

David Walsh

We see the sinking of the *Titanic* as an unmitigated disaster. We also marvel at the irony of an unsinkable ship at the bottom of the ocean. This is the stuff of legend.

There are other perspectives, of course. Perhaps the failure of one ocean liner engenders an analysis of process. Maybe we do better now, maybe the things we launch stay afloat. But those very legends—movies, books, songs, *stories*—perhaps they enrich us.

When liquids freeze, the resulting solids typically occupy less volume. Water is a significant exception. If it wasn't, icebergs wouldn't float, and the *Titanic* wouldn't have sunk. In fact, it wouldn't have sunk for a much more fundamental reason—it would never have been built. Deep oceans, cold and dark, would freeze from the bottom up. There wouldn't be any liquid water; there wouldn't be any life on earth.

A critic's role is to ponder the sunken ship, and wonder if it sank the right way, a good way.

A eulogist has a much more honorable role. A eulogist sees the ship resting there on the bottom, and sees past that to celebrate the unfrozen ocean.

I choose to eulogize Matthew Barney for those reasons, and this: Barney's work is an iceberg, massing below the surface, waiting to cut me open, waiting to show me the sea of opportunity.

While I was considering how to contribute to this book, I learned that Lou Reed had died and I spontaneously wrote an obituary for our museum blog, *MONA Blog*. Even though I knew little about Lou Reed, the blog was worthwhile. It captured my ambivalence about his death: I hate that he died but, after all, he had to die, because he lived, so the only unknown is whether he lived meaningfully. A better writer than me, Ford Madox Ford, wrote of Joseph Conrad, a better writer than almost anybody, "That such a man could have died, that such a man could have lived." So now here's my contribution: an obituary of Matthew Barney, even though he isn't dead. Based on a sample space of one, obituaries benefit from lack of proximity, and lack of certainty. I certainly have both. And anyway, Barney might well be dead by the time you read this, given the time between composition and publication, and you could be reading it long after that. A very healthy forty-five-year-old has a bit less than one chance in a thousand of dying in the next three months.

I only met Barney once, just six months ago in June, and I am saddened that the opportunity will not come again. That was in Long Island City, at his studio, and there I became acquainted with his last

body of work and was astonished at the level of resolution and integrity displayed. He showed us brief excerpts from *River of Fundament*, a film now complete. At five hours fifteen minutes it better have a lot to say, and it does.

I had encountered Barney's work only six years before, my aesthetic migration from antiquities to contemporary art having begun in my early forties. I'd attended the 2007 Venice Biennale and having left Venice en route to the Basel art fair, we found our connecting flight cancelled in Munich. So Olivier, one of MONA's curators, decided that we would drive to Basel via Bregenz where he knew there was a stunning museum. At the time, the Kunsthau Bregenz had four works of art on display—one per floor—in an exhibition called "Mythos," and one of the works, *Cetacea*, was by Barney. It led me here.

A brief aside about history: since students of history seek essentially to explain how the present came to be, and everybody else is seeking to justify the status quo, there is a tendency to come to accept whatever prevails. Yes, millions died pointlessly in WWII, but it was sufficiently long ago that most people alive today were not alive then, and most people assume that this mostly good world is the result of that world. In the spirit of "better the devil we know . . ." the majority would keep history as is, and not eliminate massive injustices if they had the choice, because any changes would presumably ripple through to a vastly different present where the currently living would never have lived. Of course, the predominant effect of snuffing out all those lives was to end those bloodlines: the people most affected were affected by not being born. And the unborn don't author histories.

I had severe asthma as a child, and it adversely affected my activity levels and my schooling. The converse is that I read a great deal, having nothing else to do. So I am now the product of luck, genes, some choice, a slightly underprivileged upbringing, and asthma. But I'm also the product of that cancelled flight—that which availed me of Bregenz and Barney—and here I am, at the keyboard, pondering the value of reality. And in that same reality Barney was born, and exhibited at Bregenz, and died. And now, close to the point of his demise, it seems a disaster for him, and for those who loved him, and for those who love his work. But this new world, the Barney-less world, will soon become the status quo, and that will be the world we want, and in that world there will be acceptance and, more than acceptance, a doctrine that asserts the inevitability of what came to pass. Within that doctrine we will be able to trace the orbit of high-minded contemporary art, and it will be shown that this orbit has been boosted by Barney, and further expanded, maybe, by his passing.

And here is another thing. As we consider a world without Matthew Barney, we should contemplate a world where he never existed. For me, that is a world far worse than the one into which he was born and died. Maybe, right now, the best of all possible worlds is the one in which once the Barney switch has been thrown it has not yet short-circuited. But the second best world is this one, the one where he was born and lived until very recently, and made all the works we see, and the works that I saw in his studio last June. Once one is born, dying is, of course, inevitable. Being born, on the other hand, is very unlikely. It requires a confluence of events that range from the evolution of life on Earth through the oxygenation of the atmosphere to the invention of sex. It also requires that hundreds of millions of an individual's ancestors live long enough to produce their progeny, and also requires of them to be horny enough, or slow enough, that those offspring are produced. And it requires the intervention of comets like the one that caused the Chicxulub crater, or dinosaurs might have prevailed. Also, and far more importantly, it requires the avoidance of an infinite series of ghostly impediments that I cannot nominate, since they didn't happen, but could have. In this view—call it “The Unbearable Unlikelihood of Barney”—Barney was special in many ways beyond his capacity to contrive and create. Many things contributed to the body of work we enjoy from him, although over his dead body.

At the risk of belaboring the point, I note that unlikely as Barney's existence was, the confluence of minuscule probabilities is further diminished by the fact that each of us is as unlikely as he; and that nature and fortune contrived to place us here, overlapping his brief beacon and ranging slightly beyond it, so that we can not only enjoy his work, but also appreciate it, interpret it, and rationalize it to establish his place in our canon.

Barney's controversial legal will, which stipulates that his body be hacked to pieces, superficially reeks of self-aggrandizement. It seems that he identifies himself with Horus. But his body of work belies this obvious connection. Emboldened by his inability to respond, I contend that Barney is Isis, the giver of life, the committed servant of process and, at least as far as Norman Mailer is concerned in his 1980s novel *Ancient Evenings*, a mistress of the destroyer (Barney uses the ancient Egyptian Osiris myth sieved through Mailer). Like Isis, Barney allows nothing to interfere. The destination is known and the journey will be undertaken. Aggravations like death will not be permitted to stand in the way. Perhaps the dismembered Barney chunks share some of a tapeworm's regenerative power. Each may become a metonym for the vastness of his conception: little bastard Barneys preserved in Lucite, waiting for the day when some Spielbergian Isis extracts information that permits reassembling the matrix of Barney. Would not each degraded and imperfectly reassembled Barney

clone ideally show the circularity that is inherent in the myths and in Barney's work? Osiris-Set-Isis-Osiris. Barney-Mailer-Osiris-Barney. Osiris-Dionysius-Jesus-Barney-Osiris.

I identify with Set. His actions were appalling, of course, but he had every right to consider them permanent. While grieving, many imagine a different world where the confluence of events didn't lead to the loss of a loved one. Isis has the power to undermine certainty, albeit briefly, and thus cause and effect are given short shrift. Far from creating the order implicit in the myth, this in turn undermines how we seek explanations, because now they don't explain. A later myth, one coupled to the Osiris myth, has Jesus temporarily returning to life, but oddly—as in Barney's recapitulated car—the reversal of the damage done by death is incomplete. He still bears the stigma(ta) of his ordeal. Here, replete with symbolic meaning but no other sort of meaning, we are given evidence of the impossible, and we are given to understand that redefining "impossible" as "really quite achievable" is a good thing. Does Jesus's mother's impossible virginity add a layer of conceptual purpose to Isis's fornication with her ephemerally undead husband? Two thousand years later, the refinement of the myth introduces the idea that no man is required for conception, an idea that would have allowed Osiris to stay honorably dead. After a further two thousand years, Barney and Mailer reinvigorated the myth cycle, with the ephemeral returnee becoming permanent. Industrial revivification requires no faith; the evidence is eternally interpretable. The next refinement might well be eliminating the resurrection by eliminating death. In my view this has the potential to be as problematic as any of the precursor myths. And it might not be a myth at all.

During my visit to Barney's studio a few months ago, I began to understand the precision of his creation. Most artists with whose work I'm familiar, including even a few I consider great, meddle with their media and an outcome emerges. Serendipity programs their response to that meddling and meaning is retrospectively introduced. I have no wish to dismiss, nor diminish, this process. Most of the worthwhile things in the world were created iteratively, without flashes of insight, from penicillin to the *Principia*. However, emboldened again by his incapacity to contest my speculation, I note that Barney seemed to flesh out his concepts fully before their execution. Fortunate happenstances were welcome, and slag and wax and celluloid were allowed, to some extent, to do as they chose, but the greater purpose was adhered to.

I did not see Barney's phenomenal performance in Detroit, a part of his overall recapitulation of the Osiris myth. I won't re-recapitulate the Set-murders-Osiris-Isis-gives-birth-to-Horus-myth here, since other more academic and informed writers are sure to embrace the structures that buttress Barney's work; though I note his declared ambivalence to Mailer's dense and difficult tome, a novel wherein the supernatural is as natural as sex with one's sister. A literary masterwork would have

created an expectation of servitude from the art, whereas *Ancient Evenings*, which it seems reasonable to assert that only the author, and possibly Barney, ever finished, allows room for tale-telling while providing a contemporary framework. And what better place than Detroit to seek to leaven the impact of death—here Barney writes his own epitaph—and to lever from that into the nature of rebirth and its potential consequences? Osiris’s rebirth, ephemeral with respect to Osiris but considerable with respect to Horus and order in Egypt, contains the germ of the presentation that I gave earlier: death results from being born, birth is the event of significance. Detroit has been transmogrified in this way, but it’s only in observing old Detroit that the oddity of the new can be encapsulated. Thus it was for me that day in Long Island City with Barney’s consumed Chrysler and its renewal as Osiris, in broken but perfected form.

I am an art collector, and I want that ascended car. Occasionally, infrequently, an object is whole; its medium, its message, its matrix, and its conceptual process are subsumed into a creation of great constitution. In the presence of Barney’s Chrysler, I felt sanctified by its tamed form, and I felt the restrained malevolence of its inner animal. Here Set and Osiris are one, the killer and the killed, a compound of the brutish and the stoic, allied and alloyed into a gleaming thing that is no thing, and thus can represent, each in their turn, both folly and fulfilment.

As I said, I want that car. But impediments exist, not least the explosion in value that the death of the artist often effects. And here is the embodiment of that folly, that the axiology of Barney’s oeuvre is enhanced by his absence. We might as well value the gold in the ground, un-mined, more highly than the golden ring that aids a declaration of love. I want that car to be the ring *and* the declaration. I love this particular work, and the body of work to which it belongs

My exuberant endorsement of Barney’s work might lead an unbiased observer to conclude that the “I” in this essay is Matthew himself. Perhaps in a flurry of near-dead activity he (I) wrote this self-congratulatory piece and then realized that its impact would be undermined if published under his own name. Or maybe, while visiting his studio, I pilfered a speculative document, a pending work, and after his demise reconfigured it to be my own. There is a precedent for this, at least in art. In Woody Allen’s unattended masterpiece *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*, a failing novelist is party to his friend’s excellent manuscript. His friend dies and he publishes the manuscript as his own; except the friend isn’t dead, only comatose and, at the movie’s conclusion, likely to recover. If this is Matthew’s little experiment, I will sure look stupid if, like Woody Allen’s character, or like Osiris, he turns up not to be dead. But I have little to worry about. Death, except in myths, is forever. And a good thing, too.

David Walsh is the founder of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), a private museum in Hobart, Tasmania, which opened to the public in 2011. In 2014, MONA will present selected works from River of Fundament in the context of ancient Egyptian objects from the museum's permanent collection.