

Matthew Barney: 'My work is not for everyone'

Film-maker Matthew Barney, famous for huge, daring works about everything from whaling ships to dentistry, took seven years to make his latest five-hour epic – and it was almost too obscene for Britain



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Liquid spectacle ... Matthew Barney at his studio in New York. Photograph: Tim Knox

I stand on the dock waiting for Matthew Barney. I have a sniper's view of the UN building, downstream on the far shore of the East River, while the Chrysler Building, which has featured in Barney's films, gleams against the skyline. Doomy, ponderous post-rock music echoes through the cavernous studio behind me, along with drilling and banging where unseen assistants work away. There is no art to be seen, just shipping crates and big, tantalising lumps covered in tarpaulin receding into the gloom.

The studio is at the end of a street in Long Island City, Queens, a place of used car lots, loading bays and anonymous industry. When Barney shows up we retreat to a big table in an upstairs office. Cables snake the floor. There are computers and office dreck. A fit-looking 47, Barney was a footballer and wrestler in college, and later did some catalogue

modelling. Polite and relaxed, he has a dignified air, all containment and reserve. His eyes are intense and lively. I feel the need to convince him that I have seen his new operatic film, River of Fundament, made with the composer Jonathan Bepler. Barney has dedicated years to its development and filming, and has become impatient with journalists interviewing him and reviewing the film without having seen it right through.

Over five hours long, River of Fundament is a liquid spectacle of words and music, mercury and sulphur, molten iron, blood and faeces, polluted industrial rivers in New York and Detroit, a river in Idaho where sockeye salmon go to spawn and die. Rivers of shit run through it. I came out winded, ravished, appalled. "I am asking a lot of the audience, for sure," Barney tells me.



Words and music,

mercury and sulphur ... a scene from River of Fundament.

Based on Norman Mailer's 1982 novel Ancient Evenings, the film conflates Egyptian myth and modern America, the death and reincarnation of the novelist, cars, sex and creativity. River of Fundament has been presented in opera houses in Munich and Adelaide, and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Its British premiere later this month will be at the London Coliseum, home of English National Opera. Reviews, battling with its complexity and often focusing on its more salacious moments, have been mixed. "It's not for everyone," says Barney.

Barney was a success almost as soon as he left Yale in 1989, being given a solo show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1992, and appearing in Documenta 9 and the Whitney Biennial a year later. But it's true that his art never has been for everyone. A sculptor, performance artist and film-maker, Barney often develops his works over years. He began his Drawing Restraint series in 1987, releasing a film, Drawing Restraint 9, set on an Icelandic whaling ship and starring his then partner, Björk, in 2005. Made between 1994 and 2002, Barney's Cremaster films (named after the muscles that control the rise and fall of the testes) were strange, haunting, mythological conundrums, moving from celtic myth and the TT races on the Isle of Man, to scenes in the New York

Guggenheim museum, featuring mafia hitmen, dentistry, Gary Gilmore, and sculptor Richard Serra as a grand masonic master. What unites all Barney's work is its preoccupations with the body, life and death, creativity, belief systems, power and industry.

At the beginning of *River of Fundament*, Norman Mailer, resurrected and daubed with faeces, climbs from the river of shit that runs beneath his apartment to attend his own wake. Sarcophagi gleam among the bookcases and the author's mementos. Salman Rushdie's there, along with Elaine Stritch, Jeffrey Eugenides, Dick Cavett and conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner. Mailer is played by the author's own son, John Buffalo Mailer, with a bubbling colostomy bag beneath his shirt. "Norman was deeply sensitive and full of doubt," says Rushdie, as the revenant writer wanders the room.



Barney's former

partner Björk in *Drawing Restraint 9*. Photograph: Chris Winget

It was Mailer himself who suggested Barney might read his novel, after appearing in the artist's 1999 film *Cremaster 2*, playing the escapologist Harry Houdini. At first, Barney was dubious. Much of Mailer's lengthy novel is extracted from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which itself exists in many variants. "I was trying to navigate the novel," says Barney, "and to pull things from it into my own work. At a certain point I just stopped caring. There is this thing I have with my subject matter, which is about balancing what I love and what I hate in equal parts. I needed to have my name and my way with it. There was an ongoing dialogue about where the line was between respect and disrespect."

It took Mailer 10 years to write his novel. Barney worked on *River of Fundament* for seven. I admit to having been frequently lost in the film, in which Mailer is reincarnated three times (played by three different actors), while his soul is incarnated as three classic American cars: a 1967 Chrysler Imperial, a gold '79 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am and a 2001 Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor. But being lost in Barney's work can be good. I was transfixed. Dressed in gold, the ghost of the late, Detroit-born artist

James Lee Byars (played by Barney) also haunts the film. An errant, theatrical artist Byars' work spanned minimalism, conceptualism and zen. In 1994 Byars, wearing a gold suit, lay down on the floor of a gallery that had been entirely covered in gold leaf, creating the illusion of his own disappearance. It was called *The Death of James Lee Byars*. The artist, who died in Cairo three years later, often described himself as "the world's most famous unknown artist".

"I think Byars had this Egyptian subtext through his work. His roots in Detroit felt important," says Barney. "Ancient Evenings is to do with the ambition of the Pharaoh and the ambition of the nobleman to live again and again and again. So there's something about Byars that has always interested me in his work to do with its ambition to become pure gold and its failure to be pure gold. It's always a veneer. It wants to be something it can't be. And I love that about the work, I love the theatre of it."

Barney wants his work to be read, but not always in a traditional sense. "The way that I deal with narrative isn't exactly linear. Sometimes it involves feeling something, sometimes it involves presence – in the way that sculpture has presence."

Like Joseph Beuys and Byars, Barney creates stories and myths around every aspect of his work. Everything he does – drawing (he's a marvellous draughtsman), sculpture (sometimes utilising frozen Vaseline and "self lubricating" plastics, just as Beuys used lumps of fat), film-making and performance – is interconnected: his own ragbag cosmology. "It's never been the point to balance out these different mediums into a larger work," he says. "It's just what is natural for me."

Reviewing Ancient Evenings, the critic Harold Bloom discussed what he called, quaintly, Mailer's "humbuggery and bumbuggery". Some of this has got into Barney's work (though I'd suggest it was there all along). "I've always been a little bit wary of staging explicit erotic scenes in the past. One of the challenges with the novel is that there are these transformations – scenes where a boar becomes a bear and fucks a cow, and so forth."

There are scenes in *River of Fundament* that are hard to take. A man, his penis smeared in faeces and gold leaf, has anal sex. A woman has sex with a car engine. There is a scene involving two women and a dildo that appears to be made of shit. A man disappears into the belly of a cow. There were some scenes that Barney was advised would be difficult to show in Britain, legally. "Somehow that went away. Funnily enough, it was the scene under the table that caused a lot of discussion. It was about the degree to which an erection can appear on screen." Barney laughs.

The scene occurs during a long, ribald dinner at Mailer's wake. People scrabble about under the table pleasuring the guests. The erection is seen, fleetingly, and cunningly disguised by a lettuce. This is a riff on a scene in *Ancient Evenings*, but translated into

something approaching farce. "Mailer really wanted to be a Hemingway, but does America really need a Hemingway novel at this moment? So I don't think it's about making a *gesamtkunstwerk* so much as taking what I have inherited and working with it."

A chorus of Hemingways appear in the final act of *River of Fundament*. Georges Bataille's *The Story of the Eye* is in there too, as well as WB Yeats, Walt Whitman and William Burroughs. Barney's libretto is crammed with references, to popular culture, art and literature. He also provokes the perversity of our own imaginations. "Mailer describes the Earth as a kind of bleeding entity, that runs together simultaneously with this description of a dying body. That's attractive to me."

Unlike a novelist who might spend 10 years alone in their room, Barney's is a collaborative process. "There is a kind of team spirit that I think has carried over from being involved in sports when I was younger. There's a collaborative spirit." During the years spent developing something like *River of Fundament*, he says, "babies are born, people die. I mean, there are a lot changes. Even when we are in the sculpture studio, it's still run something like a film studio." He clearly likes these long arcs. "It's to do with the way my brain is wired. It's a type of slowness I have with regard to resolving things and connecting the dots. The specifics really come quite late. There is a willingness for the work to develop organically."

Barney was wary of his own, early success. "It felt like things were moving faster than I could keep up with. I was 24 and I didn't really understand what was going on. I made a conscious decision to take something on that I knew would slow everything down. That's how the *Cremaster* series came about."

River of Fundament marks a departure. It is punctuated by astonishing live performances that have the character of rites and rituals – the dismemberment of a car in a Los Angeles showroom, its consignment to a hellish, medieval foundry in Detroit, where it is smelted into iron and cast in the earth, the flooding of a dry dock in New York. Mailer's Brooklyn apartment is hoisted on a raft in Barney's studio and floated down the East River. The smelting scene in Detroit was an eight-hour performance alone, shot in real time.

"We couldn't really afford to rehearse," he says. "The furnace scene in Detroit had to do with setting up a situation that was uncontrollable. Whether it would succeed or fail is subjective." Mailer, too, had a willingness to fail that Barney appreciates. Is he, too, willing to fail? He smiles. "Yeah – as long as it's fantastic!"

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