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LIMITED EDITION COVER
BY MATTHEW BARNEY

MODERN MYTH

American artist Matthew Barney's latest project is an ambitious, radical reinvention of Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*. Here, the novelist's son, John Buffalo Mailer, an actor and writer who plays his father in the film, recalls how Barney took over Detroit to create his epic vision: an arresting, sometimes violent succession of symbolic scenes featuring a motley crew of Egyptian gods and FBI agents

PORTRAIT: MARTON PERLAKI



MATTHEW BARNEY, PICTURED OPPOSITE, CREATED THE ARTWORK FOR THIS MONTH'S LIMITED-EDITION COVER. *CRUCIBLE*, 2014, ENGRAVED BRASS AND LIVER OF SULFUR IN BRASS FRAME

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'The police department of Detroit is in support of what is about to transpire,' the police chief himself assures us. 'But everyone in attendance needs to understand that they have signed a waiver absolving not only Matthew Barney, but the City of Detroit from any liability should any bodily harm be inflicted upon you.'

It's a biting cold October day in Detroit. Two hundred or so guests have been invited to witness a one-off live performance that will eventually become 'KHU', the second act of *River of Fundament*, Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler's operatic film. Seven years in the making and running to almost six hours, the film premiered at New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music and London's English National Opera, and is now on show at the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania (W*141). It has also formed the starting point for this month's limited-edition cover (see left).

River of Fundament was originally inspired by Norman Mailer's controversial and scatological novel set in ancient Egypt, *Ancient Evenings*. Structurally, the film alternates between small-scale scenes, set in the author's Brooklyn apartment immediately after his death and featuring the likes of Salman Rushdie and Debbie Harry; and three hugely ambitious outdoor performances of almost unimaginable scale staged in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York. The performances take the ancient Egyptian rituals of Mailer's source novel off in myriad strange and unexpected directions, each culminating in the ritual destruction of a car.

'The way that I was approaching work during the *Cremaster* years [a cycle of five full-length feature films made between 1994 and 2002] was almost like being in a vacuum, where all the air was sucked out, where no

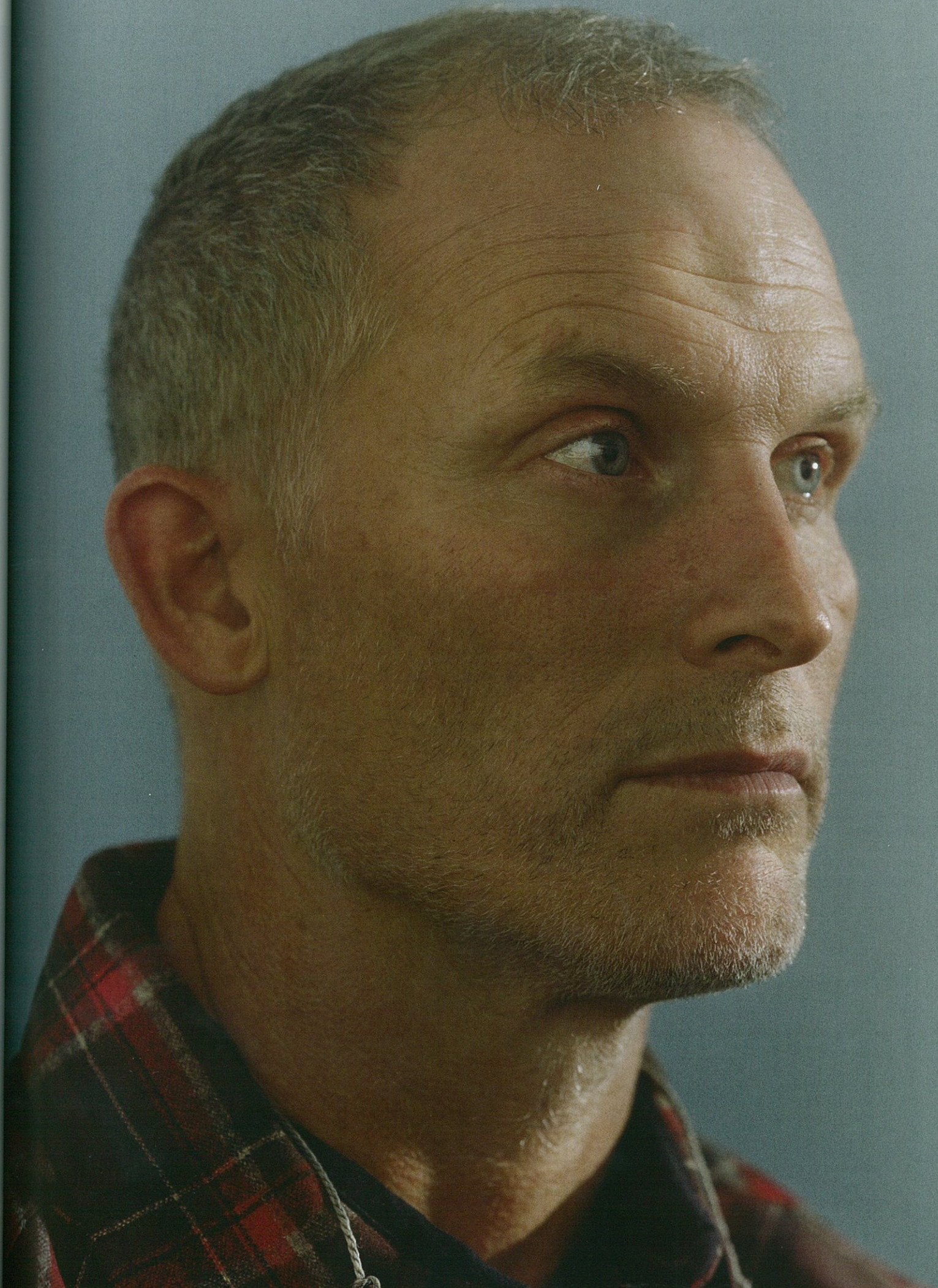
shadow existed, no gravity existed,' explains Barney. 'But with *River of Fundament* I was determined to make it real, on some level. This is not where I feel most comfortable. I feel more comfortable in the vacuum. But I learnt a lot by throwing myself into something so real, and being forced to learn from it. And really designing a number of situations, like the casting pit scene in Detroit, or the shredding of the automobile in Los Angeles – scenes at the centre of the action that are unrepeatable, unrehearsable, unpredictable. It is like having a wild animal in the room. You have to react to them, and accept them. It's exciting.'

A car is hoisted out of the water and placed onto the deck of the 30ft barge we – the audience of 200 – find ourselves on, in the middle of the Detroit River, apparent witnesses to a crime scene investigation. Four speedboats blaring horns appear and circle us like a tribe of Indians who have come upon trespassing pilgrims. Aimee Mullins, who is playing a combination of an FBI agent and the Egyptian goddess Isis, boards the ship. They unwrap the car, and upon seeing the automobile carcass inside – which represents the remains of her dead brother and husband, Osiris, who was killed by his brother-in-law, Set – Isis vomits a neon-green substance and the chorus of female cops shriek in horror. She then drops her pants, places three snakes inside the engine, squats on top and, in a distorted voice, shouts a prayer to Osiris, intimating that they will be together again. As she finishes, a colossal freight ship crosses our sight line behind her, ever so slowly, and in time with the music. All 200 audience members are trying to figure out how in the world Barney managed to pull off that timing. »

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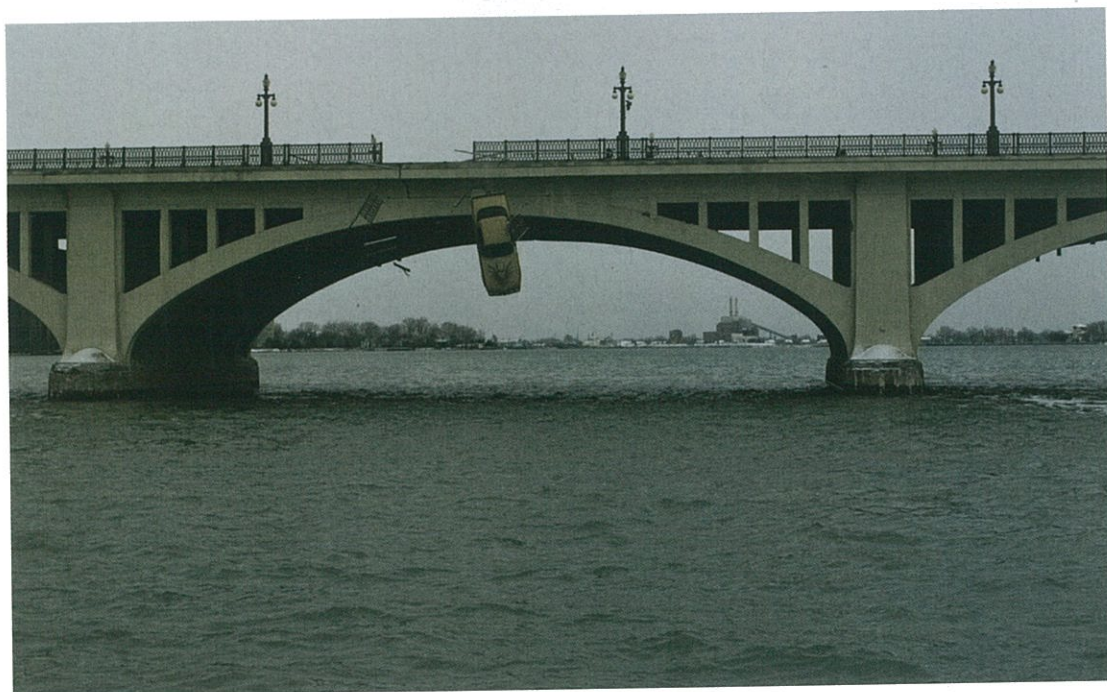
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NUMBER OF CARS RITUALLY DESTROYED FOR THE FILM - ONE OF *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT*'S MANY THEMES IS THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AMERICAN CAR INDUSTRY

OTHER TROPES INCLUDE REINCARNATION, DEATH AND IMMORTALITY, SEX AND SODOMY, AND COPROLOGY AND VIOLENCE

RIVER OF FUNDAMENT MIXES NARRATIVE CINEMA, LIVE PERFORMANCE, SCULPTURE AND OPERA IN A NEAR-SIX-HOUR EXPERIENCE



A 1979 PONTIAC FIREBIRD CRASHES THROUGH THE RAILINGS OF DETROIT'S MACARTHUR BRIDGE

Prologue, Second Act, 'KHU'

'It's a working river,' says Barney. 'We knew that those were the ships that deliver iron ore to the Rouge Plant at the end of the river. So we knew that we were going have to get into that turning basin before that ship came in, or we were going to have to stop and wait for it to go all the way down the Rouge and pass before we could come into the shipping lane. We knew that it was coming, but not when. There are these incredible things that pass up and down the river every day. You take them for granted until you've got a camera running. And then they become part of the film.'

After another hour or so, our barge pulls up to a dock, where Set - Osiris' arch-nemesis (played by Eugene and Herbert Perry) - is standing on the shore, chomping down on a head of lettuce, and screaming that we can't park here. We are escorted off the barge as we watch what remains of the car being hoisted onto land with a crane. The car is then cut into 14 pieces by men wielding long-necked torches.

Next we are escorted up a dirt hill, to the top of two metal platforms, where a grand and apocalyptic scene is taking place. Barney has constructed five 40ft-high furnaces, dressed to resemble termite mounds. In front of these furnaces stand three 100ft-tall abandoned silos. Perched on top of each silo is a figure clad in a shiny gold straightjacket and top hat. They send cymbals

'Some of the things that happen in these projects are beyond explainable'

sliding down 200ft metal cables strung from the ground to the top of the silos. They chant over speakers placed throughout the area, creating a chilling cascade of sound. At the top of the furnaces, iron workers dump more metal than they ever had the pleasure of melting down before, or ever will again, into these ovens.

'What we did was essentially unprecedented,' says Barney. 'We took a kind of plan for a DIY furnace and we blew it up in size many, many times. We worked together with a guy named Casey Westbrook, who consults schools and iron-casting clubs where they convert things like hot water heaters into furnaces, and they melt down broken-up radiators. So what we built was on an industrial scale, but it was with the same processes you might use in your own back yard.'

A pattern has been carved out of the ground in front of us, roughly 20ft by 30ft, and it is now apparent that what we are going to witness is nothing less than 25 tons of molten metal (the largest non-industrial iron smelt in history) being released into this etching Barney has carved out of the earth. The spectacle is such that we are almost able to forget about the freezing bitter air, almost able to forgive Barney for having tortured us with the elements for ten hours at this point. Almost. But the rain is picking up, and two-thirds of the audience, having had no idea what to expect when they started this day, have had enough. They go back to the buses to try to regain feeling in their extremities, leaving the rest of us, 50 or so diehards, up there on the platform to witness the culmination of this day in performance-art history.

The orchestra plays at the sidelines. The iron workers dump the remnants of the car into the

THE FILM WAS INSPIRED BY MAILER'S 700-PAGE *ANCIENT EVENINGS*, 1983, SET IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND FEATURING VIOLENT, HYPERSEXUAL GODS

BEPLER'S SCORE FEATURES METAL VIOLINS, A TROMBONE CHORALE, RAP, RENAISSANCE MADRIGALS AND A UKULELE EULOGY

7 THE NUMBER OF ACTS IN THE FILM, IN REFERENCE TO THE SEVEN STAGES OF THE SOUL'S DEPARTURE FROM THE DECEASED BODY IN EGYPTIAN MYTH



DETROIT METAL WORKERS POUR 25 TONS OF LIQUID IRON FROM FIVE TOWERING FURNACES

Conclusion, Second Act, 'KHU'

furnaces. The gold people sling their cymbals. And the diehards wait for the grand finale. But all of us are getting the distinct impression that something should have happened by now. We've been standing up here on this platform for over two hours, and the numbness in our bodies is starting to become painful to the point of total shut-down. And then it happens. Barney releases the first of the furnaces, opening a flood of burning yellow molten iron flowing down its designated path. A sudden blast of heat washes over us and everyone starts literally jumping for joy. We have made it. We have survived Barney's challenge.

A loud voice bellows from behind us: 'You Must Evacuate the Platform Immediately! This Is Not Part of the Show! Your Lives Are in Danger! You Must Leave Now!' He's kidding, right? This is Barney messing with us. Right? Does this man know what we have all endured to get to this point? He can't truly expect us to give up now and go back to the bus. 'I Will Not Say It Again! Evacuate the Platform and Return to the Buses Immediately!' I look down and see that the orchestra is being evacuated from the sidelines. The workers who are not wearing fireproof silver suits have also been evacuated.

Eventually we follow suit. Collectively deflated, we 50 diehards make our way off the platform, down the hill, and into the warmth of the buses. Five minutes later, after the crew has released the other furnaces and allowed the molten iron to find its new home, one of the men jabs a cold tool into a flaming stream. The result is a chemical reaction which causes a pop, and the molten metal spews up through the air, landing on the very platform where we had been standing minutes

before. Had we not left when we did, there is little doubt, some of us would have been killed.

'What happened was there was a crack in the back of one of the furnaces,' explains Barney. 'And it started leaking out. At that point they decided they had to empty that particular furnace earlier. That was the one that was emptied as the audience was being asked to leave. Then there was a big pop, yeah. But it wasn't the kind of explosion that everyone was dreading. So, we were lucky. I was watching monitors as we were performing it and filming it. So I knew that what we were getting was amazing, in that scene.'

'I will say that some of the things that happen in any one of these projects are kind of beyond explainable in terms of serendipity. I consider myself very opportunistic as far as my work as an artist. Any one of these projects has a multitude of relationships within it – that are made for conceptual reasons, for aesthetic reasons, for emotional reasons. And each one of these relationships that gets added to the system makes the system stronger and more autonomous. It's an opportunistic organism. I'm a part of it, but I'm not it. I think we're all a part of it, all of us involved in the making of the work. And there are things that happen in that process that are not explainable. I don't know that I would define it as tapping into a metaphysical space, but I think it does have an undeniably powerful energy, and that keeps me interested in working at this scale. Because there is something about this scale that makes the organism more powerful and more opportunistic and transcendent.'*

Matthew Barney's River of Fundament is on show at MONA, Hobart, Tasmania, until 13 April, mona.net.au