

## River of Fundament: MONA's 'brutally elegant' limit push

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Artist Matthew Barney in a gold coffin in his exhibition *River Of Fundament*, which combines cinema, sculpture, live performance and other mediums. The show is coming to MONA in November.

Source: Supplied

**MONA's next major exhibition has some royally big shoes to fill — and it's already stirring up controversy, more than two months before it opens.**

Current exhibition *The Red Queen* — which featured major commissions, art loans and previously unseen works from MONA owner David Walsh's collection — has been a huge success, attracting about 390,000 visitors since opening on June 19 last year. It officially closes tomorrow.

Patrons from interstate and overseas have accounted for 65 per cent, more than 250,000, of *The Red Queen's* visitors, reaffirming MONA's standing as one of the state's leading tourist attractions.

But it remains to be seen how the public will take to New York multi-discipline artist Matthew Barney's first Australian solo exhibition *River of Fundament*, which opens at MONA on November 22 and runs until April 13 next year.



Barney on a chair after swimming through excrement.

Source: Supplied

Hailed by the *New York Times* in 1999 as “the most important American artist of his generation”, 47-year-old Barney — a former male model who has a daughter with eccentric Icelandic singer Bjork — is perhaps best known for his two film series, *Cremaster* (1994-2002) and *Drawing Restraint* (ongoing since 1987).

In *River of Fundament*, Barney combines narrative sculpture, traditional cinema, live performance, film storyboards and drawings in a “brutally elegant distillation” of his creative process.

Inspired by Norman Mailer’s “unreadable” 1983 novel *Ancient Evenings* — which was itself inspired by the Egyptian “Book of the Dead” — *River of Fundament* is based around a confronting six-hour, sexually graphic film of the same name, made by Barney and his long-term musical collaborator, Berlin-based US composer Jonathan Bepler.





A vulture on lights.

*Source:* Supplied

Described on the artist's website as "an epic story of regeneration and rebirth" set in Los Angeles, Detroit and New York, the film — which includes a scene depicting the artist swimming through a river of excrement — juxtaposes Mailer's story of Egyptian gods and the seven stages of death against the rise and fall of the US automotive industry. It features Hollywood actors Maggie Gyllenhaal, Ellen Burstyn and Paul Giamatti, controversial author Salman Rushdie and singer Debbie Harry; and documentary footage of three live performances filmed over six years.



Artist Matthew Barney. Picture: Ari Marcopoulis

Source: Supplied

MONA curators also worked with Barney — who has won several prestigious art awards including the Venice Biennale’s Aperto prize; the Hugo Boss Award; the Kaiser Ring Award and the San Francisco International Film Festival’s Persistence of Vision Award — to select a number of sculptures, drawings and Egyptian antiquities from Walsh’s collection to feature in the exhibition.

MONA curator Nicole Durling said showing Barney’s work at MONA “was meant to be”.

“Well before the museum was built the ritual narratives in his work resonated with us,” she said.

“*River of Fundament* folds together personal, historic and cultural myths in an epic tale, so the inclusion of select pieces from David’s Egyptian antiquities adds yet another layer — ancient and contemporary — in our tomb-like galleries.”

The *River of Fundament* film screens at Hobart’s Federation Concert Hall on November 21, before the exhibition opens. Barney and Walsh appear In Conversation on stage at the Odeon Theatre on the 22nd.

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