

eyeline

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The Invocation of the Dead
Matthew Barney: *River of Fundament*
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 Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart
 22 November 2014 – 13 April 2015

What we know is that Matthew Barney's latest epic is almost six hours long. That it involved many millions of dollars and a cast of thousands. That it features Hollywood celebrities, porn stars, the upper echelons of the intellectual world. That Barney is not known for his restraint.

Before the curtain has opened, then, there is a palpable sense of anticipation borne of rumour and controversy. *River of Fundament* went through a number of incarnations, beginning life as a series of performances and live events which were then woven — albeit very loosely — into the final film. One gets the sense, jumping from the canals of Brooklyn to the suburbs of LA and factories in Detroit, of an encompassing sense of continual movement through landscapes and bodies, cast here as two halves of the same whole. Barney is grappling with the stuff of life, the fact of the body, its ever-present deterioration mimicked by industrial detritus, the flotsam of a city's slow slide into ruin and its eternal resurrection.

Based loosely on Norman Mailer's divisive 1983 novel *Ancient Evenings*, the film is set in a recreation of Mailer's Brooklyn home, where his wake is underway for what feels like an age. In a parody of New York intellectual life, the dinner party spirals into the centuries as mouldering crockery piles up and guests come and go. This *mise en scène* tiptoes near total horror but retains a kernel of humour, for as luminaries and intellectuals endlessly eulogize, food on plates is left to rot, jewel-like peaches and pomegranates laced with spider webs and fat furred centipedes, and the dead — dripping in excrement — come to rejoin the party ignored by the living. John Buffalo Mailer plays one of the incarnations of his dead father, reborn after passing beyond death through a river of faeces. The figure of the novelist and the boxer is ostensibly here, looming over proceedings at his own wake, and every frame is bright with connections between the body and landscape and an infinite return to lives, from lives, with bodies as the vehicles for both.

The utter relentlessness of each scene, more operatic and hugely extravagant than the last, gives the sense of Barney as a small god summoning images and scenes at whim, in turns dripping, scatological and filthy. Despite this, the film does offer moments of transcendent beauty — deeply memorable shard-bright images, as well one should hope when making such a commitment to the cause.

'I'm not gonna tell you to enjoy it — that's not what it's about. I don't even know what it is yet!' So says a man standing nervously at the front of the theatre, who, thanks of course to Barney's particular talent for physical self-reinvention, will have to remain identified as he is in my scrawled notes: SAD-EYED MAN BROWN CRUMPLED SUIT.

The soundscape of the film is one of its greatest successes — a cacophony of children chanting, harps and sirens, jazz, screams, speaking in tongues and a powerful vibratory tone that hums through for hours, rising and falling before suddenly cutting out like a dead engine. This is sound wedded to skin, and between the guttural, ritualistic voices, sung elegies, machinery and the constant presence of water moving through vessels, it goes some distance in linking otherwise disparate set-pieces. It is appropri-



clockwise from top left: Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, *River of Fundament*. Performance still. BA, 2013; *River of Fundament*. Performance still. KHU, 2 October 2010; *River of Fundament*. Performance still. KHU, 2 October 2010. Images courtesy the artists and the Adelaide Festival.

ate, then, that composer Jonathan Bepler is given equal billing with Barney, and the pair share a love for improvisation, each drawing upon an artistic tradition both pop and gothic.

One of the most memorable recurring images is the children in the next room, watched over by a benign fortune-teller. Through each incarnation they hum, sing, swing from the rafters and bang on cans, resolutely alive while the centuries pass for the adults holding court in the sitting room. Life goes on, things die and are born, and in the second room a sort of limbo occurs where the uncommodified time of the mind is released from the steady disintegration of the body. In this setting, we are not at all surprised to discover that the route to the afterlife is to slide beneath a child's bunk and cling to the wooden slats.

Barney displays his most elegant touch in the thoughtful oppositions between things — lightness and heaviness, the vast and the minute, the fertile and the decaying. He takes sensuous pleasure in rot and decrepitude set against gloss and shining lushness; hence yellowish LA magic hour versus crumbling Detroit, New York high society versus the festering waterways of Brooklyn.

If there is a failure it is one of momentum, or lack thereof. Overwhelming as a spectacle, the shifts in scale can be dizzying, from claustrophobic decaying interiors to wide industrial vistas. Fading and funny, infused with life as everything is dying, *River of Fundament* is an ambitious attempt to capture something of the distinctly American contemporary decay. Barney displays a sculptor's obsession with the object-ness of things, camera lingering on single objects long enough to grant them a certain power. At this dinner party are performed sacred, profane alchemies with perfect lilies, diamonds, a tiny silver trowel cast at the dinner table, bedside tables, teacups and incantations, great blocks of lard and stone in the uptown sitting room, slowly eroding under a dripping roof to take us through the centuries. The morning after turns into the year after and nobody has moved from their seats.

Part of the difficulty of this film comes from its circular structure. In film, this non-linearity can be frustrating, as the audience eventually wearies of connecting cryptic dots that lead nowhere. An attempt is made to gather ideas central to the American cultural imagination — the American dream, the epic, the fantasy of progress and infinite growth — under the scaffolding of another long-dead civilization.

Like trumpeters clearing their instruments in the kitchen sink, blowing underwater sounds, a halved pomegranate being devoured by a beautiful woman, a man crawling into the bloated womb of a swollen cow, greying flesh turned putrid. The childhood memory of an adult dinner party, being wheeled out in your finest dress, that tiny voice silencing all present. Barney is at his best in those slivers of recognition, images of astonishing beauty and familiarity wrapped in a dreamy, urgent sense of purpose.

Thanks to his deep commitment to indulgence, each narrative seems on the verge of connection with the next without ever quite weaving to the point of coherence. *River of Fundament* began life as a series of experimental projects with an uncertain outcome, and it shows. Sense arises like a waterlogged thought before being dragged, helpless, back down into the soggy depths. The current changes direction without warning, and the ludicrous and the spectacularly moving hang on a knife-edge, inseparable. A sense of precarity invades each scene, as though proceedings are on the verge of sliding down a cliff, but never quite do. In Barney's particular brand of demented grandeur, excess builds upon excess until the entire pretense collapses in exhaustion.

The fourth hour slides by, narrative forgotten, dredging moments of lucidity the way one sees dreams flee at the moment of waking. Each undercurrent of narrative is left to drain away, building until even the idea of a climax has been forgotten and the audience, stupefied, watches the last hour or so of salmon spawning and wide mountain vistas perplexed, waiting for a resolution that never comes. Rivers and waterways appear repeatedly, white reflec-

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tive highways mimicking fetid canals and internal processes. In a South Californian car dealership a hazy carnival is taking place amidst the sad late afternoon light of pastel office blocks. Every line uttered seems marked with significance; every lingering frame suggests a particular object as important.

In a rare moment of intelligible dialogue, one character remarks somberly: 'We don't know anything about this deep stuff'. After each intermission, the

Matthew Barney's Research
Matthew Barney: *River of Fundament*
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It is all too easy to be seduced by the sheer gloss of Matthew Barney's career. He makes epic videos via massive budgets. He seduces 'big' names to be involved, from Ursula Andress to Deborah Harry to Norman Mailer. He shows at the Guggenheim and was married to a rock star. At times it is high impossible not to be blinded by the glittering surface sheen, regardless of the faeces and the gore.

But the grunge at the core of this glitter has been there consistently. This became apparent during an all-too-brief discussion I had with the artist in Hobart as he was installing his massive sculptures in the bowels of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in late 2014. The conversation had begun by discussing the author J.G. Ballard, whom Barney has long acknowledged as his favourite writer. Ballard's fascination with psychopathology, with the bodily, with automobiles (crashed) and the apocalyptic has bled through Barney's *oeuvre* since its inception, however there was a parallel, rarely discussed, interest which came to light when Barney uttered a few words: 'There were also those wonderful RE/Search books which were definitely an inspiration.'

The influence of RE/Search opens a Pandora's Box into how to (re)consider Barney's *modus operandi*. Based in San Francisco and founded in 1980 by publishers Andrea Juno and V. Vale, RE/Search grew out of Vale's seminal punk fanzine *Search & Destroy* from the late '70s and continued to wear its punk/industrial/hardcore credentials with pride, covering such acts as Cabaret Voltaire, SPK and Throbbing Gristle (Barney's own interest in hard-hitting rock is abundantly clear via his inclusion of such bands as Morbid Angel, Agnostic Front, Murphy's Law and Slayer in his works, and in conversation he also cites The Butthole Surfers and Swans.)

But RE/Search never intended to be yet another rock magazine. In some ways it was Semiotext(e)'s evil brother. While Semiotext(e) was the quintessential New York publication, introducing its audience to French theoreticians, RE/Search was archetypal San Fran and it rapidly segued into a semi-literary journal. Its fourth issue saw William Burroughs, Brion Gysin and Genesis P-Orridge discussing notions of the 'Control Process', cut-ups, violent crime and revolution. However, always restless and relentless, its next issue was dubbed 'Industrial Culture Handbook' (1983) and carried a theme of 'deviant' performance artists and musicians including Survival Research Laboratories (SRL), Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire, SPK, Non, Monte Cazazza, Johanna Went and Z'ev.

Of these, is it abundantly clear that the work of SRL left a lasting impression on Barney. Founded in 1978 by machine-artist Mark Pauline, the group rapidly gained a reputation for its monstrous robotic bat-

audience wearies further and the effect is heightened. There is a particular psychic state engendered by a world never washed clean and begun anew; instead, each new birth steps gingerly across the ruins of the last. Each image piled on top of the last creates a sort of fugue state, where everything is significant, or nothing is.

In the end, *River of Fundament* is an attempt to engage both the pure and tainted stuff of the earth,

salt and flesh and souls turned up towards the light. All that exists is what you see: the ritual of a dead car, organs, sweetmeats, a spiritual death of America, fat blossoming pomegranate buds and dusty moths, mouths. Faced with such a dizzying array of images, it is impossible not to make connections.

Madeleine Stack



both images: Matthew Barney, *River of Fundament* storyboards, 2007–14. Details, mixed media in eight oak and glass vitrines. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photograph Rémi Chauvin/MONA. Image courtesy Gladstone Gallery and Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart.

tles and life-threatening (to the audience as well as the performers) antics. One can see the resonance in Barney's *oeuvre* in such works as *Hoist* (2004) and in the cinematic aspect of *River of Fundament* in which a backhoe eviscerates a 1967 Chrysler Imperial in an almost sexualised mechanical orgy. (It transpired that both Barney and I had met Pauline and uncomfortably agreed that his handshake was decidedly memorable: in 1982 Pauline was working with a rocket motor that exploded in front of him, severing most of his fingers. He was rushed to hospital where his hand was 'remade' by attaching some toes and skin from his back.)

Yet another edition of RE/Search was dubbed 'Modern Primitives' and considered the phenomena of multiple piercings, tattooing and ritual scarification in contemporary times. The issue, published in 1989 and featuring such extremists as Fakir Musafar, Anton LaVey, Monte Cazazza and Genesis P-Orridge clearly preempts many similar elements running through Barney's work, such as the flensing scene in *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005), and Aimee Mullins self-mutilation in *River of Fundament* as well as the solid emphasis on tattooing in that film.

But perhaps of most significance, both in terms of written and visual content, would be several books revolving around J.G. Ballard that RE/Search published. The first of these, simply titled J.G. Ballard, appeared in 1984 and is lavishly illustrated with grainy photographs of crashed cars and ruined buildings, as in the kind Barney captures when he portrays Detroit in *Fundament* — a form of Ruin Porn. Along with interviews, non-fiction and Ballard's own montages, the RE/Search book contains an excerpt from Ballard's infamous novel *Crash*. 'I was asked by *Artforum* to review Cronenberg's *Crash*', Barney said in Hobart. 'But there was no way I was going to like Cronenberg's version, there was no way I was going to like my version. *Crash* remains one of my favourite books.'

In 1990 RE/Search also reprinted Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which was first published in 1970 and promptly shredded for its supposedly offensive content. Perhaps most significantly for Barney was the fact that RE/Search commissioned gruesomely sexualised illustrations by artist Phoebe Gloeckner and decidedly dystopian photos by Ana Barrado. The illustrations clearly parallel Barney's fascination with biological aesthetics. The Cremaster muscle is not illustrated but the Urogenital groove, Cloacal-urethral fold and the Nasolacrimal groove are, as is a severed penis, one of which features in *Fundament*. There is also a malformed or unformed phallus à la Gary Gilmore's in *Cremaster 2*. The RE/Search edition also features a preface by William S. Burroughs who is quoted in *Fundament*.

But one must remember that, like RE/Search, many of Barney's original inspirations came from the rock world. During the same period that Barney was ingesting RE/Search he was also consuming the bizarre hardcore punk visuals of The Butthole Surfers: 'Some of the first shows I saw when I moved to New York were the Butthole Surfers', Barney told the *New York Magazine* in 2006. 'They were using found medical films, projecting them behind the band — things that were really difficult to watch, like a vasectomy. The way they mixed media I found really compelling.'

In August, 2008 Barney held a house party and pig roast which he dubbed Black Metal Pig, featuring live performances by such bands as Copremeis, Inquisition, Dagon, Krallice, and S.M.E.S. Barney, wielding sharpened knives, kept his guests satiated by roasting and carving up several suckling pigs, something of a rehearsal for at least one scene in *River of Fundament*. The Black Metal pigs were consumed, the one in his film left to rot and crawl with maggots, its skeletal remains on display at MONA. Very Death Metal.

Ashley Crawford