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Baird, Daniel: Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle

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# Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle

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From the moment of his first exhibits in Los Angeles and New York in 1991, Matthew Barney was catapulted into artworld fame and cult status. Barney's hybrid of performance, video, sculptural objects, and drawings, his erotically polymorphous athleticism and predilection for perverse, baroque fantasy, and his use of materials like chilled Vaseline, tapioca, and cast plastic, made him a flash of light and weird pleasure amidst an art scene bogged down in identity politics and righteous sloganeering. In "Blind Perineum" (1991), for instance, with feet and hands taped like a football player's, mountaineering equipment swinging from his anus, a young, buff, naked Barney makes his way across the ceiling of a gallery stairwell, struggling against self-imposed restraints in a creative test of will. In the wonderfully titled "Mile High Threshold: Flight with the Anal Sadistic Warrior" (1991), Barney is again naked, taped, and penetrated, lowering himself onto gobs of semen-colored petroleum jelly. In the "Transexualis" (1991) installation, which consists of objects in "Blind Perineum" and "Mile High Threshold: Flight with the Anal Sadistic Warrior," gym equipment fashioned from queerly unnatural yet flesh-like petroleum jelly is held together by precision coolers in the gallery. Barney's early exhibits, as well as his spectacular and grueling contribution to Documenta IX in 1992, contain intricate allegorical rituals featuring Barney's signature demonic figures, Harry Houdini and the Oakland Raiders's legendary center, double "o" Jim Otto. "Drawing Restraint 7" (1993), the sole highlight in the dismal 1993 Whitney Biennial, envisions Barney prosthetically transformed into a creepy, clownish, yet menacing satyr with nub horns and furry, hooved goat legs. Barney is hardly the first artist to combine video, performance, and sculpture: Beuys, whose art of the 1960s Barney's work often evokes, effectively did that, as did Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman. Barney's singularity comes from the scope and surreal

density of his associations, between the interior of the body, sexual differentiation, obsessive athletic perfectionism, medical technology, Greek and Celtic myth, and landscape and architecture, all of which miraculously congeal into works that are luxuriantly beautiful and physically and emotionally disorienting. Begun in 1994 and fueled by the metaphor of the cremaster muscle (the thin, smooth muscle that raises or lowers the testicles relative to temperature and fear) and the primordial moment in embryonic development which precedes sexual differentiation, the five-part, seven-hour Cremaster Cycle encompasses the figures and themes of Barney's earlier work and more, but with ambition, extravagance, and decadence on an unprecedented scale: cheerleaders dance-pulsating, anal Jim Otto "o"s in a brightly lit football stadium, a hardcore singer encrusted with live bees shouts into a telephone, Barney decked out as Gary Gilmore rides a wild bull in a stadium made of salt, haunted Chrysler Imperials engage in a funereal demolition derby in the Chrysler Building. The Cremaster films, made out of order, each more elaborate and expensive than the previous, are not so much narratives as allegorical pageants of the kind staged in Renaissance Italian city states (and to which major painters and sculptors like Leonardo and Bernini contributed), or for that matter in Busby Berkeley musicals, moving from one ornate visual set piece to another. Barney is not really a filmmaker. The cinematography in the Cremaster films is efficient and professional, but when compared with great filmmakers like Andrei Tarkovsky, it is undistinguished; the editing is clear and straightforward, but in contrast to serious cinema and video, it has little aesthetic significance. I'm not sure Barney would disagree with any of this, and indeed he has repeatedly commented that he regards himself primarily as a sculptor. Unlike his work of the early 1990s, however, where the performance videos were exhibited alongside the related sculptures and drawings, most viewers have only seen the Cremaster films projected in isolation in theaters like Film Forum. The weight of the Cremaster Cycle at the Guggenheim, then, is to show that the films, photographs, sculptures, installations, and drawings, taken as a whole, constitute a compelling, multifaceted work of visual art. Barney's art is associative, infectiously generative, and relentlessly circular. Wandering up and down the ramps of the Guggenheim, it is a relief to not have to focus on any single segment of the Cremaster Cycle; one can move with the logic of association and make the delirious leaps the work itself proposes. At the top of the museum in a corner is the splattered Vaseline and clogged gutter where in Cremaster 3 Richard Serra, donning the guise of Hiram Abiff, architect of Solomon's temple and Masonic cult figure, satirized his own lead splatter sculptures with molten Vaseline. The gobs of thrown Vaseline are, however, curiously polite, as though Serra was being careful to avoid making too big a mess. Compare this with the photographs of Serra performing the original lead splatter pieces, the huge, industrial loft a Vulcan's den full of smoke and sooty filth. In the gallery just beyond the Guggenheim's crowning turn, one finds an elaborate, undulating structure made of cast translucent acrylic that looks as though it were cut from ice, its decorations sumptuous, cold, and obsessive. Suspended above, two video monitors play sequences from Cremaster 5: Ursula Andress delivering a haunting aria in Hungarian in the State Opera House in Budapest and Barney naked among nymphs in the steaming Ottoman baths. Regrettably, the video and the ringing surround-sound encourage viewers to stand back from the installation and watch and listen, without establishing a relationship between the video and the sculpture. The remove from which one inevitably views the piece, combined with the sterilizing florescent lighting, render it, not perverse like over-the-top Baroque glasswork, but static and indifferent.

One of the only truly melancholic and affecting works in the exhibit is "The Ehrich Weiss Suite" (1997), which occupies a smaller, adjoining upper gallery. Viewed through a glass door, the installation is a lament for the dead Houdini, whose given name was Ehrich Weiss. In the center of the room is a sleek, coffin-like object with a shiny black top and clear sides. On the top is a spindly, flower-like, translucent sculpture set on a molded black plastic pillow, a black plastic banner slowly twisting down to the floor. Inside the coffin are oblong white objects set within circular tubes, and around the room walk white Jacobin Pigeons decked out in fluffy, regal black coats. The coffin and the floor are encrusted with pigeon droppings and feed. Throughout *Cremaster 5*, where at one point the pigeons, dressed in white coats, are tied with garish ribbons to Barney's genitals, pigeons represent desire and transformation; in "The Ehrich Weiss Suite," they are in mourning. The sole living element in the exhibit, the pigeons seem bereft, lost, and incapable of flight, as though they are the moment, the sad rupture of the real, at which the huge, revolving system breaks down. Watching them, I kept thinking of the birds which pull Aphrodite's chariot in Sappho's great ode, imagining them just wandering around, untethered and alone.

Staged on the Isle of Man, and involving car racing, body builders, and Barney himself as a tap-dancing satyr donning a white suit, *Cremaster 4* was the first film in the cycle to be made, and it is cruder than the other four, which works in its favor. While the "Isle of Man" (1994) installation containing replicas of the race cars is gimmicky, there is something gaudy and corrosive about the crumpled, flesh-colored plastic tongue and yellow banner descending from the petroleum jelly counter. The objects set on a bright yellow wrestling mat in "[Pitch] Field of the Ascending Faerie" (1995) are mysterious and creepy. In an exhibit that is often overdetermined, these pieces, as well as the closely related "[Pitch] Field of the Descending Faerie," with its baby blue ribbon and belt emerging from a cruciform hole, are enigmatic and oddly fragile. The space devoted to the paraphernalia of *Cremaster 4* also contains several of the show's most striking photographs. In the diptych "Field of the Loughton Candidate" (1994), the top photograph is of Barney in his satyr get-up, thickly slathered in Vaseline, and below is an image of a star-shape bored deep in a geological mass of Vaseline. The literalness and near vulgarity of the *Cremaster 4* pieces keep them closer to their references to popular sport, and, like "Transexualis," make sports equipment and display seem part of a hermetic rite. The strident, electric colors, stripped of the natural, make Barney's use of synthetic, manufactured materials feel inevitable, as though plastic and Vaseline were the world's *prima materia*.

Whereas the best sculptures associated with *Cremaster 4* have an aggressive tackiness that evokes the early soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, the work from *Cremaster 2* has a glittering, mineral grandeur. The finest passages in *Cremaster 2* are among the most ecstatic in the whole cycle: Gary Gilmore's mystical bull ride in the salt stadium on the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, or the graphic copulation scene in which the bodies are encased in curving plastic, petroleum jelly, and swarming bees. As is often the case in the *Cremaster Cycle*, the larger sculptures, like the wax and honeycomb filled car shells in "The Cabinet of Gary Gilmore and Nicole Baker" (1999- 2000), are less compelling than the smaller, more enigmatic pieces. "The Cabinet of Bessie Gilmore" (1999), for example, consists of a curving, translucent corset, a rock of solar salt over which loops a resin rope, and two poles ending in feet made of plastic flaps, all set inside a glassed-in cabinet with cast plastic borders and elegant, tapering plastic legs. In the stunning "The Cabinet of Harry Houdini"

(1999), an open, heart-shaped screen with a frothy decorative fringe is set within a standing wax cabinet from which bar bells made of cast solar salt spill, and a single rod with a honeycomb black ball at its end bows out, a black plastic ribbon uncoiling onto the ground. Like "The Ehrich Weiss Suite," "The Cabinet of Harry Houdini" is tinged with melancholy, as though the aspiration toward escape and transcendence is inevitably reabsorbed back into the inanimate. Barney is expert at exploiting the emotional indeterminacies of materials like Vaseline, salt, and honeycomb; they seem to exist between the organic and inorganic, and their unstable inner structures make them, despite their coolness, fragile and intimate. A sculptor like Serra relies upon the epic solidity of industrial materials like lead and steel; Barney's sculptures, on the other hand, are at their best when they are in an unstable equilibrium, as though they might melt or crumble at any moment. Like human bodies in a way, Barney's sculptures exist only under special, rarefied conditions. They allude to Robert Smithson's conception of process and entropy, and at the same time they are akin to Tom Friedman's obsessively fussy, brittle miniatures.

The metaphoric properties of location and architecture have always been important in Barney's work, at least since *Ottoshaft*: think of the football stadium in *Cremaster 1*, the salt stadium in *Cremaster 2*, the island in *Cremaster 4*, the opera house in *Cremaster 5*. Centered around the Chrysler building and the Guggenheim Museum, *Cremaster 3*, the longest and most recently completed film in the cycle, most directly addresses monumental Twentieth Century Architecture. As with *Cremaster 2*, many of *Cremaster 3*'s most sublime passages, such as the macabre indoor demolition derby or the race of the flayed horses, do not have sculptures directly associated with them. Some of the bulkier, more obvious pieces, like "Partition" (2002), a refrigerated petroleum jelly bar set on orange and green AstroTurf, and "The Cloud Club" (2002), a grand piano trowelled full of cement with a pyramid of potatoes heaped under one of its legs, feel inert, self-conscious, and illustrative. Nonetheless, some of the *Cremaster Cycle*'s most exquisite objects issue from *Cremaster 3*. In "Fionn Maccumhail: The Case of the Entered Apprentice" (2002), a mysterious curved object clotted with Vaseline and surrounded by clusters of white balls rises out of earth full of moss and sprouting potatoes. In "Oonagh: The Case of the Entered Novitiate" (2002), a bowed seat holds two translucent prostheses and an umbilical tangle of multicolored plastic wire coils down to a leg fitted with a golden toe. "Fingal: The Case of Hiram Abiff" (2002) is composed of what look like scale models of the Chrysler Building resting beneath a table, while a golden thumb sticks up from loamy earth below, touching a dangling ribbon. In "Joachim and Boaz" (2002), a huge, torquing structure of rubber slots has a fuzzy orange fungus spattered over its twisted metal supports, and on a long, sleek attached table is a model of the Chrysler building flocked with the psychedelic orange fuzz. Desires fulminating in the unconscious are, according to Freud, archaic, magical, and immune to logic and history. Barney is at his best when the work neither explains nor illustrates, but presses its charged elements together in ways as inscrutable as those in one of Joseph Cornell's boxes or the contents of one of Duchamp's wily suitcases.

With their fixation on orifices, the messy, formless interior of the body, and the frontier between the natural and the unnatural, Barney's films, for all their evident sheen and glamour, are visceral and uncomfortable. One has the sense of Barney being a kind of process sculptor, influenced by Beuys, Nauman, and Serra, but unabashedly entwined in surrealist fantasies. And yet for the most part, the *Cremaster Cycle* exhibition is clean, polite, and comfortable. While Barney's use of

specially designed cupboards has its own inner logic, evocative of natural history museums and cabinets of curiosity, the fact that so much of the densest, strangest, most fragile and lyrical work in the show is set upright and encased behind glass mutes any sense of tactility, much less of contagion or risk: one would have liked the Guggenheim's grand architecture to have been threatened and sullied by all that dirt, salt, Vaseline, and plastic. One is constantly reminded of Georges Bataille's polemic against the pristine elegance of Andre Breton's surrealism— that desire is formless, uncontainable, and dangerous. In addition, photographs framed in Barney's signature and at times cloying thick, creamy, cast plastic frames, occupy most of the space on the museums walls. Largely shot by James O'Brien, many of the images are ravishing: Barney nude against a lush green wall above a bevy of nude nymphs with drooping ears, his penis attached by ribbons to seven pigeons, Barney with slicked red hair slithering through a long orifice of Vaseline, images of ice falls and of the great salt flats in Utah. But unlike, say, Roni Horn's austere images of Iceland's barren coast, they are not specifically inventive or compelling as photographs; they are essentially fashion shots that document rather than embody. Barney's drawings are a different story altogether. Typically framed by, or snapped into, cast plastic, they divide roughly into two types: those that are notes or sketches for scenes in films, and those which serve as talismans, directly embodying concepts in an intimate form. Barney has an eccentric, quivering sensitive drawing style reminiscent of that of the ever-present Beuys. In "Choreographic Suite" (1996), a series of 12 drawings, a delicate constellation of marks forms a hovering starburst surrounded by greasy swabs of Vaseline, the drawings set in molded plastic on shaped paper that is itself snapped into a larger plastic frame, the support literally pointing into the nearly indecipherable cell-formations of the drawings. In "Manx Manual" (1994–1995), a sequence of five drawings, interlocking spine-like shapes entwined in circles trail off into what look like either gonads or ovaries, or an embryo shape is fit within the outline of an island, mounted on striped blue fabric and snapped into a double frame of pink and lime green plastic. The drawings combine the artificial presence of Barney's sculptures with mysterious, idiosyncratic, and lyrical shapes and lines. They are at once dense, private, odd, and stickily palpable.

Delayed a year by the cash-strapped Guggenheim amid vindictive calls for Thomas Krens' resignation, opening amidst adulatory reviews by critics who threw both critical judgment and personal control to the wind, Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle could not but partially disappoint. Ironically, matters were made worse by the beautifully designed, glossy, 500-plus page catalogue, which was published prior to the opening of the exhibit at the Guggenheim. The catalogue's reproductions inevitably emphasize the graphic values of the photographs and film stills, all but eliminating the disconcerting tactility of the best sculptures and drawings. And while hugely informative in an encyclopedic way, especially with regard to Barney's early work and the convoluted narratives and sources of the films, Guggenheim Curator of Contemporary Art Nancy Spector's monograph, titled "Only The Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us," is so absurdly humorless and philosophically clumsy it leads the prospective viewer away from Barney's more eccentric virtues. Reading Spector's commentaries, which often degenerate into a pastiche of psychoanalytic literary and film theory, one gets the impression that Barney's vision is one whose meanings are wholly purposeful and determinate. Yet Barney's art is most powerful when one has the sense of it issuing directly and uninterpreted from the unconscious in all its horror, vaudeville, and absurdity; its enjambed associations irreducible and uncomfortably personal.

Barney's connection with Beuys is perhaps the most significant and salient for understanding the pitfalls of the Cremaster Cycle. Like Barney, Beuys used unstable materials allegorically, pointing to mythic narratives and constantly referring back to the site and performance of making. And if Beuys conceived of himself as a shaman healing personal and historical wounds, Barney is a trickster conduit through which perverse fantasies pass and mix. For his 1980 retrospective, Beuys placed an enormous tallow sculpture in the Guggenheim's rotunda, and its scent filled the dimly lit museum. For all its multimedia effects, the Cremaster Cycle fails to push beyond a spectacle that the viewer consumes. It may be that only perverse fantasies can still save us, but in our hyper-commodified "society of the spectacle" for such fantasies to be perverse they have to address something other than our eyes and minds: they have to get under our skin and into our bodies. There is little doubt that Matthew Barney is already, at 36, a prodigious and even visionary artist; the finest moments of both the films and the exhibit are mad and rapturous. He would, however, have been better served by an exhibit less concerned with enshrining and illustrating the achievements of the films, than with making the vision even more intractable, sensuous, transfiguring, and troubling.