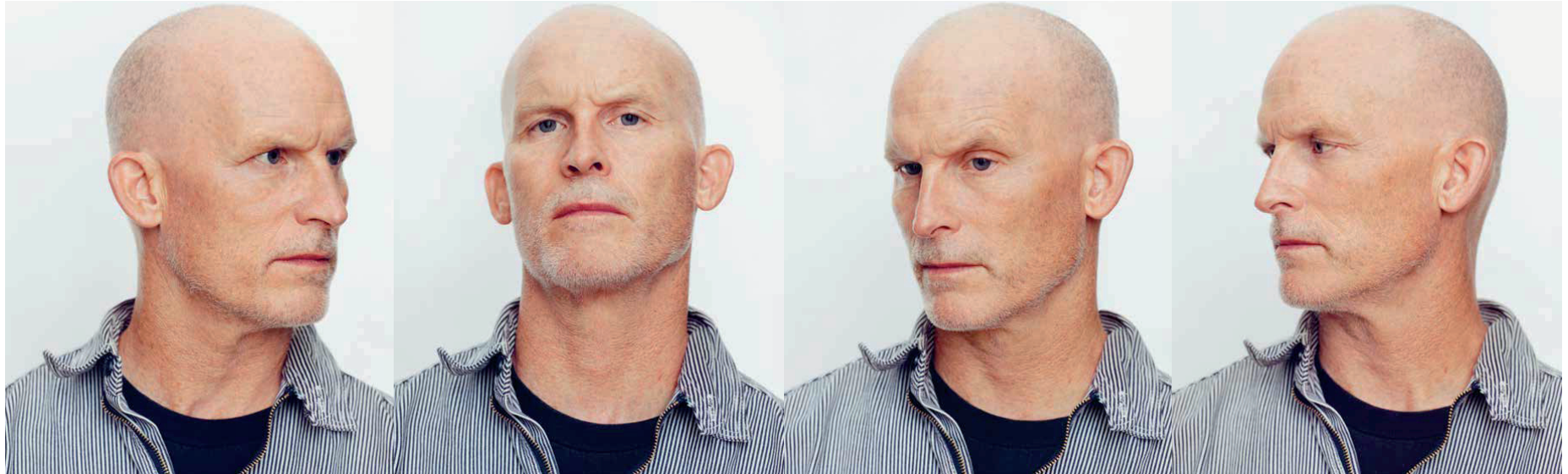


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Koerner von Gustorf, Oliver: Matthew Barney

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MATTHEW BARNNEY

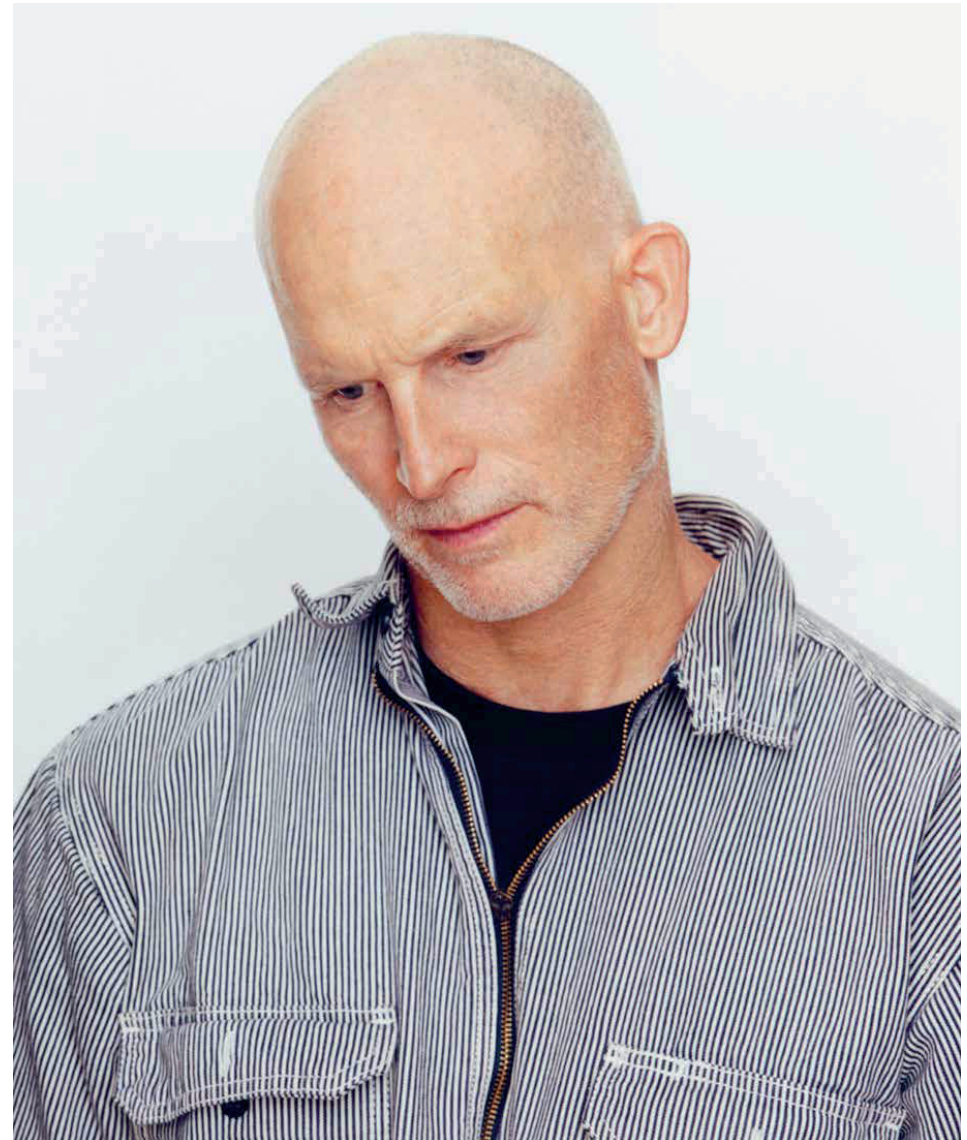
Words
OLIVER KOERNER VON GUSTORF

Photography
ILYA LIPKIN

REVUE

As *Oliver Koerner von Gustorf* writes in this perspicacious portrait, any artist would do more than well to create only *one* of MATTHEW BARNEY's monumental film cycles, not to mention the accompanying shows. With *Redoubt*, the artist is deep into his fourth, still flexing those mythical muscles. On the heels of his Hayward exhibition, he talks about going back to the woods of his childhood, the war around wolves, and the spiritual conflicts at the heart of American life today

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A scarlet circle on the snow. A roe torn apart. Above, clouds loom over snow-covered mountains dotted with thousands of black tree trunks, as if some god inked this charred forest directly on to the cold, barren land. Wolves roam through the undergrowth as rain starts to fall on the thawing heaps of snow. Wrapped in a camo suit that looks like it's made from high-tech snakeskin, Diana, hunter-goddess-marksman, opens her eyes. She senses that something's going to happen, something's coming. Her tent is filled with an arsenal of crossbows, rifles, and pelts. Outside, her servants, the Calling Virgin and the Tracking Virgin, awaken in an enormous treetop hammock. They lie in their sleeping bags as though cocooned, forming an almost erotic unity. Then their arms and legs unfold, like hatching insects—and they rappel to the ground in their white thermal underwear. Not a word is spoken, every movement precisely choreographed. Diana is hyper-attentive too, ramrod straight. Even when she opens a jar of instant coffee and pours some into a saucer, there's a ceremonial aspect to it. While she fills cartridges with powder, her servants blacken their faces with the ashes of the burnt trees. Clearly, they're out for blood.

Watching Matthew Barney's film *Redoubt* (2019) one night, I huddled on the couch, stuffing myself with toffees as panic set in. In a few hours, I'd meet the artist himself. Almost all the recorded Q&As I've seen introduce him as a living legend, one with a direct connection to the postwar modernist Olympus of American geniuses, to heroic men like Rothko, Rauschenberg, and Pollock. At a time when the male-dominated art of the 20th century is being reappraised and the Western canon re-evaluated, Barney seems the resurrection of a forbidden fantasy: a mythical white male artist, athlete, and alchemist—shamanic like Joseph Beuys or James Lee Byars, macho intellectual like Hemingway or Mailer.

In one lifetime, an artist might hope to create at most the equivalent of one of Barney's monumental film cycles, which include performances and equally monumental exhibitions. Since his student days in the 1980s, the artist has completed four mammoth years-long projects: *Drawing Restraint* (1987–present), *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002), *River of Fundament* (2007–14), and now *Redoubt* (2018–21). Everything he touches turns epic. The press kit for the *Redoubt* show at London's Hayward Gallery reads, "The closely interrelated

REDOUBT (still), 2018, 4K video with sound, 134 min

elements of his oeuvre form the parts of a mythological *Gesamtkunstwerk*, addressing questions of life and death, the natural world and industrial transformation, the cosmic and terrestrial." This makes him sound like Nietzsche's Zarathustra come down from the mountain. But I don't know anyone who could walk through Barney's seductive, visually powerful, and also taxing, universe lightheartedly. Seeing the American Amazons in *Redoubt*, I thought that if it were me in this silent, rough prepper world, I wouldn't even be able to get out of my hammock and probably would be dead within the first 10 minutes of the film, fallen from a branch or executed by the Virgins due to my lack of fitness, survival skills, and inability to keep quiet.

The next morning, I run up a narrow staircase as Barney waits for me at Berlin's Galerie Max Hetzler, where he is setting up his exhibition *After Ruby Ridge*, which quasi-completes the *Redoubt* project with drawings and sculptures. Everything is exactly timed. You can sense how coordinated his team is: the studio manager, the technicians—these people have known each other for years. After the opening, Barney will travel to Schaulager at Art Basel to perform, over three evenings, *Catasterism in Three Movements*—a new work featuring dancers

from the film, for which Jonathan Bepler, who has scored Barney's films for years, has written a symphonic composition.

Barney didn't want to have a long conversation. In part, this was because he started working on this film back in 2016. The first showing of *Redoubt*, including the film's premiere, was at the Yale University Art Gallery in 2019, then it moved to UCCA Beijing and, in spring 2021, to the Hayward Gallery. Covid-19 threw a spanner in the works, so Barney has had to repeat the same things over and over. In his striped worker shirt and discreet, gold-rimmed aviators, he looks like one of those carpenters who has moved to the countryside to combine ancient traditions with modern design. He'd be right at home north of Berlin, where I've lived for years, and where there are similar conflicts as in his film.

Redoubt can be seen as a dystopian sci-fi western dealing with the genre's classic questions: who gets to live and who gets to die; disputes over land, borders, and habitat; who belongs where or doesn't. The project was inspired by the political atmosphere in 1980s Idaho. Barney experienced it firsthand as a teenager in Boise, when he was a successful athlete, played football, and never dreamt

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of an art career. At the time, there was a scheme to reintroduce wolves in the area, and it led to bitter debates as conservationists clashed with farmers and hunters. The latter's ferocity was not only based on a fear that wolves might attack elk, red deer, or farm animals, but also on a rejection of "progressive" ecological ideas and on the desire to defend a specifically white culture of hunting and bearing arms. "This idea of bringing the apex predator back into a place where it is absent is controversial," Barney explains. "There are theories that it trickles down and affects ecology by putting

"There is this completely radical argument happening between different factions, and it has nothing to do with wolves. It has to do with ideology"

things back into balance, but I think the controversy is in the idea that once a place is altered, you can't go back to balance—it becomes something else. Though it will be a new situation and probably a better one, it is not about going back to the same situation." Such unpredictability is what leads to conflict. "Suddenly, there is this completely radical argument happening between different factions, and it has nothing to do with wolves. It has to do with ideology. The conflict between these two factions felt like it was just something that really crystallized the essence of that place," Barney tells me. "I mean, it is the way the United States is now. There is such division."

A redoubt is a kind of fort, a military defense structure, but Barney's usage also refers to American Redoubt, the ultra-conservative Christian settler movement founded in 2011. These survivalists called on devout Christians and Orthodox Jews to settle in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming to form "safe havens" for the impending demise of the United States—when the economy and electric power industry collapse and the government declares martial law. The extent to which Barney's

recent work relates to the idea of armed defense and off-the-grid culture is also clear from the title of his Berlin exhibition: Ruby Ridge farm was the site of an 11 day siege between US federal officials and supporters of the Aryan Nations terrorist organization in which several people died.

For his film, Barney returned to the Sawtooth mountains of his Idaho youth. There's still a war going on there over the wolves, which were finally released in the early 2000s. Only 100 were allowed to be shot each year, until the spring of 2021, however, when conservative politicians passed a new law that pursues a 90 percent cull. Of 1,500 wolves, 1,350 are to be killed—a genocide of the population. Barney approaches his overwhelmingly beautiful yet extremely ideological home soil through the myth of Diana and Actaeon, using it as a kind of alchemical vessel for contemporary stories. The fateful encounter between the hunter and the goddess is told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and was immortalized in one of Titian's best-known paintings. Diana lives in the forest with a flock of virgins, and though she is the guardian of the animals, she's also a cultivated predator herself, bearing a bow and arrow. Ovid relates how Actaeon accidentally surprises Diana while she bathes. Furious, she turns the hunter into a deer that's then torn to pieces by his own dogs.

Barney embodies an Actaeon-inspired character as a mixture of artist, bureaucrat, and gamekeeper. The Engraver places metal plates on easels, etching forest and mountain scenes onto them like a plein air painter, but he also collects landscape data and culls animals like a forest ranger. As with Diana, he has an ally. In the interludes between his time in the woods, he brings his copper engravings to a remote trailer that houses a rudimentary laboratory, where the Electroplater subjects them to an electrochemical transformation, causing copper to accrete in a seemingly organic pattern along the plates' etched lines. The Electroplater, again like Diana, appears to be endowed with magical powers: alone in her trailer, she assembles and manipulates a sculptural model of the galaxy centered on the constellation Lupus. Then one day, when the Engraver shoots a mountain lion, he comes into conflict with Diana. The two begin to chase each other and swipe their opponent's prey. As the battle develops, Diana does not make the artist himself into a trophy but shoots his easel instead.

As usual in Barney's films, Diana is not played by an actress, but by an expert: Anette Wächter is a member of the US National Rifle Team, with

Following spread top: BASIN CREEK BURN, 2018, cast and machined brass, cast copper, cast lead, cast polycarbonate, 84 × 1154 × 310 cm
Bottom: ELK CREEK BURN, 2018, lodgipole pane, cast copper, brass, and lead; cast polycarbonate, 99 × 1085 × 267 cm

AMERICAN REDOUBT, 2021, gouache on paper in high-density polyethylene frame, 52 × 43 × 3 cm







VIOLET DIANA, 2021
Gouache on paper in high-density polyethylene frame
44 x 37 x 3 cm

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multiple championship titles and national records under her belt. Wachter, known as “30CalGal” in the gun community, also designs jewelry made from rifle cartridges.

“As a deity, Diana is a bit confusing,” Barney says. “There are paintings of her with piles of dead animals. So, who is this character who essentially kills the thing she holds sacred? I was really interested in exploring that duality. I wanted to think of her as an aspect of land management. I was not only interested in hunting, but in all the ways this landscape is harnessed by human activity, done in this technological aesthetic in which things are kind of overdone, overdesigned. You can see this in some of the sculptures—this aspect that there have to be dozens of ways that things can be adjusted, just because you can, but not because you need to.”

What he means by that becomes clear in the exhibition at Hetzler: the sculptures Barney carved or cast from the burnt and blackened trees from Idaho look like hybrids of nature and technology. *Bore* (2021), a piece cast from copper, brass, and plastic, is reminiscent of a gigantic drill an extinct alien culture might’ve used to take soil samples, but also of the barrel of a telescopic sight. *Bole* (2021), hand-carved by Barney and his assistants, looks like a futuristic anti-aircraft gun, half-grown and half-made, organic, martial, threatening. Tree sculptures like this earned Barney several negative reviews, the *London Review of Books* among them: “His new show at the Hayward opens with an unapologetic display of phallicism. It’s a commitment of long standing.” He loves guns and dicks, it suggested, and he stunt cast a conservative gun fanatic as his leading actress only to provoke. But how does that story line up with someone who allegedly had a clock in his studio counting down the hours until the end of the Trump administration? How does it line up with this humble man kindly listening to me prattle on about his work? Barney’s reluctance to judge, his open stance, and his neutrality are not expressions of arrogance. On the contrary, he’s a man who practices egolessness, acceptance, and radical openness. The only narcissist in the room is me.

The phallic shapes of his futuristically fossilized sculptures give them an erotic aspect. They might be read as fantasies of male omnipotence, but in their petrification, they speak of something else—of what it’s like to make art in a time of extermination, active killing, extinction. There are no explicit sex scenes in the film. Yet on

Barney’s detailed, psychedelically luminous gouaches, framed in high-tech, high-density polyethylene, the forest’s inhabitants indulge in transgressive pleasures: the deer satisfies Diana orally; Actaeon is sexually aroused while his dogs rip him apart; and wolves fuck in the undergrowth, a rifle’s crosshairs on them. Above them shines the Milky Way, or Makoi-Yohsokoyi (Wolf Trail), which according to Blackfoot myths reminds us that these animals, as the first beings on Earth, helped their ancestors to survive.

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I ask Barney about Jung’s archetypes, universally available structures that reside in a collective unconscious like some archaic legacy. They are always patterned the same, regardless of history and culture, even if they appear in different representations. For Jung, alchemy was a kind of proto-psychology. The principle of transmutation—the alchemical connection and refinement of different metals—signifies the passage through various material and mental states, whereby the “philosopher’s stone” embodies the holistic self that psychologically unites male and female aspects. The hermaphrodite represents such wholeness. Barney says Jung’s ideas resonate with him. Indeed, the figures in the artist’s work are reminiscent of symbols from alchemy—for example, the Electroplater’s trailer, a laboratory with crystals, plants, and books on astrology, alchemy, and alternative medicine. I ask how he first encountered that early science.

“It was by way of the body, through my relationship to my body,” he says. “As a young person, I was pretty dedicated to athletics and changing my body and developing it, so I started making art with that experience behind me. I could understand this general proposal of transformation as it exists in art most easily through sports or through my own body, by practicing as a kind of bodyworker. That was



definitely my entry point into art. I didn't think of it in those days as a kind of alchemical process. But eventually, I started learning more about these traditions, like alchemy, Freemasonry, or Jungian philosophy—these ways of thinking that use a physical model of transformation in conversation with a psychological or a spiritual one."

With *Redoubt*, it was important to bring together, or even merge, two things that do not belong together: "It's a reaction, a chemical reaction that requires the contrast, which I think is a basic idea in alchemy. In terms of the characters in the film, rather than trying to make them neat and archetypal, I was definitely interested in creating contradictions, even within a single character." The resulting archetypal figures—the goddess, the artist-hunter, the alchemist and healer—are controversial. The Engraver and his ally in the trailer remind me of some of my neighbors in gentrified Kreuzberg who visit bodywork courses, feminist shamans, yoga classes, and Buddhist and Indian retreats—and, of course, have a second home in the countryside, like me. In times of Covid-19, the upper middle class is moving out of the city and colonizing its environs with eco-friendly cottages, organic

vegetable patches, and general self-sufficiency. The rural population, who shop at cheap supermarkets and lean right politically, are suddenly faced not only with heirloom tomatoes, but with traditions and wisdom they'd supposedly long since forgotten.

The trailer duo in *Redoubt* share a certain bourgeois entitlement. While the film evokes cosmic orders and 19th-century painting, the characters dump their leftover chemicals into hazardous-waste bins and wear hobbit-like, but still high-quality, camo on their hunt. Diana and her helpers, on the other hand, appear like sturdy preppers or rural women who are totally allergic to anything foreign to "their land." Of course, this is all about ideology and class

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REDDOUBT (still), 2018, 4K video with sound, 134 min

struggle. Each of *Redoubt's* characters embodies the search for order and control, a quest for which they're willing to kill. Again and again, the dancers perform diagonal movements, as if wanting to connect earth and sky. Yet the film ends with the destruction of this futile experiment. During a solar eclipse, while the Electroplater performs her dance rituals, a pack of wolves dismantles her alchemical laboratory. The emerging chaos is the film's first truly magical moment, ushering in an unpredictable new era.

"In America, there is this kind of underlying truth that all of the land was taken away so explicitly from the start," Barney explains. "So if somebody performs a supposedly God-given right, it is undermined by the fact that the land was stolen in the first place. It is complicated, that land rights question, obviously." This is exactly what his film is about. He describes it as "the most naturalistic piece I ever made." *Redoubt* concerns how settler colonialism has shaped land management and conservation. When we talk about wildlife sanctuaries, we usually mean areas kept in a pristine, natural state where people are not allowed to live. This is a "no man's land" left to its own devices. There is a correspondence here with the legal

principle of *terra nullius* that European settlers used to conquer the continent between the 16th and 18th centuries. By defining land as wild or uncultivated, the colonial powers justified their appropriating it—even if Native Americans already lived off the land and cultivated it to their needs.

Redoubt's sublime landscape shots are not influenced by the paintings of Albert Bierstadt and the Hudson River School for nothing, artists who studied at the Düsseldorf Academy in the 19th century then painted the New World in the US. "The state sent the painters out to the West to paint and idealize it, and to then bring it back to the East Coast," says Barney. "They would present these landscapes almost like in a proscenium. There would be an event to which people would be brought, and the scenery would be unveiled behind a curtain as a promised land. It was basically commissioned by real estate speculators who were trying to convince people to move West. Those paintings had a cinematic quality to them." With astonishing clarity, Barney's film shows the present-day consequences of this romantic ideology: the colonial exploitation and destruction of landscapes, animals, people, cultures.

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There is one scene that is often criticized. In a town, the Engraver watches a Native hoop dancer. Alone in an empty American Legion hall heavily decorated with military paraphernalia, she rehearses a choreography in which her colorful hoops gradually form a cosmic model that parallels that of the Electroplater—implying an unseen energy that unites the characters across time and space. While the film's white characters hunt outside in the landscape or carry out rituals shaped by Native myths, she is more or less enclosed, like an exhibition piece.

“The state sent the painters out to the West to paint and idealize it, and to then bring it back to the East Coast. They would present these landscapes almost like in a proscenium”

I ask Barney why everyone in his film has to be so isolated, why community seems impossible. “The isolation of the characters, also of the Hoop Dancer, has to do with this kind of idea in the portraiture of this place,” he replies. “If you grow up in an area like that, the reservation system is a part of your reality. You see the cruelty of the Native American reservation not only as a concept, but as a reality, and of course there are reservations all over the place. There are very beautiful things happening on reservations—the way the culture is being carried forward is inspiring—but the reservations themselves are brutal.” At that moment, I realize that the whole *Redoubt* project isn't about mystical storytelling, but about a different kind of topography, a new, materialist way of getting closer to the world. To put it in the terms of the science historian and feminist Donna Haraway, *Redoubt* is not a “made-up” but a “made” narrative.

Barney combines ancient practices with the materialist posthuman thinking that dominates

discourse today. His films are like an alchemical version of Beuys's social sculpture. The actual achievement is not just the works themselves, but the process of their production. Barney treats his characters, actors, and landscapes with full respect to their physical and psychological powers, as though alloying different metals. In doing so, he sets up very precise experimental arrangements using myths as vessels into which he implants performances, dance, interactions, people from totally different backgrounds—all without pre-determining the outcome.

There is a touching scene in *Redoubt* in which Diana, or the markswoman Anette Wachter, shoots a wolf. Held by her servants, she mourns this death as complexly as probably no professional actress could. Her face shows real pain, the realization that the loss of animals, of entire animal populations, is real, final, and that she bears responsibility for it. Meanwhile, one of the virgins moves her hands over her head to form antlers, perhaps as a symbol for the hunt or as a reminder that there's a kind of kinship here, that the world we live in is not only human, that all species depend on each other and share a single history, including a colonial one. During the ritual, Wachter spits a honey-like liquid into her rifle barrel that begins to bubble like the copper plates in the electroplating bath. You can sense that she's also changing, softening, opening up.

Instead of proving a thesis or generating universally valid solutions, Matthew Barney creates complex connections that entangle everything—people, landscapes, power relations. And, indeed, he deliberately doesn't try to untangle them. Colonialism means that one system of knowledge overturns and displaces another. In *Redoubt*, there is no such duality between researcher and subject. Everybody in the zone becomes a player and is transformed by their engagement, so that one knowledge system does not dominate another, does not transform into mere tradition or folklore. *Redoubt* can be read as a portrait of the divided American society in the Trump era. But you can also take it as an invitation to look for other materialist or alchemical forms of experience and knowledge, to engage with the legacy of our ancestors, be they Native myth or colonial ideology. Not to come to terms with our past, but perhaps to save our future. In Haraway's words, we have to remember that “the sky has not fallen—yet.”

BLIFE NOCTURNE, 2021
Graphic and gouache on paper in high-density polystyrene frame
44 x 37 x 3 cm

