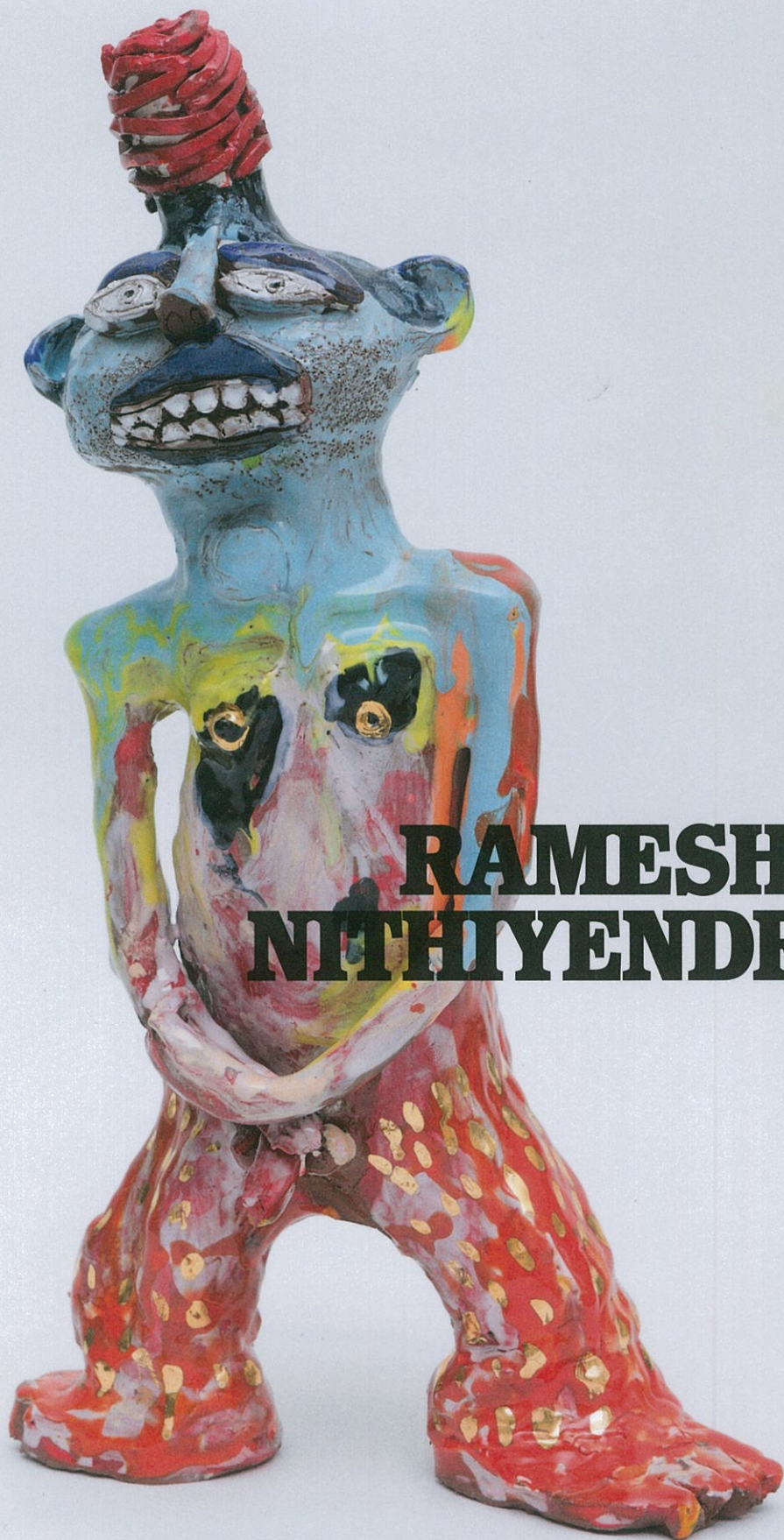


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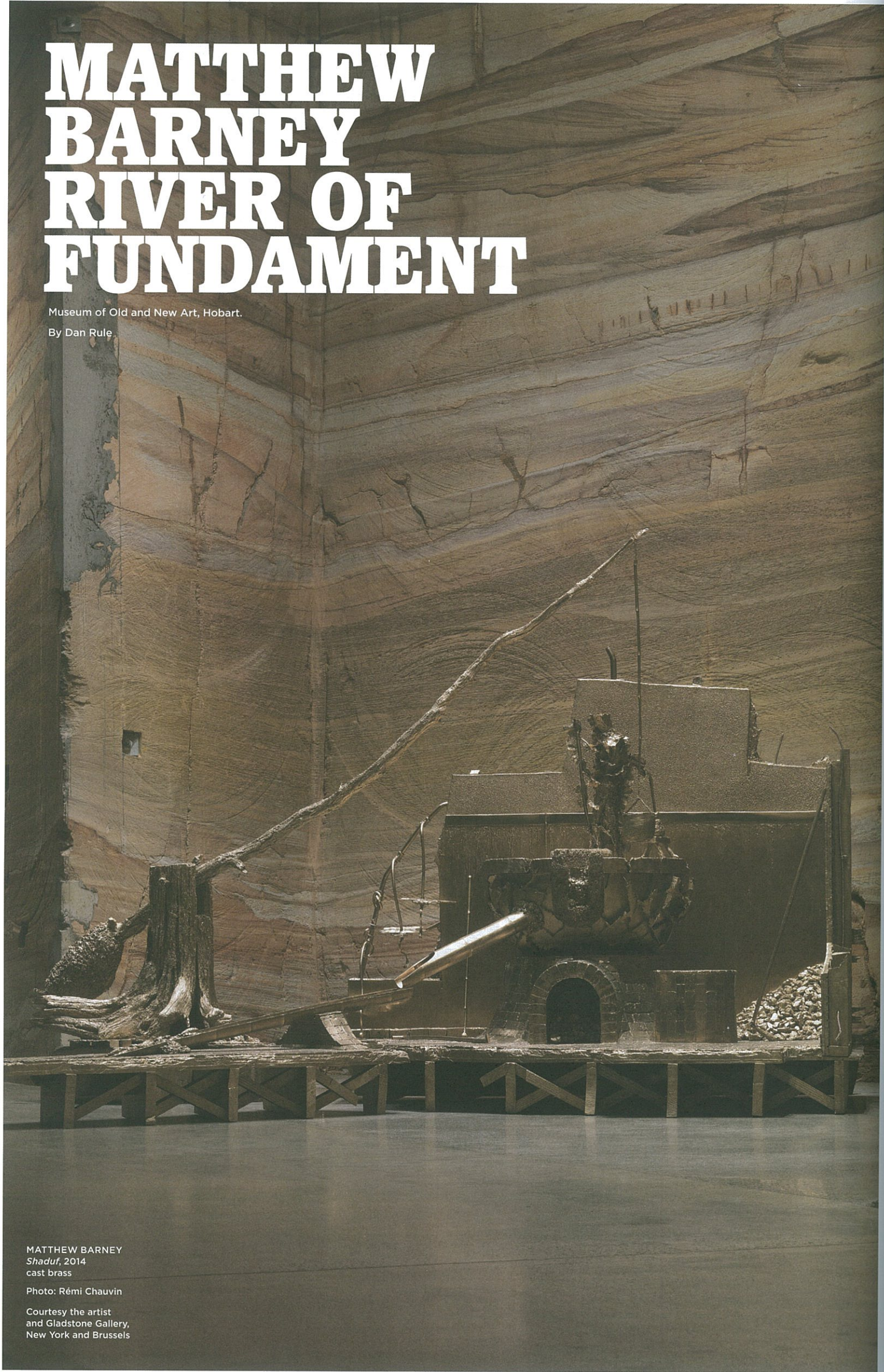
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# MATTHEW BARNEY RIVER OF FUNDAMENT

Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart.

By Dan Rule



MATTHEW BARNEY  
*Shaduf*, 2014  
cast brass

Photo: Rémi Chauvin

Courtesy the artist  
and Gladstone Gallery,  
New York and Brussels

It's difficult to gain a sense of the frothing fandom, hyperbole of an artist (or perhaps, beloved artist) Barney. His whim for the necessary to deliver it – *The Cremaster Cycle* his n – has placed him in rare fastidiousness in research, disjunctive cultural and historical contexts, too, has set any other contemporary

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Left  
MATTHEW BARNEY  
*Boat of Ra*, 2014  
wood, resin-bonded sand,  
steel, furniture, cast bronze  
and gold-plated bronze  
335.3 x 1524 x 731.5 cm

Right  
MATTHEW BARNEY  
*Portcullis Block*, 2014  
graphite and wood sleds

Photo: Rémi Chauvin

Courtesy the artist  
and Gladstone Gallery,  
New York and Brussels





It's difficult to gain a sense of traction or perspective amidst the frothing fandom, hyperbole and scale-anxiety that tends to trail an artist (or perhaps, better stated, a mythology) like Matthew Barney. His whim for the epic gesture and access to the funding necessary to deliver it – the 12-year, five-feature-length-film *The Cremaster Cycle* his most realised opus and chief case in point – has placed him in rare company. The American artist's utter fastidiousness in researching, co-opting and juxtaposing otherwise disjunctive cultural and historical narratives, references, settings and contexts, too, has set him widely and wildly apart from almost any other contemporary artist you might care to mention.

And it's within this schema that *River of Fundament* – the exhibition that operates both inside and outside its five-and-a-bit-hour filmic catalyst and namesake – envelops Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). It is the epitome of the epic event; the scale of which only the unfathomably deep pockets and extraordinary collection of David Walsh could make happen. In some ways, Barney, Walsh and the whole MONA concept are almost analogous characters. Their worlds are supremely unrealistic and unfathomable; we are spectators and inactive players in their wild, opulent, fucked-up, generous, supremely self-indulgent spheres – ogling happily at their weirdness and awesomeness as we totter along.

Much has been written of the *River of Fundament* film – which Barney made in collaboration with composer and long-term creative foil Jonathan Bepler, debuting at last year's Adelaide Biennial and screening at Hobart's Federation Concert Hall as a precursor to the opening of the MONA exhibition – and this review won't indulge much more other than to offer a hint as to its successes, which were in its cinematic devices and wrangling of that more elusive notion of tone, than in its incredibly complex (and rambling) knots of historical, mythological and narrative references (chiefly pulled from Norman Mailer's horrifically over-written nightmare of a novel *Ancient Evenings*).

While the consensus among many at the screening seemed to supplant Barney's longwindedness with a kind of do-no-wrong brilliance (one particularly puffed up fan even went so far as describing Mailer's ghastly text to me as "exquisite" after the screening, only for us all to learn at the Q&A session the following day that Barney had never even finished the book), the film's mastery wasn't so much in its tangle of Egyptian mythology and shit fetish (which were, indeed, startling), but in its photographic

negotiation of urban landscapes. That Barney managed to flit between the fantastical and something resembling present day New York and Detroit (and between the wider implications of the death of American manufacturing and the central tenet of reincarnation, via the guise of a car) without it seeming the least bit jarring was a masterstroke. In any other case, the aerial shots of Manhattan and those tracking Newtown Creek, which separates Brooklyn and Queens, should have read like clichés or tropes, but here they didn't in the slightest.

Likewise, the exhibition – which for the most part comprises physical and formal residue of the film – might be frothed over for its monumentalism (part of the building's structure needed to be temporarily removed just to fit some of these vast sculptural objects into the museum), but again, its real success is in the unlikely tonality shared between the forms, materiality and evocative qualities of the sculptural objects. While many might have a problem with the idea of an exhibition as ode to or echo of another work, it's hard not to feel that *River of Fundament* would still be mightily impressive without having even seen the film.

Many of Barney's sculptures take the form of huge, hulking metallic moulds whose surfaces shift from gleaming panels to craggy nodules and structural framework, glowing green with oxidation. Outside of their filmic treatment, their 'purpose' is unclear and abstract; they are monuments to an *idea* of American industry, rather than losing themselves to the potential didacticism of specifics. Barney's treatment of Egyptian artefacts from Walsh's collection is also incredibly light. Here, we witness Egyptian coffins juxtaposed against contemporary zinc castings and tablaturne offsetting Barney's own etched drawings on metal.

One of the show's most impressive works takes the form of an ark; it is the arched roofline of Norman Mailer's apartment in the film, only upturned to become a hull.

Another unlikely and utterly effective treatment is that of the gallery environment as a whole. The dim fluorescent lighting and light grey walls forge what Barney measured as resembling the environmental equivalent of Detroit, overcast with rain, while a scuff line that follows the walls mimics the waterline (or, should we say, shit-line) that marks the majority of scenes in the film in fact came from one of the sculptural objects (a large, boulder-like section of graphite that Barney had a Hobart women's football team drag around the perimeter of the galleries before the opening), which rests in the shadow of the ark.

Perhaps the most refreshing and, indeed, disconcerting quality about the entire *River of Fundament* experience is its shameless ambitions of scale and virtuosity. In an era when contemporary art so often reads like a self-conscious attempt to expunge its own presence – via esoteric social actions and exchanges, expressionless micro-objects, faux-politics and unknowing pastiche – Barney's work almost reads like an anachronism.

It's not that the project's missive isn't troubling; the idea of the white male artist afforded free and fabulous reign is both thrilling in its possibility and boringly extraneous in its espousal of privilege. But what makes the *River of Fundament* exhibition something other than a kind of gross, monumental contemporary art equivalent of an Eddie Van Halen guitar solo, is its elicitation of wider worlds and histories. These are not monuments that scream of themselves and their creator. They may be large, but they whisper quietly of things much larger. ▼

*River of Fundament* shows at the Museum of Old and New Art until April 13, 2015.  
mona.net.au

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Boat of Ra, 2014  
wood, resin-bonded sand,  
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