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Barney's art of the grotesque

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Marti Domination in *Cremaster No1*.

Matthew Barney's films might (briefly) change the way you look at life, writes Gabriella Coslovich.

Remember singer Bjork's scene-stealing, red-carpet performance at the Oscars three years ago?

Among the parade of strapless satin numbers, the Icelandic pixie's frilly white swan dress stood out like a tree on a tundra.

Bjork's subversive red-carpet turn earned her canings on worst-dressed lists, at the hands of those who just didn't get it.

But one American who may well have been attracted by Bjork's antics was New York artist Matthew Barney.

Bjork's voluptuous, giant ovoid, falling from beneath layer upon layer of crispy, ruffled tulle, and landing provocatively between her fetching can-can-girl legs in their white, high-heeled T-bars must have set Barney's heart a-beating: it could have been a scene straight out of his bizarre *Cremaster* film cycle.

By August 2001, Barney and Bjork were publicly dating. By October 2002, they'd hatched an offspring of their own - the flame-haired Isadora.

But I digress. The point is this: if you think Bjork's barmy, wait till you see the bent imaginings of her boyfriend Barney.

Named "the most important American artist of his generation" by the *New York Times* in the mid 1990s, Barney is the man behind the cryptic *Cremaster* film cycle - five films in all, eight years in the making, comprising almost seven hours of the most audacious, repulsive, seductive, annoying, frustrating, puerile, pretentious, hilarious, beautiful and original images you will see, with no clear plot, no dialogue, lashings of Vaseline and sculptural, visual and prosthetic references to all things sexual and reproductive.

The entire cycle will be shown for the first time in this country at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, starting with a marathon screening of all five films this Sunday at 11am.

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ACMI curator Alexie Glass compares the *Cremaster* cycle to the epic grandeur of Wagner's operas, to the films of David Cronenberg, especially *Crash*, and to the creations of American video artist Bruce Nauman.

So what are the films about? Where to begin? There's a clue in the title, and it's not for the squeamish. The male cremaster muscle is the gizmo that raises and lowers the scrotum, according to the ambient temperature: when it's cold, neat and concise is nice; when it's hot, dangling loose and free.

The heights to which Barney takes this fundamental idea are amazing. And to think it originated from the mind of an all-American boy.

Born in San Francisco, Barney grew up in Idaho, played football in high school and later at Yale. Handsome in that chisel-jawed kind of way, he modelled during college.



Matthew Barney in a scene from *Cremaster No. 3*.

But Barney, who writes, directs, co-producers and acts in his films, disguises his looks on camera, disfiguring his face and body.

We're not talking ego-enhancing body-attachments, a la Mark Wahlberg in *Boogie Nights*.

In *Cremaster 4* Barney appears as a satyr, with huge welts on his head, covered by a matt of greasy, scarlet hair.

In *Cremaster 2*, he plays notorious Utah murderer Gary Gilmore.

In *Cremaster 3* he has his teeth smashed by a gang of hit-men and spends the rest of the movie with a bloodied satin handkerchief stuffed into his mouth.

Barney's films are a weird hotchpotch of history, mythology, religion, art, architecture, autobiography and American culture: from car worship to capitalism, Busby Berkeley musicals to Masonic rituals, corporate branding to cheerleading.

Landscape is a key motif. The films are set in five different locations, moving from west to east - Idaho, Utah, Manhattan, the Isle of Man and Budapest.

Watching them is like being trapped in an alternately grotesque and alluring dream. Absurd, illogical, ugly, tedious, fetishistic - these adjectives also apply.

However, if you're willing to endure some hair-tearingly tiresome stretches, there's lots to marvel at, too - extravagant sets, gooey sculptures, fabulous costumes, hybrid creatures, hermaphrodites, sexy amputees in kinky footwear. The shoe god himself, Manolo Blahnik, gets a credit in *Cremaster 1*.

Barney never intended to make films. His background is in live performance and sculpture, and the plastic arts remain his greatest inspiration.

The *Cremaster* cycle evolved from a project that began as "discreet sculptural work".

"A film audience started to discover this body of work that an art audience already knew about. (So) I started consciously pushing it in a cinematic direction, while trying to maintain the sculpture system," Barney says, speaking from New York.

He is quietly spoken, measured, and not at all what you'd expect from watching his films, but his responses can be as obscure as his works.

These days, Barney plays down the whole *Cremaster* link, and says that aspect of the films has been overemphasised.

"The cycle was always about making a narrative from the notion of how form develops, essentially. How an idea comes into your head as an undifferentiated form and leaves it in a much more complex way.

"So, one of the first models I looked at . . . was how the reproductive system develops in the foetus and starts as undifferentiated for a number of weeks before it declares its sex, and that's referred to in the cycle, but it's not the over-riding theme."

OK, so what is, then? I mean, gonads, groins and body fluids play a pretty big role in the cycle.

"I think the over-riding theme is much more simple. It's about how you can keep a fertile idea from becoming overdetermined and dead. So, it's very much an extended metaphor on the creative process."

Some may suggest that the *Cremaster* cycle succeeds on that account only too well - illustrating just how to butcher an idea by overdoing it.

Barney did not make his sequence of films in chronological order.

Cremaster 4 is actually his first, and frankly, worth giving a big miss. Set on the Isle of Man, and silly in the extreme, it features two motorcycle sidecar teams - the Ascending Hacks, who are racing each other but heading in opposite directions.

Close-ups of the racing drivers' trembling torsos reveal slimy, testicle-like objects emerging from their jacket pockets. The Ascending Hacks' free-form testicles slide up, while the Descending Hacks' ooze down.

It's an extended metaphor for sexual differentiation, and, 10 minutes in, the metaphor's worn, well, thin.

Barney tried selling *Cremaster 4* to the BBC and Channel Four. He thought the Brits might be taken by the Isle of Man angle. He wanted the film to function like an alternative sports show. The networks didn't buy it.

"I just think they felt it was too slow and abstract," Barney says.

Was it charming naivety or blind determination that ever made him think this stuff was made for TV?

If you can only see one of the films in the cycle, make it *Cremaster 3*, but be warned - it's three hours long.

The last film made in the cycle, and Barney's most accomplished, *Cremaster 3* is set in New York's Chrysler Building and features sumptuous footage of the art deco masterpiece.

The film is like a warped version of an *Indiana Jones* adventure tale, with Barney as central hero, undergoing all manner of quests, including one that sees him scaling the spiral levels of the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan.

It's hardly surprising that these films don't make any money - they're not aimed at a mass audience. Still, they break even and the project is self-funding - money is made from the associated "merchandise", the sculptures, photographs and art books on the cycle.

Am I glad I sat through seven hours of the Barney? I'm not sure yet: I'm still recovering. I suppose so, but part of that might just be the feeling of euphoria, of having survived, suffered the ordeal and come out at the end.

And what does it feel like at the end of the tunnel? A bit twisted, a bit tortured, a bit brainwashed.

You walk out of the cinema, and nothing looks quite the same. I sit at the window of Degraeve Cafe and note our home-grown fetishes, rituals and weirdness. I notice women's shoes - pointy kitten heels with black satin weaving up the calves, multi-coloured platforms, pink wedges - and clothes, a snake-skinny blonde woman in ultra-tight jeans that are laced up firmly at the bum.

Well, it was David Malouf who said that we come away from art "with a quickened interest in things". . . "it changes our sense of ourselves and the world".

After seven hours of *Cremaster*, it is just like that.

Oh yes, we're a weird mob alright.

The Cremaster Cycle screens at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image from Sunday until February 22. Bookings essential. Phone 8663 2583 or see website www.acmi.net.au for details

DOs and DON'Ts of watching *The Cremaster Cycle*

- Do see them in order.
- Don't attempt the marathon screening unless you're a die-hard visual arts nut or want to do your head in.
- Don't see *Cremaster 4* unless you're a die-hard Barney fan and are interested in his progression from disastrously bad filmmaker to relatively respectable.
- Don't get too caught up in analysing the films, go with your gut, not your head. ACMI curator Alexie Glass says, "If you are repulsed, be repulsed, and if you are seduced, be seduced. Be in the moment, because Barney's in the moment . . . You will just send yourself insane if you try over-intellectualising and working out all the nuances."
- Don't read the synopses before seeing the films - it's more fun trying to work out what the hell is going on, and later comparing what you thought you saw with what Barney intended. The synopses, available online, at www.matthewbarney.com, make as much sense/nonsense in hindsight.
- If you can only do one, do *Cremaster 3*, the last film Barney made and, according to some, the most accomplished.

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