

Matthew Barney at Mona: the artist at the edge of the world

As his *River of Fundament* reaches Tasmania, the American artist reflects on near misses, full-frontal nudity and why he's happy never quite arriving

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It's midday on Sunday and I'm sitting in the "art installation suite" of a Hobart hotel opposite American artist Matthew Barney. He wears a moss-coloured trucker hat perched high on his head, not quite shading his piercing blue eyes, and a black T-shirt emblazoned with the words *Pig Destroyer*. They're a grindcore band from Virginia, he tells me, but it could be a piece of his own merchandise. If Barney did merchandise. Which he doesn't.

On Friday night at the city's full-house Federation concert hall, I watched the body of a suckling pig (and much else besides) decompose over the five-and-a-quarter hours of Barney and Jonathan Bepler's latest film, *River of Fundament*. And that pig's skeleton is now contained within a vitrine in Barney's exhibition of the same name at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (Mona).

The show opened on Saturday evening with suitably cool fanfare: a hypnotic soundtrack from a local noise artist who (I'm told) still lives with his mum. Seemingly half of Sydney and Melbourne's gallery set flew into Hobart International for the occasion, where the first thing you see at the baggage carousel is an advert for Mona: "Sex and drugs for \$25 - and that's just the art."

Even before reaching David Walsh's castle of ancient booty and contemporary art, Tasmania can knock a first-time visitor off-centre. To a Brit, the architecture and climate seem familiar and yet a feeling keeps washing over me: we're on the edge of the world. The *Aurora Australis* icebreaker currently docked in Hobart harbour only serves as a reminder. Next stop Antarctica.

For Barney, who has been installing the show here for the past three weeks, the dislocation is less emotional, more practical. "I think there are certain exhibitions that are more remote and this is certainly one that feels that way," he says. "You gain something: a focus, a lack of distraction. Both for me and for people looking at the work."

It's only the latest stop on a seven-year journey for *River of Fundament* - to be expected from an artist who spent much the same amount of time making his cult *Cremaster* film

cycle. Barney's latest amalgam of film, live performance, drawings and sculpture is loosely based on Norman Mailer's 1983 novel, *Ancient Evenings*, a hypersexualised take on Egyptian mythology, mashed up here with the life and death of the US car industry.

The project's early seeds were sewn at the Manchester international festival before three live operatic sequences were filmed on location in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York City. Barney also completed and premiered the film in New York, combining it with the exhibition at Munich's Haus der Kunst and now Mona.

But it almost wasn't to be, Barney reveals. Two days after production finished on the film's central scene - a star-studded wake for Norman Mailer attended by a who's who of art from Blondie to Salman Rushdie - Hurricane Sandy hit New York: "we didn't even have time to dismantle the set - it was completely ruined."

Barney marvels: "Somehow we managed to film everything we needed, a month's worth, right before it hit. But the flood was so much a part of our story. Sandy completely wiped the studio out. It was six-feet under." As is Norman Mailer's character for much of the film, crawling through a sewer-set Underworld and in and out of the carcass of a cow to be reborn.

Five minutes before I leave my hotel for Friday's marathon screening, I accidentally drop an entire bottle of perfume on the bathroom floor and consequently reek of the stuff. A colleague kindly tweets: "Your artful answer to Barney's scatological excess." I wish. After the first interval, my right-hand neighbour doesn't rematerialise. After the second, the woman to my left has also gone awol. Could it be the *Coco Mademoiselle* or can Barney shoulder some of the blame?

As Sydney festival director Lieven Bartells puts it to me later: "There's a moment in the film where dropping a bottle of Chanel wouldn't go amiss." Australian reaction to the *River of Fundament* film, which first played at the 2014 Adelaide festival, has divided roughly down gender lines. And I won't lie: I found the film incredibly hard (excuse the pun), male-orientated viewing for long periods.

But what of Barney, both a father to a daughter by his former partner, Björk, and a son whose artist mother has accompanied him for his Hobart stay? Do those other roles in his life influence the choices he makes as an artist? "Sure," he says. I push him to elaborate. "One, I felt obligated to deal with the explicitness in the novel. On the other hand, there is a full-frontal genital nature to Mailer's imagery that I'm not quite interested in. However, I felt that I needed to take some of it on."

And take Mailer on, too, he adds. A character from the film that stood out to me - amid all the faeces, phalli and violently crushed cars - is Hathfertiti. Played at different ages by Ellen Burstyn, Maggie Gyllenhaal and Madyn G Coakley, she wears the same white dress throughout before dying, reciting lines from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as she does. Not a spot of dirt touches her.

"Right?" says Barney with a smile. "It's effective. That character came into the writing at the time Whitman did as a way of going head to head with Mailer. To create a very strong character out of a character in the novel that is effectively an enabler for the male protagonist's reincarnation." Albeit one, in Gyllenhaal's segment, who milks her own

breasts.

Gender depictions aside, also notable during Friday's screening was a lack of audience laughter. Barney's Cremaster films were filled with jokes. Are we allowed to smile at this one? When one (male) character was being pleased under a table with a cabbage, I certainly wanted to laugh, I tell him.

"That's good," says Barney. "I'm definitely interested in humour, that humour that sits on the edge of discomfort, a kind of embarrassment, even if it's expressed through material ways." A poo wrapped in gold potpourri and fashioned into a penis, for example? Barney pauses for a long time. "Maybe embarrassment is too specific a word. It's more about the tendency for things to fail or for things to fall."

Failure is a preoccupation throughout his conversation. At a panel talk with David Walsh at Hobart's Odeon theatre on Saturday afternoon, Barney suggests he is in constant battle with his own proficiency and that increasing the scale of his projects is a means of challenging himself.

"A situation is set up where there is a strong potential for failure but there is also an opportunity for us - as a collective - to use the skills we've developed to create resonant situations and scenes and forms," he explains now. "That element or potential for chance is important for keeping us on point. And by that, I mean opportunistic. Opportunities come up and pass by quickly. Things happen quite magically."

As a sculptor, Barney's interest will always be in material transformation, he says. "That's where I come from. So [in film] it interests me placing one character next to another and creating a different possibility: a third space. That's something like sculpture-making, where materials at odds are combined and alloys are made."

That same alchemy drew him to Mona and David Walsh. "What he has here is very special. There is a third space that he's after also - combining the antiquities with the contemporary work in a quite cavalier way. As I started thinking about working here with his Egyptian collection and combining my work with it, also in a cavalier way" - Barney places zinc sculptures on top of Walsh's priceless Egyptian sarcophagi - "I felt he would be behind that. And he was."

No shit, as you might say. Walsh, a man who installed mirrored loos at Mona so visitors can watch themselves defecate. All Barney will add is: "It's a special situation I really don't think I could repeat anywhere else that I'm aware of."

He flies out of Hobart to Europe this afternoon. After Tasmania, River of Fundament will travel back to exhibit in Los Angeles in 2015. Its final resting place? "We're still generating new sculpture from the piece so it's living on," says Barney. But there will be an end, he says. Given the Ancient Evenings source-text and Mailer's obsession with birth and rebirth, does Barney experience his own creative life in the same cyclical fashion?

Not so much, he says. "There's a continuum for me, for sure, from one project to the next. Of course there are partitions but I'm more aware of the cycles of other people's lives than my own." Barney cites his long-time production designer, Matt Ryle, who had all three of his children during the production of River of Fundament, and the late Elaine Stritch and Belita

Woods, both of whom have died since appearing in the film.

“Real time stuff,” Barney notes. “People are born. People die. So there are cycles within it. But for me it’s one long work.” A critic once asked of him: “Will Barney ever give birth?” The artist not quite at the end of the world laughs, knowingly. “The state of almost.” He pauses. “I’m comfortable there.”

. Matthew Barney’s River of Fundament is at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart until 13 April 2015

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