

**Matthew Barney's Cremaster Cycle (1994-2003)**

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
Through June 11, 2003.

*Reviewed by Derek Owens*

Whether or not you agree with Michael Kimmelman that Matthew Barney is "hands down [at] just shy of 36, the most compelling, richly imaginative artist to emerge in years," there is reason to commit a day or two to the Guggenheim before Barney's one-man show disappears on June 11<sup>th</sup>. While there are plenty of artists out there whose work I'm unfamiliar with, so far I Kimmelman's claim seems justified to me.

Certainly no other young contemporary American artist has impressed and overwhelmed me as much as Barney has. But even if you're only remotely interested in Celtic giants, fetishism, androgyny, paraplegic fashion models, football stadiums, Harry Houdini, prosthetics, genitalia, tapioca, zombies, Vaseline (both cold and molten), the Chrysler building, rodeo, hardcore drumming, bees, the Mormon Tabernacle choir, mermen, genealogy, Hungarian opera houses, body-building faerie eunuchs, umbilical cords, serial killers, slapstick bartenders, Masonic rituals, 144 truckloads of salt, or really uncomfortable shoes—and let's face it, who isn't these days—the Cremaster Cycle is waiting for you.

I first saw some of Matthew Barney's work several years ago at the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis. In one room of the museum there was a monitor suspended from the ceiling, facing away from the door. Those of us in the hallway outside the room couldn't see what was playing on the video, just the viewers lined up against the opposite wall, and it was the visceral reaction they were having to the Barney film that drew me in, their facial expressions a mixture of confusion, anger, delight, boredom, disgust, and quiet awe. (The film was one of his early short features, depicting among other things two satyrs wrestling in slow motion in the back seat of a limousine.) In another room *Cremaster 4* was showing, and I found the narrative so utterly unlike anything I'd ever seen before that I went back the next day to watch it a second time. Now with the Guggenheim showing all five films in his Cremaster cycle, I've recently sat through all of them (missing only the last hour of *Cremaster 3*). And already I'm eager to go back and watch the whole cycle again. Maybe it's because I had to suffer through Chicago several weeks ago and still haven't recovered, but I find Barney's work to be some of the most fascinating filmmaking to appear in a long time. There's no one else like him.

Briefly, because you can read various "explanations" of Barney's work on the internet, the Cremaster cycle is a sequence of five films, created out of order, so viewing them chronologically isn't necessary to appreciate them; they range in length from 45 minutes to three hours. The cremaster muscle, the launching point for Barney's extended (no pun intended) project, refers to the muscle that raises or lowers a man's testicles in response to temperature, arousal, or fear, and it provides one of the overarching metaphorical landing sites throughout the cycle. If left at this, I would find this preoccupation with the scrotum, well, a bit icky, but Barney is also interested in how this muscle refers to those early weeks of embryonic development before the sexual organs of the fetus have either ascended to become ovaries, or descended to become testicles. It's this liminal state of sexual and creative potentiality that provides some of the conceptual scaffolding supporting the five films, and related motifs—grapes, dual Goodyear blimps on leashes, waxy eggs, conjoined automobiles, glass fallopian tubes—manifest continually.

But this is just the tip of Barney's iceberg, for the films are also repositories for a host of his private obsessions that he pursues with an exuberance I find both visually and musically enthralling (one critic has commented only partly tongue in cheek that his psychic symbolic universe seems far more complicated than the cabala.) Ultimately it's of little importance whether or not one sympathizes with the fetishes circulating in Barney's dreamscape. Personally I can relate to his fascination with bees, Masonic temples, Joseph Smith, monsters, and whatnot, while the western iconography, along with the Vaseline, leave me a bit flat—but whether his vocabulary clicks with our own hardly matters. What makes Barney's films so absorbing is the degree to which the artist has completely immersed himself into, and collaborated with, a webwork of private archetypes and fixations, woven together with an idiosyncratic rhetoric of juxtaposition. The requisite energy and confidence to pull off such an insistently personal mythology is itself noteworthy; that Barney does so by creating five startlingly unique films, each one radically different

from the next, is why he's perhaps the most interesting "art star" today, particularly among people in their twenties, who seem to comprise the bulk of his audience. (That Barney, in contrast to art stars of the 80s like Julian Schnabel, seems decidedly uninterested in fame, money, or celebrity status, adds a dash of intrigue to his stature.)

All five films of the Cremaster cycle are showing on certain days at the Guggenheim. The films are viewed in the theater, as well as broadcast on monitors around the museum, where an impressive collection of Barney's sculptures, photographs, and site specific installations are assembled. While some critics like Nancy Spector, who curated the exhibit, insist that these three-dimensional ephemera are not secondary artifacts, on this I disagree. I find Barney's waxy sculptures and lubricated photographs oddly static, as if they were archeological relics exhibited as evidence that his visionary films were really made events, and not oneiric conjurings. Walking around his sculptures after watching the films is a little like the cliché of waking up from a dream, only to find some item from that dream staring back at you from the nightstand. The sculptures are interesting in execution, but they cannot compete with the films themselves, which are by far the main reason to attend the exhibit. (Perhaps I'm being cynical, but it's worth noting that one of the ways Barney has supported the costs of making these films is through selling his photographs, prints, and sculptures; one wonders how many were created primarily to fund the cycle.) Then again, it's probably wrong to expect this work to "compare" to the films, which are collaborative enterprises involving dozens if not hundreds of participants, and where lush musical scores (by turns chilling, romantic, and hilarious), elaborate makeup, ritualized athletic feats of endurance, cinematography both sweeping and claustrophobic, and an exquisite eye for color all converge. That said, there is no better museum in the world in which to contemplate the entirety of Barney's work, as the white spiral concourse vaguely echoes some of the tunnels, elevators, and elaborate architectures sprinkled throughout the films. In fact the epicenter of his Cremaster cycle, a sequence in the middle of *Cremaster 3*, takes place in the Guggenheim, and it's a delight to watch this sequence play on screens suspended in the center of the museum while standing where the scenes were shot.

A number of critics have pointed out that what distinguishes Barney from post-World War II avant-garde filmmakers like Stan Brakhage is his unapologetic embrace of narrative, and for this reason alone anyone interested with narrative theory (as well as biology and mythology) ought to at least dip into the Barney universe. It's no surprise that his films strike a chord among younger viewers in their twenties, who have come of age amidst a hypermediated network of virtual connections, and who likely respond to the fantastical range of Barney's work not the way viewers must have greeted surrealism nearly a century ago, but probably with a comfortable sense of recognition. In fact, for those who grew up with the hyperactive jump-cutting of television where few images now rarely last more than a second, and for whom the lack of closure implicit in the infinite regress of the world wide web is more familiar than sequential linearity, Barney's work might even appear exotically self-enclosed and soothingly slow-paced. It's also important to realize that while the term "surrealistic" might initially come to mind when first encountering his work, there is in fact little of surrealism here. A fierce logic permeates his materials. He is closer to Maya Deren's short films, which were also motivated by self-conscious religious and psychological themes, than the shock-effect sensationalism of Bunuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*, or even Duchamp's (overrated, I've always thought) final masterpiece, *Etant Donnés*, where the uncomfortable eroticism, body modification, and voyeuristic framing is a distant influence to some of Barney's favorite themes. In fact, Barney might be more of a classicist than anything else, his epic vision more Wagnerian and Homeric than Kafkaesque. He pushes the envelope so much further than do many contemporary gender-bending artists whose work remains compromised by predictable irony. And his forays into the grotesque make David Lynch films seem like Sears commercials in comparison (an unfair observation perhaps, since this has always been one of Lynch's objectives). And his relentless composing of mythopoetic and archetypal terrain is not only exuberant and refreshing, but might well point to an aesthetic that speaks remarkably well to an audience coming of age long after the declaration of postmodernism. One wonders if the next generation of film and video makers, influenced by Cremaster, might eventually come to see Barney as their Orson Welles.

If you do decide to check out the Guggenheim show, I recommend biting the bullet and going on a Friday, when all five films are screened in order (on other days only two films are shown). Get there a little before 10 AM, pay your \$15, and start with the 10:30 showing. There will be a good half hour in between

showings, with more than an hour off for lunch. You'll be done in time for a late dinner, and wind up with a rare filmic experience. The only extended film event that has had an equal, though obviously very different, impact on me was when the ten-hour *Shoah* was released, and I sat in the dark weeping on and off with the audience, only to walk out of the theater into a tranquil Schenectady night. This time around the experience was inverted: one loses oneself in Barney's exhilarating parallel universe, only to exit the theater and into a world hypnotized by the latest of our criminal wars.

One last comment: available on the web, and also in brochures at the museum, you'll find a synopsis of each Cremaster film written by Nancy Spector. These are helpful and interesting—and yet I would recommend initially watching some of the Cremaster cycle without paying much attention to these footnotes. Let the films wash over you and work their effect, and then later check out the accompanying interpretations, which are sometimes unintentionally funny. One can't help but feel as if Barney is secretly grinning at this matter-of-fact explication, especially when he's been quoted as saying that "I want there to be a fraction of the art that even I don't understand." (There is a wonderful sense of humor underlying much of the Cremaster cycle, which I suspect might have gone unnoticed by more than a few critics.) There's no reason one shouldn't devour the accompanying texts in order to more fully "get" the Cremaster Cycle, and I certainly understand the desire to make all the connections and diagram the references. But one can also revel in Barney's films without the roadmap. And perhaps explanatory notes like Spector's can have the unintended effect of dampening the weirdness of these remarkable movies. If you doubt me compare her matter-of-fact liner note for the opening of Cremaster 3—"After a prologue steeped in Celtic mythology"—with the wonderfully hilarious opening 10 minutes to which she refers.

You can easily get a quick taste of Matthew Barney's Cremaster cycle by going to [www.cremaster.net](http://www.cremaster.net) and clicking on the trailer. This site also offers glimpses and outlines of all the five films, plus more detailed information about the viewing times at the Guggenheim. And if you have time browse the Barney catalog, which at \$45 is really not bad, considering the size and color quality. In particular look at the lengthy "vocabulary review" in the catalog which documents the countless fetishes running throughout the Barney mindscape.