

Artforum

Taft, Catherine: Survivor Syndrome

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# SURVIVOR SYNDROME

CATHERINE TAFT ON MATTHEW BARNEY'S NEW WORK



Matthew Barney, *Redoubt*, 2018, 4K video, color, sound, 134 minutes 3 seconds.

**DIANA—ROMAN GODDESS** of the hunt, fertility, and childbirth—swore never to marry. Neither wife nor mother, she was a celibate separatist living in a forest with a band of virgin maidens. Among the animals in her care were the bear, the boar, the goat, the stag, and packs of wild dogs. She herself was a predatory animal, armed with bow and arrow, breast exposed to facilitate a smooth shot. Diana swiftly punished transgressors of her law, a code that

maintained the delicate balance between humans and wildlife. She famously disciplined the hunter Actaeon when he stumbled on the goddess and her nymphs bathing, turning him into a stag to be pursued and devoured by his own hounds. In the space of her forest, Diana was a goddess without mercy.

On the website NRAWomen.tv, sponsored by Smith & Wesson, US National Rifle Team sharpshooter Anette Wachter teaches shooting technique, explains the proper use of a bipod, provides tips for reading the wind, and suggests that you mark your weapon with nail polish to differentiate it on a storage rack. Wachter is the first American woman to win the British Columbia Precision Rifle Championship, and she holds the NRA three-hundred-yard civilian national record, though she unofficially broke the record at five hundred yards as well. On her blog, 30CalGal, Wachter shares her victories, publishes reports on Second Amendment issues, and sells jewelry made from .308 Winchester rifle cartridges.

Wachter is also, now, an actor: She plays a present-day Diana in Matthew Barney's latest film, *Redoubt*, 2018. Transposing the Diana myth onto a hunting party in the Northern Rockies, Barney paints a cinematic picture of the American West, trading his familiar baroque visuals for the straightforward sublimity of the landscape and the ineffable strangeness of its inhabitants. The film, a component of a larger project dated 2016–19, is a portrait of central Idaho, shot in the Sawtooth Range, east of Boise, where Barney lived from age six until college. The region has long been a touchstone for his work: Think of the synchronized chorus girls arrayed at Boise's Bronco Stadium in *Cremaster 1*, 1995; the death-row rodeo shot on northern Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats in *Cremaster 2*, 1999; the grand panning shots of Idaho's Snake and Salmon Rivers in *River of Fundament*, 2014. The Northern Rockies—jagged granite peaks in white, purple, and gray—evoke awe and unease. To come of age here is to understand one's own smallness against such ancient, unmoving architecture, and Barney's film surveys this psychological territory with disquieting naturalism.

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*Redoubt* is structured as a series of six hunts, following Wachter/Diana and her two virgins—Eleanor Bauer, who also choreographed much of the film, and dancer and aerialist Laura Stokes—as they pursue and kill a gray wolf. Barney plays an Actaeon-like figure, the Engraver, who appears as a US Forest Service worker. Frosty-bearded and uniformed, he gathers data from the snowpack, silently interacts with the locals, and etches alpine vistas onto copper plates. In a riverside trailer, an Electroplater (dancer and choreographer K. J. Holmes) maps the cosmos in cardboard and wire and helps the Engraver immerse his etchings in chemical baths. Diana happens on the Engraver hunting a mountain lion, and later stalks and punishes him by shooting and scarring one of his metal drawings. The film culminates with Diana killing a wolf, the Engraver skinning it, and a wolf pack destroying the Electroplater’s trailer during a solar eclipse, in a scene shot in the path of totality in August 2017.

**REDOUBT** is a pronounced departure from the labyrinthine narrative, bravado, and spectacle that characterize Barney’s “Cremaster” cycle, 1994–2002, and *River of Fundament*.

“Cremaster”—a visually splendid exploration of sexual differentiation titled after the muscle that controls testicular contractions—both enthralled and provoked audiences with its polished artificiality, operatic grandeur, and masculine, psychosexual posturing. The work had a slippery if sterile eroticism and an obsession with bodily fluids that seems indissociable from the growing public awareness of aids and the Clinton administration’s promotion of sex education. “In formal terms, it was also in tune with a younger generation’s new priorities,” wrote Michael Kimmelman in a 1999 *New York Times Magazine* profile. “One upshot of that earnest, early—90’s conceptual art about diversity politics and gender identity was the belief that every artist had a story to tell, the more eccentric and individual the better.”

As part of his explorations of his white-male identity, Barney has long enjoyed dislodging dominant but arbitrary configurations of gender, especially those that relegate the cis man to default penetrator. This is particularly obvious in early works such as the *OTTO Trilogy*, 1991–92, the artist’s first artistic cycle and his gallery debut. Homosocial, locker-room-style playfulness is juxtaposed with “transgressive” signs: anal fixations, hormonal secretions,

specula and mouth guards suggestively offering orifices. Barney and his mother appear in drag. The work is a test of the body's permeability, and no one emerges whole. As Maggie Nelson puts it, "One of the great innovations of [Barney's] early work—and perhaps, to some, one of its sins—lies precisely in its disinterest in the aforementioned models of penetrability, and its construction of alternate visual and narrative systems by which the porous body might differently mean."

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Barney's engagement with gender has continued throughout his career, and it takes center stage in *Redoubt*. The film forgoes all dialogue, unfolding largely through controlled dance sequences alongside displays of Wachter's firearm technique, Barney's plein air sketching, and *Blue Planet*-esque footage of wild animals. There are also a number of slow zooms into bloody carrion in the snow—vaguely menstrual pieces of carnage punctuating the fragility of survival in this place through contained, natural abjection. Set to a minimal score by Jonathan Bepler, a frequent Barney collaborator, dance is central to the work. Bauer and Stokes translate the athleticism and stamina established in Barney's ongoing *Drawing Restraint*, 1987–, into physically demanding and sometimes dangerous outdoor situations: Stokes performs aerial maneuvers from a giant pine during a snowstorm and balletically steps over logs and through thigh-high snowdrifts; Bauer scales a towering, charred tree, rigging and suspending herself from brittle branches; the women torque their bodies around a fire pit at night in below-freezing temperatures. Their physical relationship is intimate, even erotic. They lithely fold against each other while they sleep in a hammock hung high in the canopy. One floats the other on the surface of a natural hot spring, muscles and curves showing through wet long johns. There are elements clearly inspired by contact improvisation—a mode of movement partnering originated in the early '70s by Steve Paxton that puts pressure on dance's conventional gender roles—as when they hike uphill, taking turns falling sideways onto each other, each supporting the other's weight and momentarily sharing a center of gravity. (Holmes, who is a full generation older than the other dancers, is a renowned contact-improv instructor.) The commingling of bodies, their slow gesticulations and profound athleticism, suggests a relationship with the landscape marked by endurance and friction, the patience of the hunt and the hostility of the kill.

While the feminine is all over *Redoubt*, the film refuses to essentialize the relationship between gender and the land, pushing against prosaic associations such as “female” nature at odds with conquering frontier men. Diana’s triad are a self-possessed matriarchy outfitted, for survival and kill, with the accessories of sport and the military-industrial complex. Diana’s earth-tone camouflage is a digital snakeskin design produced by Kryptek, a company whose products have passed laser-retinal-tracking tests performed by the Department of Defense. The trio bring to mind preppers, survivalists, and “sovereign citizens,” anti-government crusaders who are prime consumers of combat-grade tactical goods. Here, they are the protectors and stalkers of animals. Defense and offense. Diana embodies such contradictions, enacting a feminized law and order with weapons of the patriarchy while offering an alternative husbandry of the land to that of phallogentric, predatory heterosexuality.

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Diana’s sexuality presents another paradox: The film prioritizes female pleasure, a feat still rare in art made by men, yet that pleasure is bound up with the clichés of guns and hunting—anticipation, pursuit, discharge, penetration, satisfaction, i.e., the kill as climax. On shooting the wolf, Diana and her virgins perform an exquisite ceremony that evinces the complex emotions surrounding the event. The scene is full-on female ejaculation: Waterfalls gush downhill; Diana is almost panting, spent and melancholy, her pleasure colored by empathy, loss, pain. She spits a honey-like goo into the barrel of her rifle; then one virgin dismantles the gun, writhes on the ground with the remaining assembly, and positions it between her raised legs; the other virgin plunges a lock of the goddess’s hair down the barrel as liquid bubbles out. The gun’s camo coating puckers and wrinkles like a skin. If it were a yonic symbol, it might look like this: a fleshy, gushing hole.

In a brief scene, roughly two-thirds of the way into the film, Barney introduces a fifth woman, Sandra Lamouche, a hoop dancer of the Bigstone Cree Nation. An inhabitant of a small mountain town (Challis, Idaho), she’s depicted apart from the other main characters, alone in an antique American Legion hall decorated with American flags and the regalia of military divisions, framed ephemera, plaques, and a vintage photo of a nonwhite American soldier in uniform. Lamouche, wearing beaded boots and a hoodie over traditional dress, shares a silent glance with Barney, who peers through the hall’s open door en route to a dingy little bar. She slowly prepares, wrapping her hoops with colored tape and arranging them across the floor.

When she is ready to dance, she puts on headphones, starts music on her iPhone, and taps out the beat that begins to move her. Her dance is precise and rhythmic as we hear Bepler's score swell, and the camera cuts back to Bauer's dramatic scaling of the burnt tree in the forest.

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Barney obscures the beat, the context, that moves Lamouche, perhaps echoing the audience's distance from the indigenous traditions those represent. Her posture at the end of her dance and the motions performed by the Electroplater at the beginning and end of the film mimic the Engraver's almost Symbolist drawing of a nude woman extending her hands from ground to sky, an etching that appears repeatedly in the story. That these women might appear as a metaphor for artmaking (or art itself) lapses into uncomfortable tropes. And then there is the non-conversation about race. In the case of Lamouche, the best we can hope for is that her presence be some recognition of the perpetual erasure of marginalized people's creative labor. Lamouche is contained within the hall, relegated to rehearsing her art. She is detached, a mirror for a story not fully her own.



Matthew Barney, *Virgins*, 2018, brass, copper, 10' 3" × 20' 7 1/2" × 9' 5 1/2".

**DESPITE ITS SURREAL** choreographies and constructions, *Redoubt* approaches a realism seemingly out of character for Barney. At its core, the film is about the land and its settlers, but there is a subdued and imprecise darkness that threatens to pierce this world. It has something to do with the specificity of “Trump’s America”: the weakening of gun laws as high-fatality mass shootings increase; continued unemployment in rural communities coupled with cuts to the US Department of Agriculture and social-service funding; the reduction of federal land protections and the elimination of national monuments in the interest of Big Energy; the reversal of prohibitions against killing bear cubs and wolf pups in their dens; the historical and continued systematic disenfranchisement of indigenous people; the mass confrontation of abuse of power and sexual misconduct; global warming’s hand in the proliferation of forest fires; diminished North American biodiversity. The list goes on.

Barney explicitly addresses the American romance with the gun—as aesthetic machine, potent weapon, and symbol of fierce individualism—in four new monumental sculptures. Building on the water-casting methods he developed for *River of Fundament*, the artist brought felled trees, scorched by an Idaho wildfire, to a foundry, where he removed their cores and filled them with molten metal, burning the exterior wood and creating an interior cast. In a new approach for the artist, he also fused these forms to digitally produced representational elements—such as the rim of a bullet casing, cushioned shooting rests, a brassy rifle tripod, and a kind of crude sight line. The result is antique and dreamy, twentieth-century tools coupling with flora and minerals to beget troubled things. Barney based *Virgins*, 2018, for example, on the contact improvisation of the women falling onto each other: A cast-copper tree with root ball attached lies over another tree in brass, the two twenty-foot-long objects propped up at an angle. In formal equilibrium, each of the trees seems to shed a skin, bark becoming classical drapery.



Matthew Barney, *Slug*, 2018, lead, copper, bronze, 27 × 32 × 28".

Not unlike Barney's early sculptures, which transformed sports equipment into fetish objects, these works dissect and protract the mechanics of modern weaponry without subsuming the nature of their source materials. In proximity to the film—with its vistas redolent of the landscape paintings of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole—the shapes seem ideologically driven, creeping toward some old-fashioned romanticism of the West only to reel back into a hyperpresent America branded by right-wing authoritarianism.

Indeed, although Barney started the project well before Trump's election, it is impossible to avoid reading it against the snowballing disasters of the current administration, particularly the emboldening of white nationalists, concentrations of whom live in the Northern Rockies. Barney explains that he selected the title, *Redoubt*—meaning a military fortress or defense system—in part after the American Redoubt, a survivalist movement founded in 2011 that identifies Idaho and its surrounding states as safe havens for libertarian and conservative Christians and Jews prepping for rapture-style religious warfare. The movement uses the rhetoric of patriotism, liberty, and sustainability to mask its extremist, racist, anti-urban,



doomsday views. Not surprisingly, this is much the same language espoused by Second Amendment activists, which, for all its bellicosity, can also lapse paradoxically into expressions of care. Barney presents an American land seemingly in need of care, even as its sublime peaks create a natural fortress and its commander is a goddess with a small artillery. The NRA Women website features an interview with Wachter, Barney's future Diana. Regarding her firearms, she says: "Take care of them. They will take care of you."

*"Matthew Barney: Redoubt," curated by Pamela Franks, is on view at Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, March 1 through June 16; travels to UCCA, Beijing, September 28–December 15; Hayward Gallery, London, March 4–May 10, 2020.*

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