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Mahdawi, Arwa: 'Stress and failure': Matthew Barney on his film about the sports accident that traumatised America  
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## 'Stress and failure': Matthew Barney on his film about the sports accident that traumatised America

Arwa Mahdawi

The superstar of the avant garde has revisited a notorious football tackle that left one player paralysed. He talks about violence, ageing and how the US empire is in decline



**T**here aren't many people in the world who could produce a literal river of excrement and be hailed as a genius. But Matthew Barney, the 57-year-old US artist whose maximalist work often features sex, violence, testicles and shit, is one of them. The New York Times, back in 1999, called the sculptor, filmmaker and performer "the most important artist of his generation". The Guardian's Jonathan Jones has described The Cremaster Cycle, Barney's most famous work, as one of the most "brilliant achievements in the history of avant-garde cinema". Kanye West, more recently, called Barney his "Jesus".

When I arrive at Barney's New York studio on a grey spring day, the first thing I see isn't the son of God but a snake. Or rather, a snakeskin - the creature itself is hiding in its tank. Its name is Hardeen, Barney tells me, after Harry Houdini's brother. It is not a pet. The snake made an appearance in Barney's 2014 film *River of Fundament*, a six-hour opera loosely based on Norman Mailer's rewrite of the Egyptian book of the dead. It features Mailer's spirits, in various incarnations, crossing a river of sewage. "Hardeen," Barney jokes, "is a retired actor."

▲▲ *I'm interested in taking my work out into spaces that aren't necessarily safe*

Barney, who is dressed in a black hoodie and baseball cap, is not your solitary artist, toiling away silently. His pieces are always productions, involving vast casts including big names such as Maggie Gyllenhaal, Salman Rushdie and Paul Giamatti. There are more than 100 people listed in the credits for his latest work, *Secondary*, a mesmerising five-channel video installation that re-enacts a famous accident in US football. Today, almost two dozen people are busy at work in the Long Island City studio, the place humming as they finalise the sculptures accompanying *Secondary*. We pass what look like sandbags, Olympic weights and barbells - symbols of strength, all fashioned out of fragile terracotta.



📷 'My art is very in the world' ... Barney in his studio. Photograph: Julieta Cervantes/© Matthew Barney courtesy the Artist, Gladstone Gallery, Sadie Coles HQ, Regen Projects, and Galerie Max Hetzler

"Embracing ceramic is new to me," Barney explains as we linger over a weightlifting rack dotted with welds. "But embracing a material that has a tendency to fail is not. I've made large works from petroleum jelly, for example, that couldn't hold themselves up. It's [a quality] I've been interested in for a long time. I think there's a way that ceramic connects to a really old tradition of expressing stress and failure that's really specific to the material."

After the studio tour, my rapport with Barney gradually develops its own stress fractures. The softly-spoken artist is in his element discussing craftsmanship. But when we sit upstairs - he chooses a seat quite a distance from me - and I nudge the conversation towards the broader cultural themes in his work, he becomes uncomfortable. Barney doesn't seem to like being under a spotlight, despite choosing to perform in his films, often in the nude, and despite an early career as a model. After pre-med at Yale (he originally wanted to be a plastic surgeon), he briefly supported his art by doing catalogue work for the [likes of J Crew](#), posing in preppy shirts and tennis gear.

"I learned a lot about image-making," Barney says of those days. "And I also learned about how flexible my own identity could be within that image. In a certain way, it was a training ground for some of the moving-image work I did. I also think it was something I couldn't have done any longer than I did. It started to feel like it was using up something in me, representing a value system that I didn't necessarily believe in." What was it, exactly, he didn't believe in? Tennis? Chinos? The all-American masculinity of J Crew? Barney shrugs: "Whatever it is."



📷 'A material that has a tendency to fail' ... Power Rack Stack (2024). Photograph: David Regen/© Matthew Barney. Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, Sadie Coles HQ, Regen Projects, and Galerie Max Hetzler.

On the surface, Barney seems to fit neatly within the prevailing value system. Born in the American heartland, he's a former high-school quarterback who graduated from the Ivy League and found almost immediate success in the New York art world. Yet his art often deals with freaks and filth. Does he think of himself as an insider or an outsider?

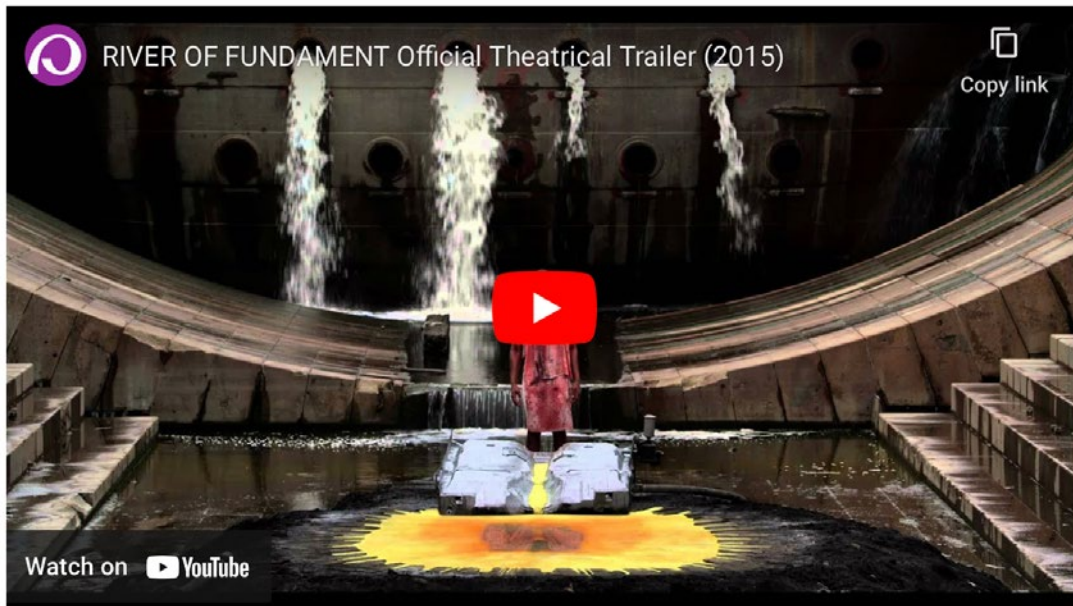
"One of the things that's unusual about my art is that it's very in the world, in terms of the making of it," Barney answers in his characteristically roundabout manner. "The way that communities are brought together in the making of the work. They're often coming from a place that doesn't have any connection to the cultural world. I'm thinking of working in environments like the Salt Flats in Utah and industrial locations in Detroit. There are also specialists who come into the work who don't really have art backgrounds at all. I'm interested in the risk of taking my work out into spaces that aren't necessarily safe."

### ■ *Masculinity has certainly been a fertile subject for me*

Secondary, which was shot at Barney's former studio a few blocks away, takes place on the decidedly unsafe space of an imaginary football field. The 60-minute film re-enacts the moment in 1978 when Jack Tatum, of the Oakland Raiders, barrelled into Darryl Stingley of the New England Patriots, with so much force that Stingley was left paralysed. The violent collision was played repeatedly on TV, leaving a lasting impression on 11-year-old Barney, who had just started playing football seriously. Far from putting him off, the violence drew him in.

Tatum and Stingley were young men in 1978. In Secondary, Barney, who plays the role of Raiders quarterback Ken Stabler, casts men in their 50s and 60s. The fragility of the ceramic sculptures accompanying the video installation, he notes, intertwine with the way age and memory function in the film. "It's an event I have a very particular memory of," Barney explains. "And I think there's a collective memory of that event, at least within a certain group of people. Given the mythological aspect of some of that, it was an easy thing to then translate to performers who had older bodies and could work with memory as an aspect of the piece."

The mythology within Secondary stretches back to America's creation stories. "I've been thinking about the way frontier paintings operated," Barney explains. "These grand paintings of the western United States were used as a tool to get people to move west. You have these caricatures of 'cowboys' and 'Indians', where the subject comes closer and closer, and then at a certain point it becomes frontal. It's coming right at you. And those American west paintings, those more frontal [Remington paintings](#) of charging horses, galvanised a kind of American myth that has carried forward into the violence of a game like football."



■◀ 'The work taps into a really specific cross-section of masculinity' ... a trailer for Barney's River of Fundament (2015).

That violence is inherently linked to masculinity: a constant theme in Barney's work. The sports field, the athleticism, the elaborate rituals of football: Secondary seems to boil traditional notions of American masculinity down to their sweaty essence. And yet the older bodies seem to suggest that perhaps that model of masculinity has reached its expiry date.

Barney doesn't seem convinced. "Well, masculinity has certainly been a fertile subject for me," he says. "A piece like River of Fundament, for example, where the work taps into a specific cross-section of masculinity - the character of Norman Mailer being a rather pure version of that. It helped create many different counterpoints for me, to have an archetype that's really strong placed in the work. But I think it's still easy to find masculine archetypes in today's culture. Yes, things have changed and there are many more archetypes as culture has become more complex. And so I feel like my palate has grown in that sense." He wouldn't say, then, that there is a crisis of masculinity? Well, he laughs, "there's a crisis of just about everything."

Barney does not like talking about politics, but it is a matter of public record that he is no fan of the former president. After Donald Trump's inauguration, Barney collaborated on an art installation in which the same [countdown clock](#) that features in Secondary was placed above New York's East River and ticked off the minutes until the Trump presidency ended. Is Barney worried about what November will bring?



📷 Back Judge (2024), colour pencil, graphite and gouache on paper. Photograph: David Regen/© Matthew Barney. Courtesy the Artist, Gladstone Gallery, Sadie Coles HQ, Regen Projects, and Galerie Max Hetzler.

“I’m certainly concerned,” he replies. “I grew up in Idaho, which already had extreme division in its politics. So in that sense, it isn’t a new condition. I think that you can track it back to more isolated communities in the US. So I am both not surprised by it, but horrified by it. I don’t want to see it get worse.”

Still, he seems somewhat resigned to the inevitability of decline. We are surrounded by storyboards from *Secondary* - which is named after the term for the last line of defence in American football - and Barney gestures over my shoulder. “I mean, there’s a reason why, on that panel behind you, there’s an image of the Roman Colosseum. I think it remains to be seen what America’s version of the fall from grace looks like. But I think we’re within that.”

While America's mythology may be unravelling, Barney keeps his own abstruse personal mythology carefully guarded. Does he ever, I ask, want to make his art more accessible? You can't easily view his films. You have to wait for them to be shown at a film festival or know someone who might have dropped \$100,000 for a limited DVD. Would he ever make his work available on streaming platforms?

He bristles. "I kind of feel like my work has been made far more accessible than a lot of other artists working in moving image," he says. As for streaming, he tried it during the pandemic and the experiment ended there. "I don't find it particularly satisfying to imagine somebody watching on a laptop."

As I leave the studio, I stop to try to find the elusive Hardeen. But he's still hiding: all I can see is his discarded skin.