

American artist Matthew Barney pushes the boundaries with his new exhibition at MONA

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Artist Matthew Barney in a production still from the film *River of Fundament*. Picture: DAVID REGEN
Source: Supplied

SEVERAL of American artist Matthew Barney's sculptures are so large, MONA had to crane them into the building through a window in the lead-up to tonight's exhibition opening.

Then MONA's team of technicians, lighting experts and specialist art handlers began the formidable task of installing the sculptures.

Sitting alongside these are more than 100 ancient Egyptian artefacts Barney selected from MONA's antiquities collection, including a rare and exceptionally delicate Egyptian falcon mummy, coffins, temple fecundity sculptures, a mummified cat and a "butchering scene" from an ancient Egyptian tomb.

River of Fundament, Barney's exhibition of elaborate sculptures, drawings and installation settings, is drawn from his epic film opera of the same name.

The 143 crates containing the artworks to be reassembled in situ for this ambitious show arrived a fortnight ago, fresh from debuting at the Haus der Kunst Gallery in Munich.

All Barney's artworks in the show originated from his six-hour opera *River of Fundament*, created in collaboration with composer Jonathon Bepler. Violated car corpses harvested from Barney's live performances, sculptural props and drawings are installed in seven rooms at MONA, representing the seven states of the soul in Egyptian mythology.

Barney's elaborate *River of Fundament* opera film will undoubtedly challenge audiences.

Earlier this year, a UK critic called it a "sh** flick".

But MONA's co-curators Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling emphasise the rewards for viewers persisting with the experience.

"Matthew Barney is one of the most important artists of our time," Durling says.

"His sublime imagination inspires an epic creative process that covers film, sculpture, drawing and performance. *River of Fundament* is an extraordinary body of work."



A still from *River of Fundament*, which has inspired the Matthew Barney exhibition.

Source: Supplied

Loosely adapted from author Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*, *River of Fundament*'s epic narrative explores three incarnations of Mailer characterised as Menenhetet the Egyptian warrior, magician and seducer who became prominent after much ritual humiliation.

The "river" in Barney's account of this legend flows with excrement; Menenhetet's ceremonial challenges, deaths and rebirths propel him through the seven "soul" states of Egyptian mythology, while the three car husks "performing" as Egyptian gods are resuscitated into sculptures.

Samuel Beckett once observed that the task of artists is to "find a form that accommodates the mess". Barney says his actors are "hosts" for his artworks.

Barney, who has a daughter with his former partner, singer Bjork, has ingeniously cast New York cultural identities for opera scenes – rock star Debbie Harry, authors Salman Rushdie and Jeffrey Eugenides, art world mover and shaker Clarissa Dalrymple, photographer Fran Lebowitz, avant garde film maker Jonas Mekas, Broadway legends Elaine Stritch and Ellen Burstyn all play roles in the artist's endlessly inventive narrative symbology.



Matthew Barney's Boat of Ra features in the exhibition.

Source: Supplied

Barney's artworks are often created out of violently innovative treatments of materials – fizzing blobs of molten metal are "cast" in water, conventional tools plated in gold and uneasy textures lending industrial plastics and steel unexpected sculptural strength.

These intricately detailed objects are essential elements in Barney's intensely symbolic vision.

River of Fundament guarantees MONA's place in the international museum world as a highly sought-after creative setting for important artists to push beyond conventional institutions' boundaries.

This distinguishes owner David Walsh's collaborative, creatively driven vision of MONA's role in artists' experience of exhibiting here.

That MONA is the first Australian museum to engage with Barney's elaborate and often highly complex artistic vision underlines Walsh and his team's ambition, persistence and expertise.

In Conversation: Matthew Barney and David Walsh is on today at 1pm. Register for the event at mona.net.au (<http://mona.net.au>).

The River of Fundament exhibition opens at MONA tonight at 8pm until late.

The film opera of the same name will be screened over the next month at MONA

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