

When MONA meets Matthew

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MONA is going to be the grand venue for acclaimed visual artist Matthew Barney's first solo Australian exhibition.



Production still from the film River of Fundament. (Courtesy of Matthew Barney; Cinematographer Peter Strietmann)

Hailed for his avant-garde imagination, hybrid films, sculptures, drawings and photography, American artist Matthew Barney is bringing his *River of Fundament* exhibition to Australia (

[article/news/visual-arts/matthew-barney-comes-to-mona-245621](#)) at MONA this summer, opening 22 November until 13 April 2015.

'The narrative themes of myth and the human obsession in his work has always resonated with us. That, and his sculptures which are stunning works of art, is what drew us to him,' said Nicole Durling, curator at MONA who along with Olivier Varenne and David Walsh saw their first Barney exhibition together in 2006 at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York.

'And then the following year we saw another exhibition in Austria in Bregenz. Around that time he had started on the *'River of Fundament'* project. He and Jonathan Bepler had started working on an abstract idea of creating an opera out of a novel,' she added.

The novel was Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* (1983). It's a 700-page book on Egyptian mythology and *The Book of The Dead*, which he took a decade to write. The book was not received well, despite Mailer hoping that it would be his 'great American masterpiece' (<http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/matthew-barney/>). Just before his death, Mailer approached Barney to read *Ancient Evenings* saying there might be something in there for him - possibly hoping Barney could deliver the praise Mailer felt the book deserved.

Barney had cast Mailer in his previous work, the five-film project, *The CREMASTER Cycle*, created between 1994 and 2006. Like its predecessor, *River of Fundament* too has been eight years in the making and the film premiered in February 2014 at BAM Brooklyn Academy of Music. Following onto other venues including its screening alongside the exhibition at Haus der Kunst in Munich in March this year (video below).

At MONA, the exhibition has two distinct elements: a five hour eleven minute symphonic feature film and an exhibition of Barney's sculptures, drawings, storyboards which relate directly to the film. In addition to these works, the artist has made a selection from MONA's Egyptian antiquity collection to create a unique iteration of the body of work's narrative across the gallery spaces at MONA.

'The exhibition that premiered in Haus der Kunst had a very particular layout that responded to their gallery spaces, MONA's exhibition is also a response to the architecture of the building as well as the artist's interest in our Egyptian antiquity collection' says Durling.

'So, there is, in a way, a dialogue where the artist has responded to our collection and our galleries and we [MONA] have responded to his works. He is not only making new works but also revisiting works that had been shown in Munich and reforming them uniquely to MONA' she adds.

The film remains the same; this reforming will only be done to specific works in the exhibition. Apart from this, the very nature of MONA's architecture complements this already multi-layered project.

'The dialogue between this body of work and the museum has an elegance to it. And certainly the catacomb-like aspect of MONA, which has previously been compared to like walking into an Egyptian tomb, adds to that dialogue,' said Durling.

The key gods of Osiris and Isis have been selected out of MONA's Egyptian votive figure collection, who are both referenced in *Ancient Evenings* and *River of Fundament*, along with elaborately decorated timber coffins, inscribed scarabs and animal mummies.

'Three of our animal mummies will be exhibited: we have one full-sized cat mummy, a mummified cat head as well as a mummified falcon – these are unusual and rare objects.

'There was nothing much to ensure their longevity when they were first created, and the fact that they are still here today, three thousand years later is extraordinary,' said Durling.

River of Fundament, the operatic collaboration between Barney and Bepler, is not entirely based on Mailer's book and has many influences.

'*Ancient Evenings* is the base structure of the film, but the artist also refers to [Harold Bloom's review of *Ancient Evenings*](#)

(<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1983/apr/28/norman-in-egypt/>) as being an influence on the film as well,' said Durling.

'It's a re-telling of the myth narratives of the Egyptian gods, particularly Osiris and Isis. Following the cycles as set out in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the characters within the *River of Fundament* enact certain ritualistic processes that, according to Egyptian mythology, the individual goes through in the pursuit of reincarnation and immortality,' added Durling.

The film boasts a stellar cast of celebrities and artists like Paul Giamatti, Richard Serra, writer Salman Rushdie, Maggie Gyllenhaal, paralympian Aimee Mullins, Joan La Barbara and Mailer's son John Buffalo Mailer among many others. Matthew Barney has been known for this in the past for casting his heroes, his influences for very particular reasons.

'Matthew Barney places certain individuals within his films to stand in for historic figures such as Harry Houdini, who appeared in *The CREMASTER Cycle*. To me this implies they are there not only for their influence upon Barney himself, but they are also cast for their place as some of the great American mythmakers,' said Durling.

So how does a film on American myths and culture as metaphors for Egyptian mythology pinned on the struggle to achieve immortality translate to an Australian audience?

'There's not a really a great divide between Australian and American culture and certainly when we reduce it back to the narrative structure, the characters and what they stand in for.

'The struggle between the twin poles of our mortality: life and death make it a universal piece of work. And this is where MONA isn't necessarily interested in works that are for a particular audience.

'We are interested in work that speaks to our humanity and helps us understand and explore what our existence is. And it doesn't matter where you are from which country, these ideas resonate and they can be understood,' she added.

And for a multi-disciplinary and multi-layered work like this, visitors are bound to pick varied things at different levels.

'Even without the compelling themes and ideas that the exhibition deals with, just purely on a physical scale the works are absolutely remarkable and have a raw beauty about them.

'I think this film and exhibition should be on people's bucket list of the great arts pilgrimages of their lifetime, like going to see the *Mona Lisa*. Wherever they can get the opportunity to see a body of work at this scale from this artist, they must see it,' said Durling.

River of Fundament film will screen at the Federation Concert Hall on the 21 November at 5pm. Tickets can be purchased [here](http://shop.mona.net.au/single/eventDetail.aspx?p=5509) (<http://shop.mona.net.au/single/eventDetail.aspx?p=5509>).

The exhibition will begin with a free public opening at MONA on 22 November 2014 at 8pm.

A free in conversation event between the artist Matthew Barney and David Walsh will be at 1pm at the Odeon Theatre, Hobart. Ticket must be reserved online [here](http://shop.mona.net.au/single/eventDetail.aspx?p=5494) (<http://shop.mona.net.au/single/eventDetail.aspx?p=5494>).

Tickets to the exhibition from the 23 November are priced at \$A25 for interstate and international visitors with a concessional rate of \$A20, and free for Tasmanians and under 18s. To book your tickets, go [here](http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/events#fundament) (<http://www.mona.net.au/what's-on/events#fundament>).

For further screening details for the film following the 21 November, please check the [MONA website](http://www.mona.net.au/) (<http://www.mona.net.au/>).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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