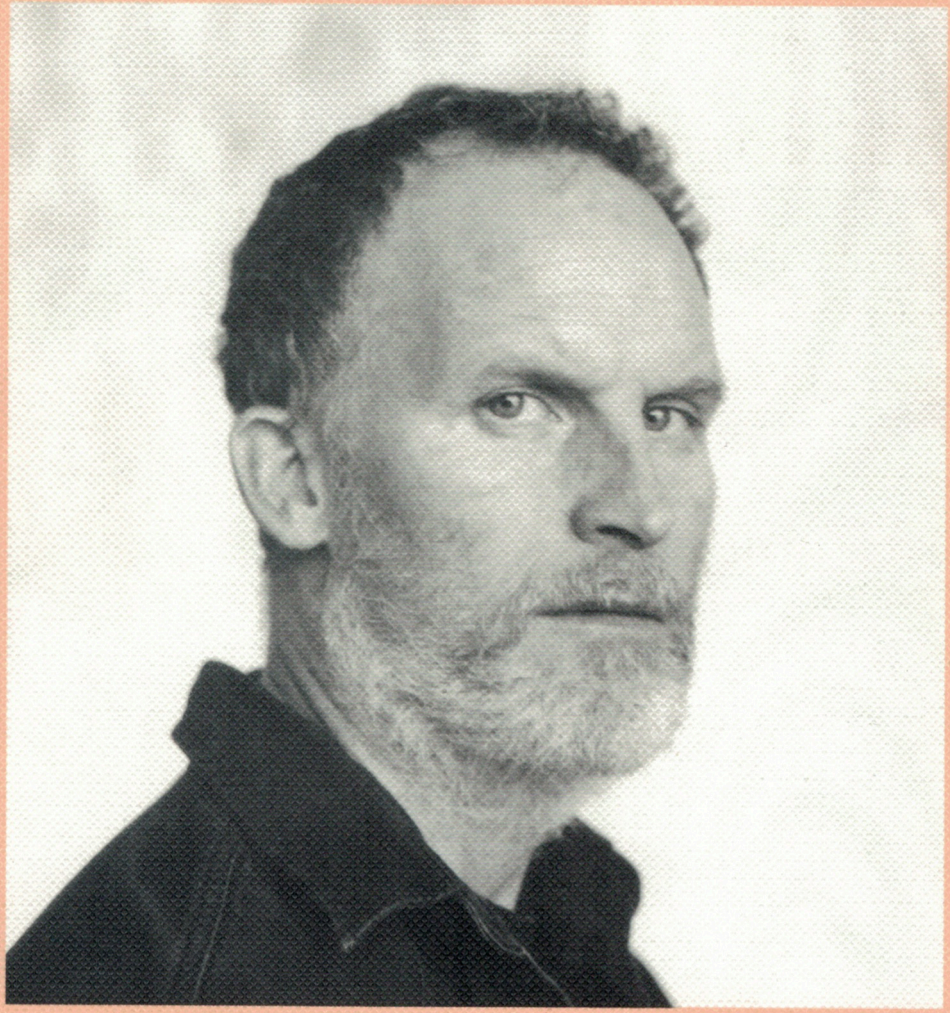

Matthew Barney

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MATTHEW BARNEY

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Matthew Barney's studio lies at the end of an industrial street in Long Island City in a large warehouse. The approach along the East River feels a bit like an abandoned film set with no one around except a closed restaurant's guard dog behind a chain link fence; the view of the Manhattan Skyline in the distance becomes gothic. The studio itself hums like a factory workshop, echoing with welders, studio assistants, and a hard romance evidenced in the brutal yet baroque materiality of the sculptures strung about. The artist is best known for his utterly astonishing series "The Cremaster Cycle," which not only re-imagined the landscape of contemporary filmmaking, but also created a new visual vocabulary through which to consider the twenty-first century. We had a chance to chat with Barney about how place affects his working process, his childhood sports experiences, and, of course, his long-awaited new work, "River of Fundament," a six hour film epic based on Norman Mailer's novel "Ancient Evenings." The film, informed by the structure of an opera, premiers this winter at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, in conjunction with an exhibition of related sculptures and drawings.

Can you tell me a bit about this new piece that you're working on, which transports a reconstruction of Norman Mailer's entire house on a boat?

I started working with "Ancient Evenings." Jonathan Beplar, who did a lot of the music for the "Cremaster" films, and I had talked over the years about doing something live together. So when this idea started percolating I asked Jonathan if he would like to try to do something with "Ancient Evenings." And so we started looking at the text and thinking about ways that we could treat it more or less like a libretto and make something that addressed the form of opera – to what extent it's an opera I'm not really sure. But we've used that as a point of conversation a lot in its development; we started out thinking that we would create an evening-length piece for the stage, started writing and made a sketch in Manchester in 2007, and I ended up having – I wouldn't say a negative experience – but it felt to me like onstage was not the place to work.

Why is that?

Because the perspective is fixed. It felt like all of the things that I'm interested in, in terms of moving around the object, the texture of the surface, you know, in cinematic terms, the close-up, a lot of these things are removed from the experience in theater. I felt like without those things, I'm not left with the strongest tools that I have. So we started thinking in terms of site-specific works and thinking about performing things in different places.

We started in Los Angeles; at that point we were taking some of the writing we had done for the stage and working out from that into a location. It started feeling a little more familiar to the "Cremaster" strategy, in terms of using place as a starting point and writing out from that. We started looking around for locations that would work with some of these ideas that were on the table. One of them, for example, was to work in a mine underground, and we visited mines in Poland – a salt mine near the German border. In another case, we went to Mexico to a lead mine. You know that crystal cave with the giants? It's been reproduced a lot. It's those tree-sized crystals – I'm sure you've seen pictures of it, it's enormous – the biggest pieces of crystal that exist.

It sounds amazing.

This is an aside to everything else, but that's just the little deposit that's in the bottom of a functioning lead mine in Mexico. So we went there to look at that room and to look at the lead mine itself, and then went to Detroit and looked at the salt mine, which is beneath the city. So with all of those we went through quite a bit of work and development trying to develop a way to bring an audience into that environment and perform something, and we were never able to make it work.

What was the connection for you between all of those places?

The connection comes from the text, in that there's a description in the first fifty or so pages of "Ancient Evenings" that describes a man dying, from his perspective. As that's

happening, the seven states of his soul are leaving him and those states are described as senses, in a way – some of them anyway. The locations had to do with finding ways of taking each of those soul states and assigning them to a physical condition, or a landscape. We were doing a lot of location scouting internationally for what was feeling like something that had the scale of "Cremaster" in terms of the amount of territory it would take on, and then in the middle of it I started feeling like one of the things that makes the novel what it is is that it's such an American voice. In a way there is an American vernacular in the telling of this Egyptian story, so I decided to do it all domestically. And part of that had to do with visiting Detroit, seeing the mine there, and seeing all of the layers of history in Detroit in front of your eyes. Seeing the prehistoric, the heyday of the industrial revolution, and everything that that brought to the city and all of the failure that came later . . . And you can see every layer of that in Detroit. And so I got really interested in keeping the project based in the States.

So you were describing your current project and how it started.

The majority of these cinematic scenes take place within a house. In this case it's a reconstruction of Norman Mailer's brownstone. The house is on a barge traveling down the East River. The structure of the film is something like a musical in the sense that, like "The Wizard of Oz" for example, you have a domestic situation, which is your starting situation, and then you cut out to another world, and in our case that other world is Los Angeles and Detroit, and in another case it's here in New York, where these performances were staged in front of a group of people. In a way, it's different from "The Wizard of Oz" in the sense that when we cut out it becomes more real and more concrete, so it's the really opposite of a musical in that sense.

And this idea of having the domestic space, which we usually think of as secure and stable, especially something like a brownstone does that change when it's moving? I'm just thinking now also of Robert Smithson's piece of the moving island ["Floating Island to Travel around Manhattan," 1975]. Did that influence your thinking at all?

I think that I am quite used to thinking of architecture as a body. I think anytime I approach an exhibition space, for example, I often think of it in those terms – where the door and windows are in relation to where life passes in and out of this organism, and those passageways are really active for me in making decisions about where to place something. So I think one of my initial thoughts with "Ancient Evenings" was to get rid of some of the characters, or not to get rid of them but to replace them with something that is object-based. One of the first ideas was to replace the protagonist with an automobile. So we took the car from "Cremaster 3" and put it in that central position. And in the texts the protagonist reincarnates a couple of times, so the car in our story becomes two other cars. It starts as a Chrysler Imperial, it becomes a Pontiac Trans Am, and then it becomes a Ford Crown Victoria. So I think when this additional layer was added by creating Norman Mailer's house and staging inside the house what is ef-

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fectively a wake for Norman Mailer, we end up putting the house on the barge as a body and the barge becomes like the boat of Ra, in terms of carrying the body down the river or across the river. I don't know if it's about instability as much as it's about the deposition of a body. I thought a lot about the issue of stability when we were making "Drawing Restraint 9" on the whaling ship in Japan. That was really the condition for that story – to take an experiment we had done in England with a really large petroleum jelly casting and put it on an unstable surface. But with this project I feel it wasn't the condition for placing the house on a boat.

Do you travel for leisure and do you separate travel for leisure from travel for work?

I don't travel that much for leisure and it is different, for sure, in terms of getting lost. I think the getting lost is really important in terms of being opportunistic in the right way. Going someplace and being lost enough that you can follow intuitive leads – it requires going to a place with little agenda, or that the agenda is sort of purely about exploring those possibilities. And maybe a couple of things are scheduled, and then there's a lot of empty space between them so that you can follow an unexpected thread that presents itself. One thing about working in this capacity that is probably unusual, is that there is a focus on one thing that's pretty tenacious, that lasts for a pretty long time. I think that thing about the opportunistic potential is raised if the focus remains in place over all that time, and then what happens is more and more opportunity presents itself. I think it's part fact, part superstition. But I think it's also true in the initial research and site visitation, and that's very different from being a tourist or traveling for leisure, or traveling with a friend, or any of that. I don't have that same kind of focus – a combination of being completely open and very, very focused on one thing.

Sports have been a major influence on your work. What are some of your earliest memories of being in a sports environment, and what kinds of feelings or materials do you remember?

Definitely the plastics. The protective equipment and their relationship between the harder shell and the foam. The cushions and the lubricants, and the softer materials. Definitely my first and probably most significant memory is – I was probably in third grade, and it was the first year I played football. We were doing this drill; it was basically that you'd line up, divide the team in half, and line up on opposite ends of a line five yards apart. Then you would square off one against another, and run at each other and hit heads. And everybody would sort of circle around and watch, and you'd do it one at a time that way. And I remember doing it the very first time and it ringing my bell, and being so turned on by it. In an instant I was hooked.


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Crashing into another child seems like a pretty violent experience to get a rush from. Do you find that similarly charged experience in other places in your life?

There are certainly other experiences that have that quality. I don't think it's necessarily as much about trauma or the violence of it as much as it is about letting go. And I certainly get that now as an artist. But I think it gets harder, the more agile I become as an artist, the harder it is to find that feeling. And I think that's one of the reasons why the scale tends to increase every time. Through complexity I'm able to have that feeling of getting lost and letting go, and it's important for me.

And how did your engagement with the equipment change as you got more into the sports culture? I'm just thinking more of your description of the materials you work with becoming extensions of your body, even when you travel to other locations. Did that also happen with the sports equipment?

Yeah, for sure. I think with football, although it's all external, all of that stuff really becomes a part of your body and it has that kind of ergonomic design. You really dial it in, in terms of the way that it works on your body. So when I started making art, I immediately started using those same materials as building materials.

Did the equipment feel like a costume to you, or part of your vernacular experience?

Yeah, it felt like part of my experience. I think that I found that when a traditional material was placed in front of me as a student, that I needed emotionally, I needed to lubricate it or protect it or make it familiar in that way.

Right now you have a really amazing show of drawings at the Morgan Library in New York. What are some of the differences between creating your work according to a site-specific installation that you've chosen, and then installing work that you've made previously, in a more traditional or already existent art context?

Well, it's huge, the difference is huge. But I think they're both interesting . . . or they both interest me. In the first case, when a work is made either within a space or for a space, the space really becomes a part of the work. And whether it's object-based sculpture we're talking about or the filmed narratives, that's the way that I tend to make things. So when it comes to an exhibition, it has to do with this displacement. It also has to do with creating relationships, both relationships between the space and the objects, and relationships between the objects. And what's useful about that, I think, is that you can create a concentration for the object in that situation that is harder to achieve when there is a totality – a total condition that has to be considered, as far as site-specific work goes. I think there are very different experiences to be had with those two cases, but I think

that in the second case you can have a deeper dialogue with the object if you don't have the weight of the site-specific condition to deal with.

But you're interested in that weight obviously.

Yeah, totally.

What attracts you to that?

I don't know if I'm attracted to it as much as it's a necessity to me. I mean, it isn't true to say that I have to start with a place, although that's usually what I do: I start with a place and then I work out from that. I think that with this current project I started with a novel and worked out from that and then started to connect aspects of that to place.

Do you think of a novel or a landscape as a kind of restraint similar to the way you've used a physical restraint?

Yeah. It's another form of it, but yes.

How do mythologies influence your life? Are there particular mythologies that you practice or live by?

There's a way in which I need host bodies for my work to live within temporarily. So I think that mythologies can function in the same way for me that places can. For example, working with the core Egyptian mythologies, there's a way that that narrative has already been abstracted so many times that I can have a very abstract relationship to it, and that's pretty important I think. It's not fixed; it's quite open-ended.

Let's touch on this related idea of a guest and a host. We can think about this on a biological level or a conceptual level, etc., but also in a very literal way: it's part of the language of travel. Where do you feel like a guest, and are there places that you go where you can get into a host position?

I think I feel like a guest constantly. I think it's one of the things that continues to attract me to New York: you never stop having that relationship to it. This is my home, but I'm still a guest here in a way. I would prefer to have that feeling. There are definitely places in the world – I know when I go west, for example, in the States, it feels more and more familiar to me. The closer I get to where I grew up, the more familiar it feels. But I don't stop feeling like a guest.

What creates the feeling of familiarity for you?

The landscape does, and I think the behavior of people. I think the typical things do. So I have that relationship to my so-called home, but I don't ever really feel like the host, ever.

Do you remember your first feeling of foreignness?

That's a good question. I suppose it was coming east as a child, and visiting the communities where my parents grew up, in upstate New York. In these Irish Catholic communities you still feel a relationship to the original immigration somehow, which you don't feel out west. I wasn't able to understand that that's what I was feeling, but it's a relationship to tradition or indigenousness or something that felt very different. •