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The artist's new film is visually spectacular but with a current of politics underneath

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Matthew Barney, *Redoubt* (2018), production still © Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, and Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Matthew Barney ventures deep into the mountains of the American West in his solemn new film *Redoubt*, now playing at New York's Film Forum, which retells the ancient legend of Diana and Acteon as a contemporary ballet with wolves and weapons in the snow. As tactile as his earlier works, and structured as a series of hunts at high elevation, the hypnotic film's absence of dialogue makes it feel all the more like a parable—and sometimes an inscrutable one.

In the myth, Acteon was a hunter who surprised Diana and her nymphs as they were bathing. The offended goddess transformed the young man into a stag, and he was pursued and torn to death by his own dogs as punishment. He was a favourite subject of ancient sculptors and of painters since the Renaissance, as well as classical composers and choreographers. Barney brings us his version of the Acteon myth in the snow of the northern wilds of America, with costumes of full camouflage.

Filming in the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho, which he grew up near, Barney presents a world where dangerous animals share the landscape with a few humans. One is the lithe long-range sharpshooter Anette Wachter, who portrays Diana. She lives in a tent and roams the territory carrying a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight. Two other women, identified in the credits as nymphs, bathe in the river waters and perform a *pas de deux* in the wilderness.

There is also a white-bearded Engraver, played by Barney, who works for the US Forest Service. We follow him as he encounters the mauled remains of animals, and later, accompanied by a pack of dogs, hunts down and shoots a mountain lion.

But Barney twists the myth around a little. The Engraver, a symbol of the despised federal government, leaves his shelter, a studio in the woods, not just to kill a predator, but to create images. He carries a copper plate to make etchings, and his focus is Diana. The goddess still chafes at being seen, and seizing her rifle, she fires on the copper plate. Eventually, she calls on a pack of wolves to punish the Engraver's misdeed.

The mountain location, captured by the cinematographer Peter Strietmann, creates a spectacular visual frame for this myth; the political frame is more problematic.

The term "American Redoubt" refers to a movement by Right-leaning and Extreme Right libertarians to relocate to the northern region where Barney shot his film. The film *Redoubt* suggests the occupation of this territory and Anette Wachter's tight camouflaged bodysuit is a variant on the garb of actual Idaho survivalists. Wachter, a member of the US National Rifle Team, can be found asserting her love for guns on the National Rifle Association's website and proudly boasts the nickname "30 Cal Gal" (after the caliber of her rifle ammunition) on her personal blog. Such views do not usually mesh with the often liberal audience for contemporary art.

Yet Barney's world is anything but binary. A graceful Native Cree hoop dance, by Sandra Lamouche, in an American Legion Hall, introduces the idea of a land that is reoccupied by Indigenous peoples and their cultures.

Sometimes the film's pace, more deliberate than musical, makes even leaden motions seem choreographed. It gives *Redoubt* the feel of a tableau vivant or an album of outdoor photography. All these elements are enough to confound many viewers and the public may be so taken with the film's aesthetic adventures they will not notice the politics underneath.

• *Redoubt* [↗](#), directed by Matthew Barney, 134min, Film Forum, New York, until 12 November. Works by Barney related to the film are currently on show at Gladstone 64 in the exhibition *Embrasure* [↗](#), until 21 December.