



IF ANYONE EVER INVITES YOU
TO PARTICIPATE IN A FLENSING RITUAL
(YOU FLENSE ME, I FLENSE YOU)
IN A SMALL ROOM FLOODING WITH
PETROLEUM JELLY AND WHALE SHIT,
THINK CAREFULLY BEFORE YOU DECLINE.

To flense means “to strip the blubber or skin from” and involves carving something up (usually a sea mammal) with a knife, plucking at tendons and exposing oozing pockets of subdermal fat. In artist Matthew Barney’s latest film – a love story – he and real-life partner, singer Björk, flense each other with expressions that suggest that they are making love with tender earnestness.

Violent, grotesque, stylised, lush, Matthew Barney’s films have been compared to the video game *Donkey Kong* (by an admirer) and Barney himself to the former Republican US president Ronald Reagan (by a critic). Most of his films, which form only one part of much larger multimedia works, resemble rock operas without the music. Generally wordless, silent except for ambient sound, choreographed to the point of ritual, they are filled with opaque, self-referential

symbols, and make abstractions out of the human characters and creatures out of, say, buildings. In a sentence: Barney’s films are impenetrable if you approach them as film. Nothing is ever what it seems to be: a bowl is a ship, a ship is an island, a knife is a pencil, obstacles are opportunities. Combining and recombining scores of familiar emblems – metaphors (beehives, cowboys, skinheads); historical characters and icons (Harry Houdini, executed murderer Gary Gilmore, the Chrysler Building); and celebrity actors (author Norman Mailer, sculptor Richard Serra, actress Sophia Loren) – they are simultaneously baffling and provocative. And the more you research what they are about, the more worthwhile they become.

In Barney’s squat brick Brooklyn workshop, an industrial pizza oven holds racks of shallow green baking sheets heated at 250 degrees. They contain translucent beads of petroleum jelly, melting into a shallow pool that has the consistency of taffy. Half a dozen men and women are assembling the sculptures that will accompany Barney’s follow-up to the cult *Cremaster Cycle* films (1994–2002), which earned him the first Hugo Boss Prize from the Guggenheim Foundation and a solo show at the museum. Wearing his curly salt-and-pepper

PREVIOUS PAGE Matthew Barney dressed in an elaborate costume of skin and fur that resembles traditional Japanese Shinto wedding garments, in a still from his latest film, *Drawing Restraint 9*. **FACING PAGE** A strange clown-like figure, whose costume is based on traditional Japanese Kabuki theatre, that appears at the end of *Drawing Restraint 9* (this is what I can figure out but check with Shonquis to confirm.)





"Every one of Matthew's films or sculptures is an exploration of the creative process, whether it's making an artwork or making a universe...It's about the idea of potentiality, an individual or a system realising itself."

< NANCY SPECTOR, GUGGENHEIM CURATOR >

FACING PAGE Is this the tea ceremony or something else?? Check with Shonquis.

RIGHT In another scene from *Drawing Restraint 9*, the crew members on the *Nisshin Maru* assemble a giant sculpture made from 25 tonnes of hot petroleum jelly called *The Field*. As the sculpture's mould is removed and the molten liquid cools, the ship's passengers are engulfed in a stream of liquid jelly.



hair in a ponytail at the nape of his neck, Barney is bent over a half-scale section of the whaling ship that acts as one of three main characters in the film, *Drawing Restraint 9*. At 39, he has an aquiline nose in a narrow face, whorls of stubble and grey-blue eyes that are partitions rather than windows into the man. He is married to Icelandic singer Björk, who acted in and scored the film, and with whom he has a three-year-old daughter, Isadora.

DR 9, which premiered in New York in February, forms the centre of a multimedia exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), and is supplemented by 150 pieces of video, film, drawing, photography, sculpture (in petroleum jelly, latex and thermal plastic), and other artworks from the 12 'Drawing Restraint' projects Barney has completed since 1987.

Unlike *Cremaster*, the title of *DR 9* places this film explicitly in the context of Barney's nearly 20-year-old series, which he began at Yale University. (The five *Cremaster* films, which took 10 years to make following his 1989 graduation, are also part of this series.) *DR 9* is shorter, at two hours and 15 minutes, and more watchable than the baroquely layered and wildly disjunctive six-hour, 20-minute epic that is *The Cremaster Cycle*. Set in Nagasaki Bay aboard the last real-life, controversial whaling ship, the *Nisshin Maru*, *DR9* continues Barney's exploration of the transformative and creative power of resistance to self-imposed restraint. In the film, while crew members assemble a 25-tonne petroleum jelly sculpture on the deck, two western guests (Barney and Björk) embark, bathe and are dressed in elaborate Shinto wedding

costumes. They then participate in a tea ceremony and are finally deluged in a urine-colored flood of petroleum jelly as they flense each other stoically in a physically transcendent act that transforms them into whales (yes, whales) as the storm abates.

DR 9 departs from Barney's earlier work in several ways. Firstly, it has a script in the form of Björk's highly textured soundtrack. "One of the reasons I don't use dialogue is because I can't write it and I can't direct it," says Barney. "Music takes the place of dialogue in this film. Often, as the film was written, the music was written." Another difference: where *Cremaster* consists of many pieces working together to describe a single whole, *DR9* describes the relationship, on a number of levels, between two things. Viewers don't need to be acquainted with Barney's private symbols to understand the film. "It's lush. It's like a fresco and it's a love story, but it is as layered as any of his other work," says Benjamin Weil, curator of visual arts at SFMoMA. "The idea of transformation is spelled out in a much more literal fashion, but it doesn't lose any of its qualities."

Both more straightforward and poetic than the other films, *DR 9* raises the stakes in the 'Drawing Restraint' series. Barney's early pieces were a response to his unwillingness to sit and draw, which didn't pose enough of a challenge. For *DR 1*, he strapped an elastic line to his thighs and anchored it to the floor. Increasing the resistance of the line by walking up an incline, he tried to draw on one of the walls. *DR 6* was the only piece performed for an audience, although most of the others were videotaped. In it, Barney bounced on

a mini-trampoline while drawing his portrait on the ceiling, making one mark for each bounce. "I would do 'Drawing Restraint' pieces when I didn't know what to do," says Barney. "The idea was to set up a condition for making a drawing."

DR 7 featured his first narrative, in which wrestling satyrs "draw" on the condensation that has gathered on the sunroof of a limousine with the movement of their horns, finally flaying one another as well as the upholstery. "Matthew brings the body back into the idea of making art," says Weil. "Lots of artists have explored this, but they haven't taken it to the degree of literality that he has. He says drawing is an easy thing to do, so he applies the whole strength of his body to put a trace on a piece of paper, to make it difficult to achieve this, bringing physicality into the notion of making art. This brings together a number of ideas that artists have been exploring in the two decades before he started working."

HAPPY MEDIUM

Born in San Francisco in 1967, Barney was raised in Idaho, where he was quarterback on his high school football team. This is where his relationship with petroleum jelly began: all the athletic equipment, from padding to balls and flags, was

made from plastic. Vaseline, chaotic and formless, would become his sculptural medium of choice.

Weil recalls seeing Barney's first New York show in 1991. "The least I can say is that it was incredibly puzzling. The work was disconcerting and confusing to most people and there was an incredible amount of media coverage that was even more confusing," he says. "Nobody I can remember who saw the exhibition was left without a strong feeling. People were either angry or excited or very, very adamantly rejecting. Nobody was looking at it like, yeah, so what?"

At first look, the flensing scenes in *DR 9* could make a viewer adamantly rejecting. On second look, however, it's clear that the characters are not actually in pain. "Matthew has been careful to not let it be gore," says Weil. "It's not sadomasochistic. They're embracing each other and each other's wish to transform into another state. It's a way to spell out the symbiotic relationship that happens when a couple forms, people become one and transform themselves through a ritual. Where is the drawing in this film? They're drawing each other's bodies with the knives." Barney suggests that he is also visualising a metaphorical system that has valves where pressure can be released and that the seeming violence is never representational

BELOW LEFT A still from *Drawing Restraint 3*, part of Barney's series of attempting to draw while being physically restrained. In the third instalment, he lifted a barbell cast in petroleum wax and jelly. The chalk powder covering the barbell's grips gradually fell onto the floor as he lifted the weight, documenting the act as drawings. **BELOW RIGHT** A still from *Drawing Restraint 4*. (Can't find any info on this) **FACING PAGE** A still from *Drawing Restraint 11*, created specially for an exhibition at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan, a precursor to the SFMoMA exhibition. The piece, which was filmed in real time, documents Barney's attempt to complete a drawing while climbing up three 12-metre-high gallery walls.







ABOVE Barney's partner, singer Björk, dressed in the Japanese Shinto wedding costume made from animal skins in a still from *Drawing Restraint 9*. According to SFMoMA, Barney "became interested in Japan's historical position as a host country to foreign guests, how the local rituals are a type of productive restraint".

for him. "Muscle fibre is torn in order to be built up," he says. "I'm compelled by violence that has the potential to become sublime."

"Every one of Matthew's films or sculptures is an exploration of the creative process, whether it's making an artwork or making a universe," says Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector, who worked with Barney during his solo show at the gallery in 2002. "It's about the idea of potentiality, an individual or a system realising itself." In *Cremaster 2*, in one of only a few scenes involving the human voice, Norman Mailer plays Harry Houdini describing one of the magician's famous illusions, *Metamorphosis*: "Within *Metamorphosis*, Houdini becomes part of the cage that contains him, he enters the lock and seals the bonds, he digests the lock, it becomes a part of him, the walls that imprison his body come open."

Barney has not been credited with one of the elements that is most interesting and least accessible in his work: his voluminous research into a plethora of apparently unrelated topics. For instance, the title for *Cremaster* comes from the word for one of the male reproductive muscles,

and the cycle is filled with anatomical references. The first film represents the most ascended or undifferentiated position of the reproductive organs in the process of embryonic sexual differentiation, while *Cremaster 5* represents the most descended or differentiated position. In *DR 9*, the ship is analogous to the artificial island, Dejima, built by 19th-century European merchants in order to be able to trade with the Japanese without stepping foot on the nation's sacred soil.

Until September 17, SFMoMA is offering an unprecedentedly comprehensive selection of Barney's work. Don't eat for two hours before going into the museum; it's not easy to digest. Viewers may feel some resistance to the work it demands of us. "You don't get a five-minute Barney experience," Weil warns. "A Barney-centric museum experience will take at least 3.5 hours, but it is one of the more important functions of art to make people slow down."

Keep an eye out for the special issue of POL Oxygen, which will feature articles about other cross-disciplinary artists and performers.