

“I was a quarterback, I’m very comfortable working on a single thing with a group of people.”

– Matthew Barney



Matthew Barney. Photo by Chris Winget.

< MATTHEW BARNEY >

Matthew Barney was born in San Francisco in 1967; at age six, he moved to Boise, Idaho. When his parents separated, Barney continued to live with his father in Idaho, while his mother, an abstract painter, moved to New York City. As a teenager Barney played football on his high school team. His experiences as an athlete informed his earliest work. For his thesis exhibition at Yale University, he created an installation of video and sculptural objects that combined the physicality of sports, the fetishistic nature of athletic equipment, and the endurance involved in performance art. After graduating college, Barney moved to New York City and entered the art world to almost instant success.

Between 1988 and 1993, Barney developed the *Drawing Restraint* series. He devised situations of self-imposed restriction, such as jumping on a trampoline, climbing over obstacles, or restraining himself with surgical latex hosing, through which he would produce artworks. In this series he explored the feasibility of creating something under severe physical constraints.

Between 1990 and 1991, Barney also created video, photography, and sculptural pieces such as *The Jim Otto Suite* (1990), which features fictional characters who function as metaphors for thematic motifs that run throughout the work. Barney has enlisted historical characters such as football hero Jim Otto, escape artist Harry Houdini, and convicted murderer Gary Gilmore as symbolic characters within his narratives.

In 1994, Barney began work on his epic *Cremaster* cycle, a five-part film project accompanied by related sculptures, photographs, and drawings. Barney’s work continues to explore the transcendence of physical limitations in a multimedia art practice that includes feature-length films, video installations, sculpture, photography, and drawing. At age 36, Matthew Barney is the youngest artist ever to have a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum.

“The film moves at what I consider to be the speed of art—which is slow. *Cremaster 2* does what I think sculpture does: It moves slowly and requires that one move around it to understand it, and to visit it repeatedly.” — Matthew Barney



Goodyear Field, 1996 Self-lubricating plastic, prosthetic plastic, petroleum jelly, silicone, Astroturf, pearlescent vinyl, cast tapioca, cast polyester, polyester ribbon, costume pearls, speculae, and Pyrex, 1.37 x 6.81 x 8.23 m overall. Emanuel Hoffman Foundation, on permanent loan to Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel.

< SCULPTURE AND DRAWING >

Although his works are usually shown on the screens of movie theaters, first and always, Barney considers himself a sculptor. His sculptures are incorporated into his films as part of complex environments.

For the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, the sculptures, banners, drawings, and photographs produced for each episode are displayed parallel to the videos to provide a conceptual framework. This juxtaposition allows viewers to see relationships, examine details, and consider the how the sculptures function differently within the films than they do installed in the galleries.

These three-dimensional works are not cinematic relics or props, but incarnations of the characters and settings. They exist separately from the films, but carry the same content.

Sculpture plays a highly visible role in the *Cremaster* cycle, and Barney has designed and constructed virtually every element. Barney's choice of materials is both personal and nontraditional. It includes plastics, beeswax, salt, tapioca, and Vaseline. Many of the materials he chooses exist in several states. Tapioca is a starch that can be solid, liquid, or gelatinous. Barney's

signature medium Vaseline changes from solid to liquid in response to temperature.

Some sculptures are as large as rooms, while containing very small details that might go unnoticed to all but the most astute viewers. Examine the elaborate sculptural containers that Barney has fabricated to hold the laser disks for each of his films. Each incorporates the symbols of the episode contained within in elegantly abstracted sculptural form.

Barney's sculptures frequently combine and mutate familiar objects into totally new amalgamations. An entire thesis could be written on the footwear that appears in his films: shoes equipped with blades for cutting potatoes into pentagonal wedges, shoes that spew grapes into elliptical patterns. One critic commented, “Not since the early Andy Warhol has an artist spent so much energy on footwear.”¹

Drawing permeates the entire *Cremaster* cycle. Barney uses drawings to conceptualize ideas and provide detailed storyboards that delineate the films' thematic flow. Maps and other found materials are sometimes incorporated into the storyboard process. Each episode generates finished works on paper.



Vitrine containing special-edition laser disk
CREMASTER 1, 1995.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Image #1: *Goodyear Field*, 1996.

Image #2: Vitrine containing special edition laser disk
CREMASTER 1, 1995.

- ▶ Show Image #1, *Goodyear Field*, 1996. It is a sculpture from *Cremaster 1*. What words can you use to describe it?
- ▶ What qualities does this work share with more traditional forms of sculpture? In what ways does this work seem unlike what is traditionally considered sculpture?
- ▶ If you are viewing this work at the museum, notice how a similar work is used in the film. How does the sculpture differ from the table used in the film?
- ▶ If you were using this sculpture as part of a film, how would you use it? What action would take place here? What narratives can you create that could be played out within this work?
- ▶ Show Image #2, the sculpture that Barney has created as a container for the laser disk of *Cremaster 1*. If you came across this sculpture/container, what might you expect to find within it? Discuss what other types of objects/products come in elaborate containers? Why? The cases, known as vitrines, are also designed by Barney and should be considered as integral parts of the work.

EXPLORATIONS FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Make a plan for an object that appears to be functional but really is not.
- Make a plan for an impossible shoe that can perform an unusual task. Through drawings and/or by transforming an ordinary shoe, indicate form, material, use, and user.
- Choose an unusual medium from which to make a work of art. Once you have completed your work, describe why this medium was chosen.
- Make a list of possible mediums for making art that have the possibility of changing states in response to external forces: temperature, light, pressure, etc. Why might an artist choose to make a work that will change in response to environmental conditions?
- After looking carefully at the sculpture that Barney has created to contain for his film, choose an object that is important to you and create a container constructed specifically to house that object. When you are done, describe your process.

“The pressure of that wall of mountains combined with the great distances between places: it was something to overcome. I think there’s a psychological dimension to the way landscape imprints people from that area. I guess formally I’m sort of interested in that.” — Matthew Barney, on growing up in Boise, Idaho



CREMASTER 2: *Genealogy*, 1999.
1 of 3 C-prints, 21 3/4 x 21 3/4 inches each.
Edition of 3, 2 A.P.

< PLACE >

The narrative for the *Cremaster* cycle flows directly from its geographic and architectural settings. In fact, the five locations were the first elements of the *Cremaster* cycle that Barney defined. The choice of setting for the episodes follows an eastward trajectory, beginning in the American Northwest and ending in Eastern Europe. The table on the reverse lists the various locations.

The land and setting are carefully chosen and bear connections to Barney’s personal history. He was raised in the West, and he currently

lives in New York City. He has Celtic ancestry, and the birthplace of Harry Houdini, who has featured prominently in his work, is Budapest.

The setting for the films is the glue that holds everything together. Setting functions almost like a central character and can be a Celtic island, or a baroque opera house, as well a person.

The abstract, non-linear quality of Barney’s work allows landscape, color, costume, and set to come to the fore.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Image #3: CREMASTER 2: *Genealogy*

(Please note: If you are at the museum you will notice that these landscapes are displayed vertically. If you are showing this image in class be sure to insert it into the slide projector vertically.)

- ▶ View Image #3, *CREMASTER 2: Genealogy*. How does displaying this landscape vertically change your perception of it? What do you notice that you might miss if it was exhibited horizontally?
- ▶ Have you ever been to a similar place? Have you seen similar landscapes in the movies, on television, in advertising? What are your associations with this landscape?
- ▶ What might be the reason(s) for turning this landscape on its edge?
- ▶ Tilt your head (or turn the slide) so that the image is shown horizontally. How does your perception of the images change? Which orientation do you prefer and why?

CREMASTER 1	CREMASTER 2	CREMASTER 3	CREMASTER 4	CREMASTER 5
Boise, Idaho	Salt Lake City, Utah	New York City, NY	The Isle of Man, Irish Sea	Budapest, Hungary
Bronco Stadium, Boise State University	Mormon Tabernacle	Chrysler Building	Motorcycle/car racetrack, Northern Island	Hungarian State Opera House
	Columbian Exposition 1893, Chicago	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum		Chain Bridge, (Lanchid) Budapest
	Bonneville Salt Flats	Horse-racing track in Saratoga Springs, NY		Gellért Baths
	Columbia Icefield, Canada	Fingal's Cave, Staffa, Scottish Hebrides		

EXPLORATIONS FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Think about a place that has influenced you. It might be a place that is particularly memorable, or one where an important event occurred that shaped your identity either positively or negatively. Write a description of how that place looks and smells, how it feels, what sounds you associate with it. Why is this place important to you, and what about this place will you carry with you forever?
- Take a series of photographs of a place that is important to you. Try to capture different aspects of that place by taking the photographs from different angles and stances, at different times of the day or year, with and without people in the photograph. Select one photograph that best represents your feeling about the place and tell why you have chosen it.
- Plot the locations of Barney's films on a world map. Using maps and the internet, locate as many of the sites as you can with descriptions and images if possible. Have you ever visited any of these places or similar places (a football stadium, a racetrack)? What personal associations do these places hold for you?

“I have a pretty specific way that I put these things together and they do function as a tight narrative for me, but I don’t expect that to penetrate perfectly for somebody else.” – Matthew Barney



Cremaster 3 flag

< SYMBOLISM >

Barney is an extremely deliberate artist. Everything that happens in his work happens for a particular reason. Nothing is arbitrary. He is inventing a world with a language and set of symbols to go with it. For instance, in *Cremaster 3* the tartan fabric specially woven for Barney’s costume incorporates the colors blue, red, and apricot, to symbolize veins, arteries, and skin.

One recurring symbol is an ellipse with a horizontal line bisecting it: -0-. It appears as the basis for an insignia or logo in all five films. As a pictograph, it represents the artist’s notion of self-imposed restraint over an organic system. Named the *Field Emblem*, it signifies the orifice and its closure. Barney sees human biology as a kind of contest with the environment; like a traditional heraldic emblem, the Field Emblem encapsulates and translates the artist’s complex symbology into visual shorthand. But the Field Emblem also functions like a corporate logo,

ensuring a certain brand identity by virtue of its constant presence in the work.

Each *Cremaster* episode has its own colors and customized emblem superimposed on the Field Emblem.

CREMASTER 1: The winged Goodyear boot with a small silver funnel added to the toe.

CREMASTER 2: A heraldic arrangement of the beehive, (the state insignia of Utah and a Mormon symbol) the American and Canadian flags and the dates 1977 (the year of Gilmore’s execution) and 1893 (the year of the Columbian Exposition).

CREMASTER 3: A Masonic coat of arms with a double-headed eagle and the Chrysler Building.

CREMASTER 4: The Arms of Man or Manx triskelion (three identical armored legs revolving around a central axis).

CREMASTER 5: A stylized fleur-de-lis.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Image #4: Field Emblem from *Cremaster 3* flag

- ▶ View the emblem from *Cremaster 3*. How many symbols can you identify? How many have you seen before and in what context? Discuss the possible meanings for assembling these symbols together. If you are visiting the exhibition, how many of the symbols in the emblem you can relate to viewing the *Cremaster 3* portion of the museum installation?
- ▶ Each *Cremaster* film has its own color scheme. For *Cremaster 3* the colors are green and orange, the colors of the Irish national flag. What associations do you have with these colors? If you are visiting the museum exhibition, describe how the colors of the emblem become part of the *Cremaster 3* installation.
- ▶ If you are visiting the exhibition, take note of how many times, and in what contexts you see the Field Emblem repeated.
- ▶ Do you think it necessary to understand the artist's meaning in a work of art in order to appreciate it?

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Study the use of symbols and icons in twentieth-century advertising. Through an internet search assemble examples of various contemporary symbols and logos. Analyze the “messages” that each symbol conveys through its shape, color, and imagery.
- Research the imagery, colors, schemes, and words contained in national, state, and local flags. To what historical events, beliefs, and people do these symbols refer?
- In the emblem for *Cremaster 3*, Barney layers and integrates symbols from more than ten different sources into one cohesive design. Using either traditional or digital media, create your own personal logo, corporate seal, banner, heraldic emblem, or flag. Integrate your initials with abstract shapes, images, design, and color to portray an aspect of your personality, interests, hobbies, and/or aspirations. Be prepared to discuss your choices.
- Barney makes many references in his work: to historical figures, events, sites, artists, and philosophies. Some may be familiar, but many are more obscure. Choose a reference from the following list and research that topic as it refers to a specific *Cremaster* episode:
 - CREMASTER 1 Busby Berkeley, Leni Riefenstahl, Goodyear Blimp
 - CREMASTER 2 The Columbian Exposition of 1893, Gary Gilmore, Harry Houdini, Mormonism, the life of bees
 - CREMASTER 3 The Chrysler Building, Richard Serra, Hiram Abiff and Solomon's Temple [Freemasonry], Saratoga Race Track
 - CREMASTER 4 The Isle of Man, Loughton Ram
 - CREMASTER 5 Ursula Andress, Greek tragedy, grand operaHow does your research influence your interpretation of Barney's work?

“[Harry Houdini]’s a model. He continues to be useful I think as a character.... There’s a brutality and a physicality... that combination of accuracy and speed and violence.” — Matthew Barney



Matthew Barney as Gary Gilmore, *CREMASTER 2: Korihor*, 1999, Gelatin-silver print in acrylic frame (shown unframed).

Matthew Barney as the Loughton Candidate, *CREMASTER 4: The Loughton Candidate*, 1994 C-print in cast-plastic frame (shown unframed).

< CHARACTER >

Each of the *Cremaster* films focuses on a different central character.

CREMASTER 1: Goodyear, a 1930s glamour girl.

CREMASTER 2: Gary Gilmore, a convicted murderer.

CREMASTER 3: the Entered Apprentice and Hiram Abiff, the mythic architect of the Temple of Solomon.

CREMASTER 4: the Loughton Candidate, a tap dancing satyr.

CREMASTER 5: the Queen of Chain and her Diva/Giant/Magician.

Barney’s central theme requires that all of the protagonists undergo a rite of passage and overcome physical and emotional challenges. Barney believes that change cannot happen without struggle. This concept is based in part on his personal experience as an athlete, when he built strength and endurance by withstanding repetitive physical stress. The phenomenon of athletic training plays a central role in Barney’s work. So does the realm of organized sports and competition. “For Barney, the idea of ordeal is not negative. It is through the overcoming of resistance that a system

grows. Barney sees both the artist and the athlete as alchemists who convert one thing into another.”²

Some characters are inspired by historical figures; others are more rooted in fantasy and mythology. But even when a character is based on a real person, Barney’s translation is never literal. In *Cremaster 2*, Barney plays Gary Gilmore. In actuality Gilmore was executed by a firing squad for committing two murders, but rather than translate this literally, Barney constructs a metaphoric rodeo setting where Gilmore dies riding a bull.

Some characters appear to be totally invented. In *Cremaster 4* the Loughton Candidate, (played by Barney) is a dapper half-man, half-goat creature in a three-piece suit. He gazes in the mirror, and inspects two sets of empty horn sockets beneath a head of matted red hair. Although this being seems totally invented, there is actually some basis in reality for his formation. The word Loughton refers to a sheep indigenous to the Isle of Man (the setting for this episode). It possesses two pairs of horns and its wool is reddish in color.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Image #5: Matthew Barney as Gary Gilmore, *CREMASTER 2: Korihor*, 1999.

Image #6: Matthew Barney as the Loughton Candidate, *CREMASTER 4: The Loughton Candidate*, 1994.

- ▶ Look at the images of Barney as Gary Gilmore and as the Loughton Candidate. Describe your reactions to each image. List the attributes you think each character would possess. Discuss what kind of story you would construct for each.
- ▶ The characters in Barney's films are sometimes incarnations of real people. For instance within the *Cremaster* series, the magician Harry Houdini (played by author Norman Mailer) plays a significant role. It has sometimes been said that Harry Houdini is Matthew Barney's alter ego. From what you have learned about Matthew Barney, and what you can research about Harry Houdini, what might Barney find interesting about Houdini?
- ▶ *Cremaster 2* is loosely based on an actual event, the life and death of Gary Gilmore. Think about and discuss significant events or times that might have sufficient importance to become the subject of a major work of art. Discuss what characteristic of an event might give it importance (e.g., the emotions it aroused, its uniqueness, its ordinariness, its implications for long-term consequences, and so forth).
- ▶ In Barney's films the protagonist endures a struggle or challenge. It has been said, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Do you believe this statement? Why? Why not?

EXPLORATIONS FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- What aspect of your personal experience would you choose as the basis for a work of art? What medium and scale would you choose to work in and why? What would the title of this work be? Discuss whether your work represents how you see yourself or how you think others see you.
- Using either words or images, build three views of yourself: as you are, as a historic figure, and as a mythological character.
- If you were to choose an alter ego who would it be and why? Research the life of the person you have chosen and write an essay that describes the affinities that you perceive to have in common.

“He continues to push the envelope of his eccentric ideas about beauty, sexual ambiguity, symbolic narrative, and in the way he propels his characters through space, in their startling physical acts, transformation, and inspired costumes.” — Roberta Smith³



CREMASTER 5 production photograph.

< GENRE AND NARRATIVE >

Each of the five *Cremaster* films has its own distinct look that invokes a specific time period and style. Barney is drawn to certain periods because their design aesthetic supports his narrative.

CREMASTER 1: 1930s Busby Berkeley musicals and Leni Riefenstahl’s Aryan propaganda films.

CREMASTER 2: Gothic western.

CREMASTER 3: Gangster and disaster films.

CREMASTER 4: Road movie.

CREMASTER 5: Romantic tragedy.

By employing diverse genres Barney accesses different vocabularies with which to articulate his central conflict.

Although never straightforwardly realistic, the

narrative moves ahead based on imagery rather than dialogue. The films are pervaded by saturated color, and while there are almost no spoken words, the soundtracks are elaborate and important. Things happen sequentially, as well as simultaneously. It is never clear how much time actually elapses.

The plot for each of the *Cremaster* episodes has emerged as the project has unfolded. According to Barney, “It’s like a game of add-on. The pieces have become more about storytelling: character zones are created for a given project, and as they reach their limit of development (or lack of it), the remaining, unarticulated aspects of the zone become the outline for the next set of characters.”⁴



CREMASTER 1: *Goodyear Chorus*, 1995, C-print in self-lubricating plastic frame (shown unframed).

VIEW + DISCUSS

Image # 7: *CREMASTER 1: Goodyear Chorus*, 1995.

Image # 8: *CREMASTER 5* production photograph.

- ▶ View the image from *Cremaster 1*, the first film in the cycle. Take five minutes to write a list of all the words you can use to describe this image. Share this list with your classmates. What are the most frequently used descriptive words? Which are unique? View the other image from *Cremaster 5*, the last film in the series. Write another list of words. In what ways are the two images similar? In what ways are they different? Describe the genre that each suggests. Describe the narrative that each suggests.
- ▶ Barney's films typically have no clear plot. How does this affect your enjoyment of them as art? Do films need to have a plot?
- ▶ Barney has said that he is often attracted to what is repulsive.⁵ How does he reflect this in his art? Can you think of an example where this is true for you?
- ▶ It has been said that Barney creates work that follows his own imagination. Based on what you saw, what kinds of things stimulate his imagination?
- ▶ List as many film genres as you can (science fiction, romantic comedy, and so on). Describe the type of storyline that you expect from each genre. Which film genres are most appealing to you? Why? Are there some that you avoid? Why? If you were to choose a genre for your own film (or a combination), which would you use? Why?

EXPLORATIONS FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- A work of Barney's scope could not be accomplished alone. He has assembled a talented team of collaborators including costume designers, makeup and special effects experts, fabricators, and a musical composer. As a class create an interdisciplinary, collaborative video. Begin by brainstorming a list of roles and responsibilities that will be necessary to complete the video. As the project progresses pay special attention to the process of collaboration.