

Matthew Barney project combines human waste and transcendent states

For a man who has masterminded some of the largest, most outrageous artistic events of all time, Matthew Barney is strangely unassuming. Trim, casually dressed, with pale blue eyes that give nothing away, he pauses to reflect before answering every question. His replies are precise and thoughtful, but never exhaustive.

Raised in rural Idaho, Barney is now an international art superstar. Before becoming an artist he was a champion footballer and a model. This phase of his life was closed by the extraordinary success of his first exhibition, held at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York in 1991, when he was only 24. Before the year was over his work had been picked up by museums and their interest has never cooled.

Barney is in Hobart for the Australian season of his latest project, *River of Fundament*, at David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). The show is the residue of three gigantic, operatic performances held in Los Angeles in 2007, Detroit in 2010, and Brooklyn last year. Each event, on a scale that makes Wagner and Verdi look like underachievers, resulted in the creation of sculptures that have been transported, at vast expense and difficulty, to Tasmania.



A scene from Matthew Barney's *River of Fundament*.

MONA is only the second venue for this ambitious exhibition of more than 90 pieces, which debuted at Munich's Haus der Kunst in March. The new version of the show has been supplemented by more than 50 works from MONA's collection of Egyptian antiquities that relate to the inspiration for Barney's work - Norman Mailer's sprawling novel *Ancient Evenings* (1983).

The show is only part of the equation. To even begin to understand the sculpture one must first sit through a film of five hours, 11 minutes, made by Barney and his long-term collaborator, composer Jonathan Bepler. The film incorporates footage from the three trans-American performances, along with an imaginary wake for Mailer held in a facsimile of the writer's Brooklyn apartment. If much of the sculpture is unconventional, being made from materials such as sulphur, salt, zinc, lead and gold, the movie is a challenging experience because of its emphases on excrement and buggery – two of Mailer's favourite themes.

The sexual and scatological references have rendered *River of Fundament* more controversial than Barney's earlier *Gesamtkunstwerke*, the five-film, seven-hour sequence *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), but there is the same wilful complexity and the same desire to probe the limits of art. It takes amazing determination to see these projects through from start to finish, let alone find

funding. The key for Barney is that he views his work as a form of continuing education.



Matthew Barney. *Photo: Samantha Marble*

"When I got to college," he says, "I realised I'd had a terrible primary and secondary education in Idaho. Each of these pieces is like a research project. It's been quite an organic learning curve."

It soon becomes apparent that what the artist prizes most is the open-endedness of each work. He likes the feeling of not knowing what he'll do next, and enjoys the fact that these multilayered projects are available to an infinite range of interpretations. Making art is akin to searching for a path in a forest of competing possibilities, while avoiding things that seem obvious or clichéd.

Ancient Egypt had always seemed like one of those too-obvious subjects, until Mailer invited Barney to an awards ceremony one evening. "I'd worked with him already, and got him to appear in *Cremaster 2*, so we had a familiarity. He asked me if I'd read *Ancient Evenings* and I said 'No'. He said, 'I think you should look at it'. He felt there was something in it for me."

After reading the first 100 pages of this most difficult and obscure of Mailer's novels, Barney was unconvinced. Shortly before his death in 2007, the author was trying to find directors to adapt his fictional works and knew that *Ancient Evenings* was unfilmable in any conventional sense. Barney, however, is

unorthodox – a self-taught director who admits to picking up a few tricks from Stanley Kubrick. His approach might be characterised as "film as sculpture".

"*Ancient Evenings* was a challenge," he says, "because it had been critically panned. When I read the book I could only hear Mailer's voice, which kept getting in the way."

He began to warm to the story, thanks to Jonathan Bepler. The two had been discussing the idea of large-scale live performances and Bepler waxed enthusiastic about the operatic potential of Mailer's text. The project began as three performances to be documented on film. The movie and exhibition emerged only towards the end of the process.

Barney decided that the best thing about Mailer's *Great American Egyptian Novel* was that he loved it and hated it simultaneously. "It had a lot of the dualities that I needed," he says. "I liked the way it could combine human waste and transcendent states."

The film reflects those dualities. It draws connections between abjection and spirituality, and uses Mailer's tale of ancient Egypt as an allegory for an American empire in post-industrial decline. The three incarnations of Mailer's lead character are transformed into three incarnations of the dead Mailer himself, and three classic American cars. Each of the three acts is a collage of musical styles that relate to a particular place – from forms of folk music to extreme dissonance. Bepler's musical travelogue includes soul singers, rappers, classical musicians, native Americans, a mariachi band, and so on.

Barney also recruited mainstream actors such as Paul Giamatti and Maggie Gyllenhaal. He says he knew they were fearless performers, but was surprised when both of them said: "Why can't I climb inside a cow? Why am I sitting in this room talking?"

Climbing in and out of animal carcasses is reserved for the three incarnations of Norman, who have to be reborn three times. Other actors have the privilege of spending the movie caked in dried excrement, from swimming in the river of

human waste that forms part of the soul's journey through the afterlife. Throughout the film there is a lavish expenditure of bodily fluids and brief, explicit sex scenes.

Barney accepts that *River of Fundament* is not for everyone, and says he'd be disappointed if it failed to divide its audience.

"Given the nature of the text I felt I couldn't ignore that level of explicitness," he says. "I'm obviously comfortable with it, but I wanted to find a way of doing it without the pure, frontal, genital descriptions that occur in the novel. I felt that the clue for me lay with Mailer's descriptions of landscape and the bleeding of the earth. The idea was to treat the body in such a way that every discharge could be a kind of natural occurrence. Even if it was as explicit as hell, it could still feel very naturalistic."

It might sound far-fetched, but that naturalistic approach – the affinity between the body and the landscape – is one of the lasting impressions one takes away from the film. There is also a strong sense in which Barney is charting the pollution and desecration of the American landscape, even as he details forms of bodily pollution. One could interpret *River of Fundament* as an eco-catastrophe film that laments humanity's perverted relationship with the earth. It would be a shame if responses to the project dwell too heavily on its more explicit aspects, because viewers looking for a few fragments of carnality will find themselves adrift on a huge torrent of art.

River of Fundament is on at MONA until April next year