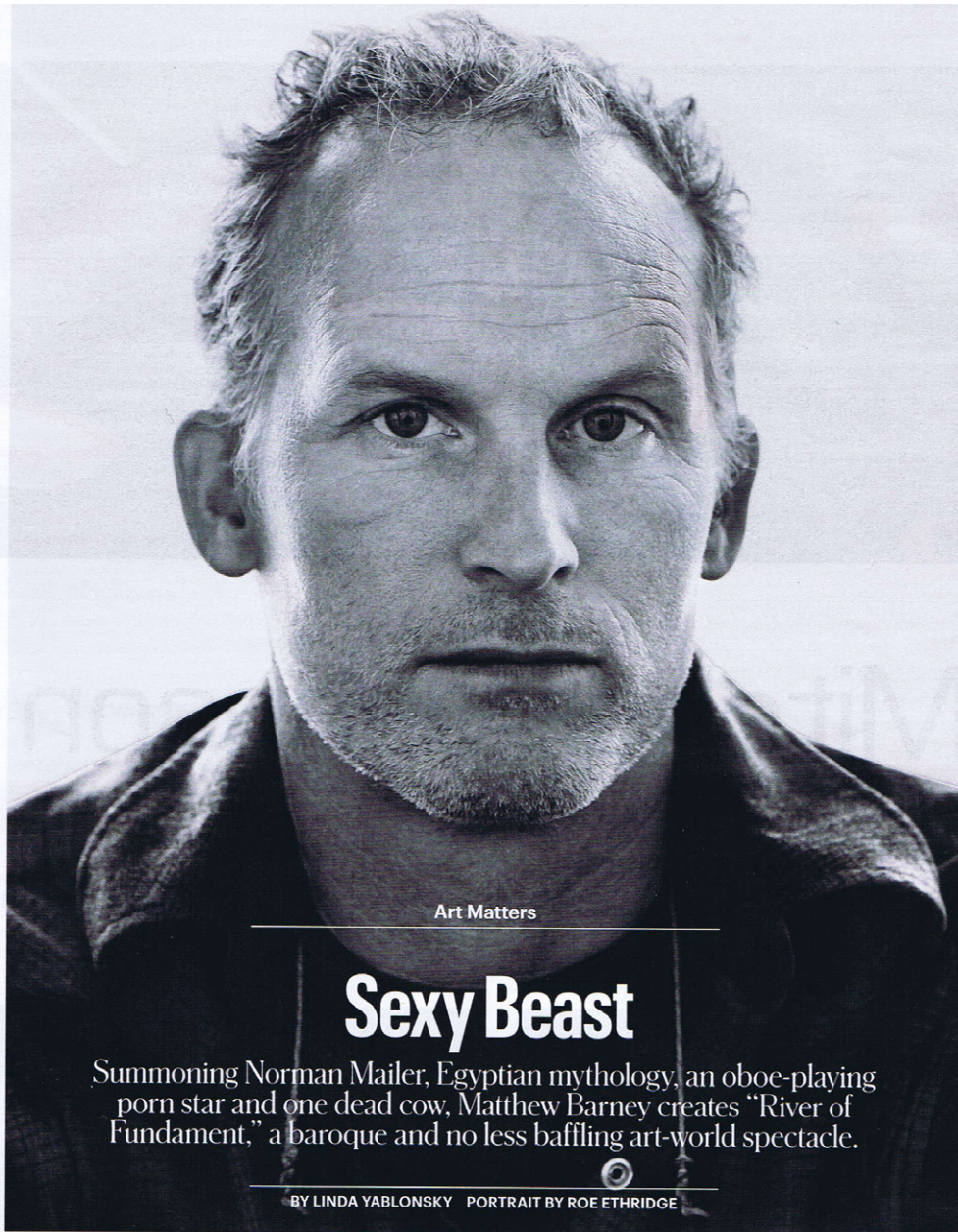


Women's Fashion
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The Surreal Mind of
Matthew Barney
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Art Matters

Sexy Beast

Summoning Norman Mailer, Egyptian mythology, an oboe-playing porn star and one dead cow, Matthew Barney creates "River of Fundament," a baroque and no less baffling art-world spectacle.

BY LINDA YABLONSKY PORTRAIT BY ROE ETHRIDGE

LEAVE IT TO MATTHEW BARNEY to come up with a zombie movie musical. Titled "River of Fundament" and initially conceived as an opera, the film runs a stately five and a half hours, has an inventive score by Barney's collaborator, Jonathan Bepler, and took seven years to complete. The actors Paul Giamatti, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Ellen Burstyn and Elaine Stritch share top billing in a cast of hundreds, with supporting roles filled by a step-dancing team, twin baritones, a porn star, a contortionist, a wailing chorus and Aimee Mullins, the double-amputee actress, athlete and former Alexander McQueen model who appeared with Barney in the third chapter of his epic, "The Cremaster Cycle" (1994-2002).

A master of the opulent grotesque, Barney immerses all of them in the mythology of ancient Egypt — as imagined by Norman Mailer in his sexually twisted, 1983

historical novel, "Ancient Evenings." Set in 1290-1100 B.C., the book follows a nobleman on a lusty, 700-page journey to an afterlife reserved for pharaohs. The story is introduced by his grandson and his Ka (spirit double), who pull a debauched all-nighter, while passing from death to rebirth via a river of excrement.

Mailer is the very American immortality-seeker in Barney's demented scenario, which features a throne room equipped with a giant toilet, women singing Walt Whitman and the noir romance of Isis and Osiris. The Mailer character reincarnates three times. The first is played by John Buffalo Mailer, 35, a son of the writer. At one shocking point, he eviscerates a cow and then climbs into its belly. Moments later, "Norman II" emerges as the 72-year-old, African-American jazz drummer Milford Graves. (The third "Norman" is Chief David Beautiful

THE MASTER
The artist Matthew Barney gave up the idea of being a plastic surgeon to study art at Yale.

Bald Eagle, 94, a Lakota tribal leader.)

Much of the action takes place during a wake for the late author in his Brooklyn home, faithfully reproduced for the film. Guests at the wake include Dick Cavett, Liz Smith, Salman Rushdie and the artist Lawrence Weiner.

“River of Fundament,” which premiered at Brooklyn Academy of Music this week and will be shown at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich next month, along with an exhibition of related sculpture at the Haus der Kunst, is the second film that Barney, 46, has based on a Mailer book. (He used “The Executioner’s Song” for “Cremaster 2.”) “To make it work, I need conflict with my subject matter,” Barney says. “Mailer provides that conflict.” Here, some of the participants recall their parts in it.



SAIL AWAY Above, from left: Barney’s team floated a replica of Norman Mailer’s house on a barge from their Long Island City studio down the East River to Brooklyn; Barney dressed as an amalgam of the late artist James Lee Byars and Osiris, the Egyptian god of death, in an abandoned Detroit church.

Matthew Barney: When Mailer said to me that I should really read “Ancient Evenings,” I thought, Wow, this is so much like the beginning of “Cremaster 3.” I’ve already done this. But the more I thought about it the more excited I got. This was when Jonathan Bepler and I were thinking of doing an opera.

Jonathan Bepler (composer): We were looking at it as seven acts, each in a different location. The first was in 2008, where we demolished a car in a showroom outside of Los Angeles with a shredding machine and 300 people watching.

Barney: At one point I got interested in a functioning mine as one of the locations. We visited mines in Mexico, Poland and the salt mines in Detroit.

Matthew D. Ryle (production designer): In Detroit, we built five cupolas to melt down iron. They had fire coming out of the top and 25 tons of molten iron coming out of the bottom. The scale was huge. There’s a whole community of iron-pouring enthusiasts making cast-iron objects. It’s like Burning Man.

Barney: I’m interested in the unpredictable element, whether it’s 25 tons of iron or a live animal. I’m not particularly interested in the control of traditional filmmaking.

Ryle: The film didn’t take on Mailer till two years ago, when we built his house for the wake. We worked from photographs and measurements to build an accurate replica of the interior and shot that, then dismantled the whole thing and reassembled it on a barge.

Barney: Harold Bloom’s review of “Ancient Evenings”



suggested that Mailer is the protagonist, and that it’s basically about his relationship to the American literary canon. So I developed the story from there, placing Mailer at the center of the film as three spirits who transform through the body of an animal. I was deeply into horror as a teenager. Still am.

Maggie Gyllenhaal (“Hathfertiti II,” mother of “Norman”): I got an email from Matthew out of the blue, asking me to come to his studio to talk about the project. I didn’t know him personally but I’d seen his “Cremaster” show at the Guggenheim and was blown away by it.

Aimee Mullins (“Novice,” “Agent Mullins,” “Isis”): With Matthew you don’t ask why. It’s why not?

Ellen Burstyn (“Hathfertiti III”): My character is played by three different actresses: a child, Maggie Gyllenhaal and me, a queen at the end of her life. When I came on the set, Norman’s house was already decaying and that looked unique. But his project was so nontraditional that all I could say was, O.K., the guy’s a genius. Just do whatever he wants.

Keith Edmier (makeup): To me, the really incredible story is what John Buffalo Mailer had to go through — playing your father and being in your childhood home. I couldn’t imagine what was going through his head.

John Buffalo Mailer (“Norman I”): It was so mind-bogglingly profound on so many levels. I’m playing the afterlife version of my father in a one-to-one re-creation of my childhood home.

Milford Graves (“Norman II”): Jonathan Bepler was my student at Bennington in the ’80s. He called me up to play “Norman II” and we had a conversation with Matthew. They told me stuff that was avant-garde, avant-garde. Way out. I said, I’m a reincarnation of Norman Mailer? Beautiful. I’m a Jewish cat now. They told me

I would be climbing out of this cow. I thought it would be a dummy cow.

Mailer: At first it seemed unlikely we would use a real cow. But then it was. And I thought, Wow, I'm really going to do this. Matthew said he wouldn't ask me to do anything that he wouldn't. And then he did it. So I had to. It was extraordinarily peaceful inside the cow.

Graves: It was like going into a freezer. They had to keep ice in there. I mean, that was a real cow. I don't know how I went in. You never know what you'll be able to do until the moment comes. You're always learning.

Barney: In "Ancient Evenings," the river is a colon. It's a river of feces. In order to transform, you have to pass back through that river, the fundament. The way the novel transposes the body and the landscape is one thing that attracted me to it. Bodily functions are interchangeable with the primordial ooze of the earth.

Edmier: In Matthew's work there's always this cold, wet, sticky goo. I have an aversion to sticky wet stuff. The last thing I want to do is touch some sticky, cold, wet thing at 4 in the morning. Material-wise, I mean. When Matthew is laughing I know it's going to be really bad, like when an eyeball comes out of someone's rear end. For months I had nightmares.

Gyllenhaal: I thought I was going to have beautiful makeup and maybe a prosthetic. I'm supposed to have birthed "Norman II," so I had a big scar down my belly, but aside from that I have no makeup. All these other actors were in the dressing room getting penises with ribbons around them, and I had nothing.

Edmier: One big thing for Matthew was the relationship of dry to wet. When his character, or John Buffalo Mailer's, comes out of the river, they're drying and cracking. We didn't want a "Night of the Living Dead," but what it really looks like when people are exposed to contaminated water. Most actors hate this kind of stuff. It's miserable.

Lawrence Weiner ("Guest at the Wake"): I was on the scene as a kid and so I could get into Mailer's parties. The house was pretty close to a replica, and the people all sort of looked the way they looked back then. I'm in two scenes, one with Salman Rushdie on the deck, ostensibly

looking out at the river and having a conversation about men and the exploitation of women. The other scene was at the table with Elaine Stritch, who was hilarious, because she kept forgetting her lines.

Mullins: It was fun to see Elaine as the master of ceremonies of the wake. She wanted to know her motivation, why she would say things. At the end of our last scene together, when I'm covered in fake sewage and my beard is glued to my face, she came over to me and said, "Well, kid. I think we've got a hit on our hands."

Barney: I think I'm at my best when I can set up a situation where the action is largely dictated by the environment. In the throne

room scene with Paul Giamatti, for example, he explains to "Norman" that he's been using his feces to cultivate crops that people eat. It was easy for him to get his head around that character because of our conversations and the rehearsals, but also because of the environment. Bobbi Starr was really easy to direct. She's a classical oboist. And one of the most famous anal

actresses in the adult film business. There's a claustrophobia in my films, an interiority that's relentless. The peaks of violence, of humor and explicit sexual imagery are like little valves that relieve pressure.

Stephen Payne ("Usermare," a pharaoh, father of "Hathfertiti"): A scene around a table was chaotic as all get out. Matthew kept the dead carcass of a pig in there for weeks. The stench of death and decay was overwhelming.

Gyllenhaal: Someone asked me if I wanted tiger balm up my nose. I said no. Then we walk into the studio and there's this decaying pig and maggots in the food. It smelled so bad I thought I was going to pass out. Then we start doing the scene. There are these women singing, and the camera is going around the table, and Matthew comes in and says, "Can you guys be a little more natural?" I didn't know what he meant. Natural, as in natural, or natural for a Matthew Barney movie? After that it became some wild, crazy experience. At the time, I was also shooting "White House Down," which could not be more different.

Payne: What was extraordinary was that at the table there were these Egyptian gods, a barbershop quartet, four violinists, two opera singers and nine Native American chanters and drummers, and they were all playing at once. It set up a powerful vibration that really affected me. I've done some strange things, but nothing that had the weight of this. Matthew brings a certain bearing to everything he does. It's almost as if he wills the magic.

Starr ("Queen," "Garage Manager"): You watch an adult film and the next day you forget it. You watch a Matthew Barney, and it sticks with you for the rest of your life.

Mailer: I think the ripples from this will go for years. This work that my dad slaved over for 10 years now will have a new life. After all it's really about reincarnation.

Barney: I would want to be buried in a box that lasts forever but is perforated. ▀



'Someone asked me if I wanted tiger balm up my nose. I said no. Then we walk into the studio and there's this decaying pig and maggots in the food. It smelled so bad I thought I was going to pass out,' says Maggie Gyllenhaal.



RITEs OF PASSAGE
Left: as the Egyptian queen "Hathfertiti," Ellen Burstyn falls into her final sleep, after declaring her readiness for the afterlife. Above: molten iron is poured during a Detroit sequence of the film.