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MOVIES

Review: Matthew Barney takes to nature to ask his big questions in 'Redoubt'



A scene from the movie "Redoubt." (Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels, and Sadie Coles HQ, London)

By ROBERT ABELE

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What does multimedia artist Matthew Barney in low-key mode look like? Maybe after spending a decade on an elaborately warped, genre-bending five-film series (the epic ["Cremaster"](#) cycle), and later a nearly six-hour, controversial opus of sewage, sex and sound (["River of Fundament"](#)), scaling back is only natural.

And nature — in its bigness and its intimacy — is just where provocateur Barney decamped to make "Redoubt," a relatively benign (in head-scratching matters), picturesque wilderness meditation that reimagines Ovid's tale of Diana, goddess of the hunt, in Idaho's staggeringly beautiful [Sawtooth Mountains](#) by way of camo, choreography and high-powered weaponry. Barney is still in the playground of the big themes that have always taken pride of place in his work: birth, death, rebirth, creativity and landscape. But in the more unadorned and recognizably breathtaking setting of sky, stars, snow and trees, his concerns have the opportunity to whisper to us their truths, rather than shock us into submission as his art usually prefers to do.

A less-hermetic Matthew Barney is, it turns out, a less willfully obtuse Matthew Barney, which might even make some longtime admirers sense a mellowing of tone in the vista-laden passages and hushed wildlife footage that could double for the kind of soothing outdoor-porn video wallpaper one finds in a waiting room. But there is definitely rumination at work in “Redoubt” on humanity’s engagement with what it didn’t (and did) create, be it through art-making and alchemy or the rituals of hunting, and the effect is to reclaim what’s sublime and ingrained about both even after technology has taken over.

In the wintry, dialogue-free scenario Barney has devised, and that’s broken into six hunts, Diana (world champion sharpshooter Anette Wachter) lives stoically in a tent with her rifles, gear and camouflage — the right-wing survivalist vibe is unmistakable. Each day, she makes her way out into the snow-drenched, mountainous terrain in search of the ultimate prey, the wolf. In tow are a pair of female helpers who sleep outside in a raised hammock, and whose arch, modern-dance movements and gestures suggest animal trainees — in the credits they’re listed as Calling Virgin (Eleanor Bauer) and Tracking Virgin (Laura Stokes).

Meanwhile, a figure called the Engraver (Barney), who drives around in a Forest Services truck, studies the actions of this trio of hunters from a distance. After carving representational scenes of what he witnesses into copper plates, he brings them back to the trailer of a gray-haired woman (K.J. Holmes) who electroplates them in her homegrown lab of water baths, tubes, solutions and machinery. Together, they keep tabs on the group via a monitor with a feed from a camera mounted on a tree.

The Electroplater also makes metal sculptures of the galaxy, rhythmically circling them at times as if respectful of a larger presence. It’s a touch of the cosmological/spiritual reminiscent of the solemnity with which Diana’s attendants perform their simultaneously primal and graceful movements, and complemented further by a later scene featuring a Native American hoop dancer (Sandra Lamouche) in an empty American Legion hall. We’re all trying to make sense of what’s around us, Barney seems to be saying.

“Redoubt” is slow going but not uninvolved. [Barney’s](#) filmmaking is less about the manipulation of image, or the roiling power of editing to create emotional states, than it is about dutifully documenting what he’s created, what he’s seeing, what’s on his mind. It’s why his films — whatever their narrative bent — often accompany a gallery show presenting the physical pieces seen onscreen, and might unfold like a segment in a continuum, or an installation one can drop into and out of. But “Redoubt” has its mystical pull, nevertheless, much of it in the elegant framing Barney’s longtime cinematographer Peter Strietmann provides of this remote, vivid world, and the artist’s placement of creatures (four-legged or otherwise) within it. Even though nobody talks, you always sense something being communicated, which, come to think of it, is nature’s ancient hold over humans, anyway.