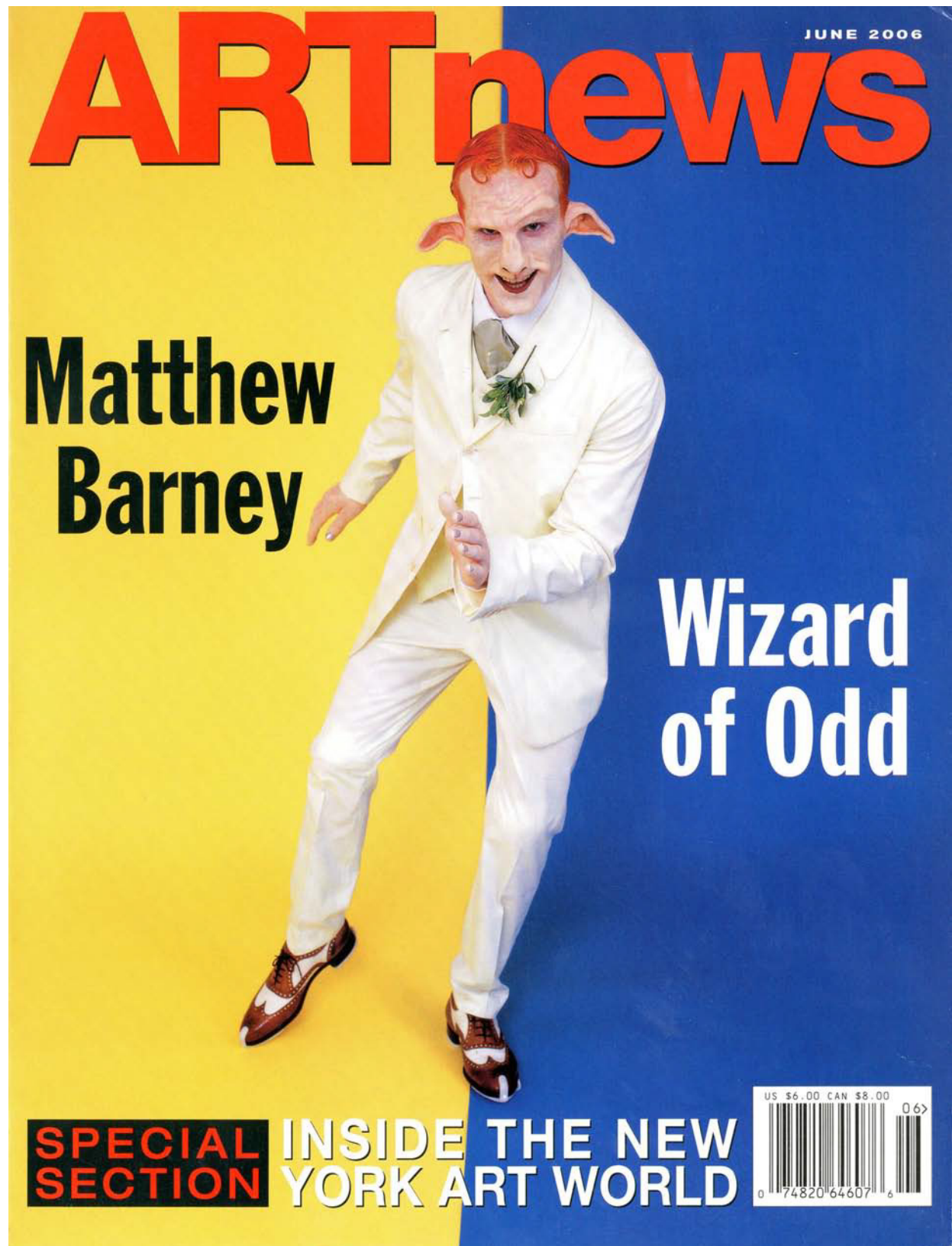


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ARTnews

Yablonsky, Linda: A Satyr Wrapped In an Enigma

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Matthew Barney aboard the Japanese whaling ship *Nisshin Maru*, in a production still from his film *Drawing Restraint 9*, 2005. Barney and Björk star as the Occidental Guests in the movie's climactic love scene. The artist as a tap-dancing satyr in the feature-length film *Cremaster 4*, 1994. Barney playing the Giant in *Cremaster 5*, 1997.





Out of costume:
Matthew Barney.

A Satyr Wrapped In an Enigma

**Seductive, repulsive, mysterious,
metaphorical, and usually gooey,**

Matthew Barney's visceral

**costume dramas are as
extravagant as they are baffling**

Matthew Barney is the most exasperating artist in America. Matthew Barney is the most visionary artist in America. Matthew Barney is the sexiest artist in America. Matthew Barney is a sham.

Certainly, Barney is one of the few artists in America who can generate such deeply divided opinions about his work. At once gorgeous and gross, fascinating to some and impenetrable to many, his art incorporates such unconventional materials as petroleum jelly and almost always involves the transformation of one body into another, often of an uncertain species or gender. "I'm attracted to things that embrace mystery," he says.

Indeed, over the past two decades Barney has created an arcane and dreamlike universe of forms derived from sports, biology, and myth, whose scope became apparent with the five films of his epic "Cremaster Cycle" (1994–2002), which dominated a career-defining exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 2003. Aside

BY LINDA YABLONSKY

from the films (actually made in high-definition video), the show also included related drawings, photographs, and sculptures, and seemed the product of a vision so grand and an imagination so excessive that many wondered what Barney could possibly do to top it.

The answer was not long in coming. He had already started production on a new, feature-length film that would be the centerpiece of "Drawing Restraint," a traveling retrospective exhibition of work dating back to 1987, when Barney was a fine-art major at Yale University and putting himself through an escalating series of physical and mental challenges designed to develop his creative muscle.

Conceived by the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan, where it opened in July of last year, "Drawing Restraint" traveled to the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, South Korea, and this month arrives at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (where it will be on view through September 17). The show includes drawings, photography, video, film storyboards, and a three-volume catalogue designed by the artist, as well as sculptures produced in Barney's current material of choice, a high-density thermoplastic that can resemble marble, snow, or flesh. By providing new insight into the Barney universe, it serves as a kind of codex to everything the artist has made thus far. "I think the drawing is almost the core of his practice," says Nancy Spector, curator of "The Cremaster Cycle" at the Guggenheim. "He has a language all his own, and once you learn it, you gain entrée into his world."

Barney is represented in New York by Barbara Gladstone, who has coproduced all his films, and in Los Angeles by Regen Projects. At auction, his sculptures can command up to \$400,000, while photographs that sold on the primary market for roughly \$25,000 to \$50,000 have brought close to \$200,000 in secondary sales.

Barney did not set out to be an artist. Born in San Francisco in 1967, he moved with his parents and older sister to Boise, Idaho, when he was six. He was class president and a star quar-

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Harry Houdini, a childhood hero, was an inspiration, says Barney:

terback in high school and was planning a career in football. Though six feet tall, he proved too slight to be eligible for the pros but had no trouble getting into Yale, where he enrolled in its pre-med program. "I was interested in plastic surgery," he says, chuckling. "The reconstructive kind." (That interest would later manifest itself in his frequent use of prosthetics.)

After two semesters, friends like artists Michael Rees and Katy Schimert (then graduate students) persuaded him to change his major to art. Influenced by the task-oriented performance work of Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and Bruce Nauman, and by the site-specific sculptural interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, Barney took the exercise mats, barbells, and Vaseline of his athletic training into his studio and made them the focus of his art.

Harry Houdini, a childhood hero, was also an inspiration. As Barney says, "He was proof that the athletic and the esthetic could join hands." To test this idea, Barney started making

use of prosthetics and was structured (like the later "Cremaster" series) as a kind of race or game.

To a degree unusual in so young an artist, Barney's subject, method, and materials were all in place from the start, and by the time of his first solo exhibition at Gladstone in 1991, he already had something of a cult following. Richard Flood, now senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the gallery's director at the time, recalls, "There was a line to get into the gallery on opening night." Those crowded inside watched *BLIND PERINEUM* (1991), a video of Barney—nude except for a rock-climber's harness—rappelling around the gallery walls with the help of titanium ice screws, one of which ended up in his anus. They also saw the sculpture *TRANSEXUALIS (decline)*, 1991, a walk-in refrigerator containing an incline bench of the sort commonly found in weight rooms but made of Vaseline.

"There was not only a fascination but an awareness that he was liberating materials no one had ever seen in art before," Flood says. "There were ten different layers of new."

By 1993, when he made the three-channel color video *Drawing Restraint 7*, Barney was well on his way to storytelling, albeit of a rather oblique sort. For this work—a highlight of that year's Whitney Biennial—he used latex and foam prosthetics to give two male performers horns, tails, and hooves, turning them into a satyr ram and ewe. Barney himself played a satyr kid chasing his tail in the front seat of a white

limousine, while the other two wrestled in the back, the ewe trying to draw a picture in the condensation on the limo's moon roof with the ram's horn. The video, though strange, was inescapably erotic.

Barney's esthetic vision has always been rooted in the biology of reproductive function, as the delicate drawings using graphite, petroleum jelly, and iodine in the SFMOMA exhibition attest. They diagram a three-part system he calls "the Path." Phase one he identifies as "a sexual place where raw, creative energy is abundant and fertile but without any direction," a powerful creative drive with no particular place to go. "A second phase," Barney says, "would discipline the raw energy into productive energy that, in a third phase, would generate a form." These phases—labeled "Situation-Condition-Production"—still define Barney's thinking, which he characterizes as a digestive system in which ideas are consumed, transformed, and expelled.



black-and-white videos of himself drawing under physically straitened circumstances. For his first, made in 1987, he tied one leg to the floor with an elastic tether and ran up and down crudely constructed ramps in his studio, attempting to draw a few shaky lines on a piece of paper near the ceiling. He increased the difficulty of the exercise in each new piece, attaching a pencil or marker to a tire iron or a ten-foot pole, or drawing between jumps on a tilted trampoline.

In effect, Barney was applying the principles of weight training, where one builds a muscle by subjecting it to resistance, to his creative process. "As a young athlete," he says, "there's something you take for granted in the way your body develops. In effect, you're breaking down muscle tissue to become stronger, but it's something you understand. So when I started making art, that biological fact became an important metaphor."

Soon Barney was adding a sense of character. In *Drawing Restraint 4* (1988) he wears a flower-print dress as he pushes a heavy football blocking sled down a hallway. "I needed the piece to become theatrical, but I didn't yet understand how to make a work of theater," he recalls. All the same, these videos became templates for more narrative works, particularly the breakthrough 1992 video *OTTOshaft*, which involved his first

Production stills from *Cremaster 1*, 1995, a musical extravaganza performed on the blue AstroTurf playing field of Bronco Stadium in Barney's hometown of Boise, Idaho.

'He was proof that the athletic and the esthetic could join hands'

Nowhere does this idea play out more clearly than in the new film, *Drawing Restraint 9* (2005), which had an extended theatrical run in New York after opening in March to reviews that were by turns rapturous, respectful, and vicious. Barney, its writer and director, appears in the lead role opposite Björk, the Icelandic musician who is his real-life partner and the mother of their three-year-old daughter, Isadora.

Barney and Björk have been together five years, dividing their time among homes in Manhattan; Rockland County, New York; and Reykjavik, Iceland, but *Drawing Restraint 9* is their first professional collaboration. (Björk also composed the film's atmospheric score.) "Working with Björk made sense in the way that I typically involve people in my films who are specialists in some way, or who have a particular physical ability," says the soft-spoken, rather courtly Barney, his intense blue eyes suddenly focused on a distant point. For someone who reveals so much of himself on film, appearing nude and with fetish objects in his mouth or anus, he is oddly uncomfortable speaking about his personal life. "Rather than directing actors, which I don't think I could do," he continues, "the idea of translating an existing relationship to an on-screen relationship seemed natural."

Sculptures related to the film *Drawing Restraint 9*, 2005, made from polycaprolactone thermoplastic, aquaplast, and self-lubricating plastic.

Commissioned by the 21st Century Museum, the movie was shot in New York and Japan for about \$4.5 million. In it, the two play a pair of "Occidental Guests" aboard the *Nisshin Maru*, the Japanese whaling fleet's only operational factory ship. In this work, the action centers on the removal of restraints. Barney chose the ship as his main location because of the difficulty it presented as a site for the sculpture he wanted to make on its deck—using 25 tons of petroleum jelly. In the film, the crew members pour molten jelly into a giant mold in the shape of Barney's trademark "field emblem"—an oval bisected by a horizontal bar representing restraint—that they eventually remove, causing chaos.

"The jelly is oppressive; it gets over everything," Barney says. "The challenge of making the piece was much of the interest. To up the ante within the frame of the 'Drawing Restraint' series, to create one of these sculptures on a moving surface with slippery materials, was intriguing."

The creation of this sticky, semisolid mass, and its ultimate failure as an object, constitutes one of the film's two narrative threads. The other concerns the on-screen marriage, formalized in a tea ceremony with the ship's captain, of the two romantic leads, who barely speak during the film's entire two and a half hours. In the climactic final sequence, they tear at each other's lower limbs with flensing knives. As their cabin fills with the liquid jelly leaking from the deck above, they eat each other's flesh, never taking their eyes off one another. At last, we see what they're really made of—and it's not human. It's whale.

Of all the "Drawing Restraint" pieces—there are now 14—this is the only one with a definite resolution. "It felt like a happy ending," says Spector. "You leave your legs behind, and there you go."

Barney says he went to Japan with fictional encounters with whales—from Jonah to Pinocchio to *Moby Dick*—already in mind. But it wasn't until he learned more about the country's

whaling culture that his project began to center on the relationship between a guest—in this case, the artists, who become transformed by a visit to foreign territory—and a host.

"The metaphor is simple," says Benjamin Weil, recently appointed director of Artists Space in New York and curator of the SFMOMA show. "The guest is taken in by the host, processed, and then excreted from the body in the way a whale takes in krill, accumulates debris that will eventually form ambergris, and then expels it. The whaling factory ship, a foreign body on the sea, takes in the body of the whale and processes it in a similar way. So navigating a foreign territory profoundly modifies the visitor."

Conversely, "To receive and absorb the foreign, allowing it to change you, resulting in the inevitable change in the foreign as well—this is the way Japan works," says the Tokyo-based artist Takashi Murakami.

While *Drawing Restraint 9* is more personal than most of



Barney's films, it also seems more political, and not only because it involves whaling and petroleum jelly, which is derived from oil. When the Occidental Guests first board the ship, they are ritually shaved, bathed, and dressed in Barney's Shinto-style wedding costumes. They move slowly and awkwardly, as if they were strangers. At the same time, it is obviously Barney—the visitor—who is running the show.

"The thing I had trouble with," Barney says, "was how to make a site-specific work in Japan that I could exhibit in Japan and also have content indigenous to the place. That's what I have done since 'Cremaster'—go to a place and find a mythology that comes from there and integrate it into my own narrative. That experiment isn't finished yet. There's more to be learned from that process."

The film begins with a reference to General Douglas MacArthur, who oversaw the American occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1951, implying that Barney is not just examining the relationship of visitor and host but also that of an occupying force and conquered land.

"Beyond the whaling politics," says Barney, "it interested me to allow this piece to have a broader political context—to let in America's occupation [of Japan] and look at the way that story keeps repeating itself." ■