



HOBART, AUSTRALIA

Matthew Barney

MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART

Matthew Barney's vastly ambitious "Cremaster" cycle, 1994–2002, was finished and presented in that window between 9/11 and the financial collapse of 2008. Not surprisingly, several critics saw it as a bloated corollary to American pomp and male triumphalism. The US has faced some harsh truths since then, but Barney's follow-up project, "River of Fundament," 2008–14, is just as grandiose: a series of epic performances, a five-hour-long film-cum-opera scored by Jonathan Bepler, drawings, storyboards, and a group of monumental sculptures. As with "Cremaster" there are cars, metamorphosing figures, and excrement. Houdini and the Freemasons are evoked. Most of all, there is Norman Mailer. But whereas "Cremaster" drew on Mailer's greatest book, *The Executioner's Song* (1979), here Barney chose one of his most problematic: *Ancient Evenings* (1983), a long-winded, fairly pornographic account of ancient Egypt.

At the Museum of Old and New Art the focus was the "Fundament" sculptures, many of which had been presented previously at Munich's Haus der Kunst. But for this occasion, Barney also made new ones in response to Egyptian artifacts in the collection of David Walsh, founder



Matthew Barney,
Boat of Ra, 2014,
wood, resin-bonded
sand, steel, furniture,
cast bronze, gold-
plated bronze,
11 × 50 × 24'.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

and owner of MONA, a subterranean museum sliced into a cliff face. The show was a perfect fit; even the venue's name seemed ready-made for Barney's dance with ancient history. The artist's brilliance here was twofold: First, he harnessed the alchemical power of metallurgy as a physical analogy for the mythological threshold between failure and immortality; and second, he turned MONA's amulets, canopic jars, and other ancient treasures into materials as mutable as the zinc, copper, bronze, and gold that otherwise defined this exhibition. By folding the objects directly into his own work, he enacted a remarkable parallel voyage through ancient Egypt—where a mastery of metals shaped a society and its myth structure—and America's twentieth century, during which those same processes gave rise to an alloyed, automotive world that changed the way we experience time and space forever.

Unsurprisingly then, Detroit, and its fall from greatness, was everywhere. *Rouge Battery*, 2014, for example, is a massive copper-and-iron mold of the underside of a Chrysler Crown Imperial that Barney had used during a performance in the Motor City in 2010. Similarly, the monumental *Canopic Chest*, 2009–11, was cast from the residue of a 2008 Los Angeles performance, during which a 1967 Imperial was ritually destroyed. Works such as *Head of Ta-Sheret-Min*, 2014, dissolve the gaps between Barney's world and Egypt even further: "Outer coffins" cast in zinc, became strange, present-day ruins when placed atop Egyptian burial cases from Walsh's collection.

Underpinning these sculptural amalgams were typical Barney themes: the productive/destructive potential of sex; the body's capacity for transformation; and male ascension (read: hubris). This last aspect was pervasive, both literally, in the form of the phallus (a gold penis referring to the Osiris myth), and metaphorically, as a move toward godlike status: The *was*—an Egyptian scepter and symbol of power—became one of the show's defining forms. The exhibition design was also crucial in mapping this ascendancy; the use of low fluorescent lighting, a hierarchy of materials, and a narrative progression from one sculpture to the next made moving through the show an irresistible procession. This started in the first space, with the base matter of Barney's universe—his "storyboard" vitrines—and ended several rooms later with the enormous *Boat of Ra*, 2014: an inverted one-to-one model of Mailer's Brooklyn attic turned into a ship, and a tomb, for a bronze cast of the novelist's writing desk and the gold suit the artist wore in the film to reincarnate James Lee Byars.

If this all sounds a bit theatrical, it was. But so are Wagner, Mailer, and, for that matter, the predecessors Barney most commonly cites: Beuys, Byars, and Serra. This was theater for a reason, offering a radical realignment of the way we navigate the temporal gap between the ancient and the contemporary, and confirming Barney's extraordinary mythical, spatial, and processional proclivities. It also elevated his trademark oedipal battles—with Mailer and his sculptural forefathers—from personal struggles to cultural ones. As America's twentieth century unravels, Barney's "Fundament" sculptures are his best attempts yet to contain the dual forces of history and collapse.

—Anthony Byrt