

Matthew Barney: The CREMASTER Cycle

"Only the Perverse Can Still Save Us"¹

Although much has been written about Barney's five Cremaster films, prior to his 2003 Guggenheim exhibit, I had never seen any of them in conjunction with the sculptures and photographs. I was familiar with many of the photographs, which have been reproduced extensively and shown in multiple exhibits worldwide. One of the key questions was to determine if the photographs simply functioned as documents of the films or if indeed they were successful as photographic series in their own right. Did the images embody the same thematic issues as the films? Also a question of authorship arose, since Barney does not photograph his own images.

Matthew Barney's photographs resist categorization, although he borrows from the established genres of classical portraiture and tableaux photography. Because he draws inspiration from a multitude of sources i.e. mythology, nature, movies, professional sports, biological systems, technology, medical processes, fashion and popular culture; it becomes impossible to speak about the work from a singular perspective. Barney's approach to art has been described as polymorphous¹, a hybridization of processes, practices and genres. The photographs can be analyzed in terms of gender, sexuality, performance, fantasy and mythical archetype.

Barney's work also embraces the dialogue of the 'Other', both in terms of his artistic process, as well as his explorations into gender. "Barney's visual language is protean: drawing and film unite to engender photography and sculpture, which in turn produce more drawing and film, in an incestuous intermingling of materials that defies any hierarchy of artistic mediums."² As opposed to a linear progression of materials and process, which culminate in the film, each

medium radiates from the core (which is Barney). Nothing is ancillary. The 'Other' has also been used to describe the issues of gender and sexuality prevalent in Barney's work. Barney's characters defy traditional gender roles, sometimes combining masculine and feminine traits and physical features as well as magical or fantastical attributes.

The title, 'Cremaster' references the muscle in the body, which raises and lowers the testicles in response to extreme temperature changes or other stimuli.³ The themes of ascension and descension as well as male sexuality reoccur throughout the Cremaster works. The Cremaster cycle emerged from early performances by Barney, which originated from his experiences as an athlete in Boise, Idaho. His early work focused on endurance and pushing the body to the extreme. Referencing the psychosexual component of organized sports, Barney's work includes aspects of competition, idolization and exhibitionism.⁴ In keeping with his performative nature, Barney starred in each of the Cremaster films. He transformed himself to appear in various disguises as a tap dancing satyr, a naked giant, a bull-riding cowboy, a Masonic apprentice, a pink-kilted Highlander athlete and the murderer Gary Gilmore.⁵ These complex character studies embody mythical combinations of masculine, feminine and animal entities.

The notion of transformation or metamorphosis is both physical and psychological in the photographic self-portraits. Barney's identities are created through elaborate designs incorporating latex, prostheses, cosmetics and costumes. The results are so convincing, that the viewer is hard pressed to recognize physical similarities between the characters. There

is the argument that the autobiographical references in the work do not result in separate identities, but form a symbiotic relationship finally merging into a single entity; alter egos of one psyche. This is not evident in the photographs. However the theme of metamorphosis is so prevalent in all aspects of the films, not only with the internal spaces in the minds of the characters, but in the external manifestations in nature and the landscapes, that the interconnectedness of Barney's universe becomes apparent if not readily explicit. This allusiveness in the films and in the photographs is what frustrates some critics who desire a linear narrative with singular meaning.

Barney's photographs are lush and evocative, exhibited in "self-lubricating" frames. I'm not sure exactly what a self-lubricating frame is or does. However it relates to the use of Vaseline, which is a prevalent medium in many of the sculptures and films. In the Guggenheim exhibit, there was a trough of Vaseline, which 'paved' the way for the viewer as they walked throughout the exhibit. The viscous substance was begging to be touched. Vaseline is loaded with sexual connotations of both protection and desire. Barney repeatedly

utilizes this metaphor in his work.

In *Cremaster 2*, Barney portrays the murderer Gary Gilmore who was the subject of Norman Mailer's book, 'The Executioner's Song.' It is the Gilmore character who externally appears the most 'normal'. This apparent normalcy is what makes Barney's portrayal so unsettling. In the photograph (image 1), the character lacks any fantastical costuming or make-up. The image of Gilmore is shot against a white concrete wall in a frontal pose, simulating a police line-up or mug shot. Barney's eyes are devoid of any emotion. The subtle details of dirt streaked on the face, unwashed hair, unkempt beard and crooked, dirty t-shirt enhance the convincing portrait of a sociopathic killer. The Gilmore character is perhaps the most masculine of all the personas. However it is the dark side of masculinity; exploring the psychological demise of a man prone to violence without emotional attachments.

Cremaster 3 features Barney as the Entered Apprentice, who first appears as a clean-cut, mustached laborer sporting a hat and rumbled sport suit covered by a worn leather apron, which is filled with rocks. (image 2) Imagine Indiana Jones meeting Clark Kent circa 1940's. The apprentice's stature



CREMASTER 1, 1995 Production photograph Photo by Michael James O'Brien © Matthew Barney, courtesy Barbara Gladstone

is proud and regal. He gazes away from the camera lens, an iconographic representation of the industrial revolution. The metal on his boots and verticality of the image reference the architecture of the Chrysler Building where the segment was filmed. Later in a ritualistic manner, the apprentice is transformed into a Celtic Highlander, donning a bright orange furry headdress and kilt with a bloody scarf protruding from his mouth. (image 3) The white powdered body resembles a corpse, emptied of blood and life. The bloodied mouth suggests a cannibalistic act with the scarf functioning as a trophy of the victim. Unlike the emotionless gaze of Gilmore, evil determination permeates the apprentice's eyes.

In *Cremaster 4*, Barney depicts the Loughton Candidate, a tap dancing, red-haired satyr, who fancies himself a gentleman dandy, causing mischief wherever he goes. (Image 4) The white Edwardian suit with a sprig of heather at the lapel sharply contrasts the grotesquely disfigured face of the satyr. With skin the texture of a badly scarred burn victim, the character is both alluring and horrific to behold. There is a femininity to some of the gestures and mannerisms, which obscures the specificity of gender. The satyr's expression is one of taunting seduction, daring the viewer to enter the mythical realm of the unknown.

Cremaster 5 features Barney in three roles: the Diva, her Giant and Magician. Her Giant (Image 5) is the most mythical of all the characters. The creature resembles a hermaphrodite Minotaur. White birds perch on its arms, serving as wings for their protector. The body is hairless except for an elaborately curled mustache. Protruding from the genitalia is a long strand of interwoven satin ribbons, perhaps replacing the castrated or missing penis. The legs resemble a horse with cloven hooves. Her Giant has small pockets of skin protruding from the cheeks, which culminate in a single frozen tear-drop. The creature is surrounded by a plethora of flowers; an artificial garden of splendor.

The female characters in Matthew Barney's work encircle and emulate the archetypes found in popular media, mythology and fairy tales. Goodyear from *Cremaster 1* (Image 6) embodies the essence of a Hollywood starlet. Her platinum blonde hair lacquered in an intricate design, pencil-thin eyebrows, long legs and high heels exaggerate the attributes of idealized beauty. She sits in a seductive, yet vulnerable position with her legs splayed, perfectly manicured hands covering her crotch. Her white satin teddy blends with her porcelain skin tone and the white fabric interior of her prison in which she sits. She appears to be trapped within the confines of her space; whether her imprisonment is self-imposed is unknown to the viewer. A carefully mapped design of red grapes depicting the male gonads convenes between her legs. Goodyear appears to be waiting for something or some-

one to release her from her entrapment, referencing Rapunzel or *Sleeping Beauty* from childhood fantasies.

Ursula Andress plays the Queen in *Cremaster 5*. (Image 7) She is both a lover and mother figure to Barney's characters alluding to the Oedipal complex. The Queen is dressed in an Elizabethan black gown. Her sheer veil covers her eyes and etched lines upon her face. She is gazing upwards; seemingly unaware of the camera, with her lips slightly parted. Although in mourning, her expression is one of wonder, not despair. The Queen is also imprisoned, but in a different manner than Goodyear. Her rigid Elizabethan costume does not allow her to move or breathe. She is hampered by her gender. Her power is constricted by her limited mobility. She is sad, but not broken. Her majestic stature belies the tortuous underpinnings beneath her cool exterior.

While the photographic series chronicles the films' characters, choruses, animals and locations, the portraits transcend mere documentation of the films. The photographs encapsulate the themes of identity and gender in a manner that the cinematic vision cannot. The photographs are not reflections of decisive or distilled moments from the films, but more as complex character studies into the world of myths, dreams and Matthew Barney's imagination.

The question of authorship is one that is never raised for a film director. It is assumed that there will be a director of cinematography, a director of photography, producers, set designers, costume designers, etc... It is only in the fine art world where authorship is questioned. What does it mean if the artist does not physically create the artwork, yet has his/her name on the finished product? As with any monumental production, it becomes increasingly impossible to be hands-on in every aspect of the process. The more important question is the consistency of the artistic vision, which makes the *Cremaster* cycle such a phenomena. The attention to minute details, the ability to pre-conceive and execute a twelve-year project spanning the globe, while combining a plethora of media is ambitious and awe-inspiring. Perhaps it is within the perverse and wonderful world of Matthew Barney that we can find the inspiration to spark the imaginations for our own creative survival.

(Endnotes)

¹ Spector, p.4

² Spector, p.4

³ MacRitchie, Lynn, *Manly Mysteries of a Golden Boy*, Financial Times, October 25, 2002.

⁴ Spector, p.4

⁵ MacRitchie



CREMASTER 4: VALVE, 1994 [detail] 4 C-prints in self-lubricating plastic frames
33 _ x 27 _ x 1 _ inches (84.5 x 70 x 3.8 cm) Edition of 3, 1 Artist's Proof
Photo by Michael James O'Brien
© Matthew Barney, courtesy Barbara Gladstone



CREMASTER 3: Five Points of Fellowship, 2002 C-print in acrylic frame
54 x 44 x 1 _ inches (137.2 x 111.8 x 3.8 cm) Edition of 6, 1 Artist's Proof
Photo by Chris Winget © Matthew Barney, courtesy Barbara Gladstone



CREMASTER 5: her Giant, 1997 C-print in acrylic frame
52 _ x 42 _ x 1 inches (134 x 108.3 x 2.5 cm) Edition of 6, 2 Artist's Proof
Photo by Michael James O'Brien
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