



Women Talking About Barney

Norman Mailer's son, John Buffalo Mailer, age 35, says he has known two geniuses in his life. One is his father. The other is artist Matthew Barney.¹ Barney enlisted John Buffalo, who looks quite like his father, to play the reincarnated Norman Mailer in his five-hour and 18-minute film, *River of Fundament*. The artist took this title from a passage in the elder Mailer's 700-page novel, *Ancient Evenings*. The novel was widely panned when it debuted in 1983 because of its self-involved, florid language, and the earnest, uncomfortable way it combined baseness and romanticism. Multiple reviewers used the old-fashioned word "buggery" to describe the novel's anal sex acts.

In Barney's film, Mailer is reincarnated three times. The first time, he is played by his son, who at the first segment's end disembowels a rotting cow and climbs into the carcass. In the film's second part, Mailer reappears as an African-American jazz drummer, and in the third as a Lakota leader. He's an everyman.

When news that Barney was making the film circulated in 2007, it seemed probable that the film would critique the strong-and-virile male mythology surrounding Mailer, who famously stabbed his second wife and feuded with feminist Germaine Greer. Ideally, by revisiting the epic failure of a novel, Barney would underscore

how grandiose narratives are always prone to overreach. The best features of Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* films—cross-dressing red-headed race car drivers, feminized football fields—are those that make masculinity seem strange. When Barney began staging *River of Fundament* in May 2008, marching bands and a Chrysler Imperial appeared on set in L.A.; the 2010 Detroit performance cost \$5 million alone. It started to seem possible that Barney's *Fundament* would indulge in a typical, hypermasculine, bigger-is-better mythology rather than questioning this mythology's premises.

After seeing *River of Fundament* debut at UCLA in April, I started talking to women frequently about Barney. Those conversations continued, more intentionally, after I saw Barney's recent *River of Fundament* exhibition at MOCA, which includes the film alongside a collection of huge sculptural set pieces. My impulse to talk with women about this work comes from a few places. So many high-endurance, body-conscious filmmakers that preceded Barney—Joan Jonas, Yvonne Rainer, and Rebecca Horn—are female, but Barney has lately been making expensive boy toys, a fact that frustrates his association with this lineage. Women and trans artists also tend to be especially attuned to the shortcomings of the same-old patriarchal narrative, because that narrative doesn't leave them much literal or creative breathing room.

The conversations about Barney that I've had with women have happened in bits and pieces and in different places—over the phone, over email, on my couch. But I've imagined them happening all at once here.

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2. Battaglia, Andy. "An Artist's River Journey Into a Writer's World." *Wall Street Journal* 26 October 2014.

In my head, they're part of a single, inclusive attempt to understand what makes Barney's *Fundament* so frustrating.

“Maybe I’m just mad because now I can’t gold-plate things without knowing that a certain man has already done it,” says artist Soyoung Shin, only half joking.

She has just returned from a residency in the Nevada desert, where she visited goldmines and brought back parts of cow skulls, hoping to cover them in gold.

“But what a weird way to be let down by a film,” Shin continues.

She means it was weird to spend six-ish hours in UCLA’s Royce Hall, where Barney’s *River of Fundament* debuted in April, being continually impressed by the lush visuals but feeling like the visuals weren’t actually the point.

“It seemed so much more about Matthew Barney, about his celebrity,” she recalls. “At the screening, you looked around and it was all museum people. 80 percent of the guests were there in the VIP area,” she estimates, “drinking free coffee during intermission. This is who Matthew Barney is at this point.”

“Epic length combined with high production value,” observes artist Jonas Becker. “But there’s something contradictory about the opulence when you’re trying to talk about the precariousness or downfall of American industry.”

The filming of *Fundament* began as the Great Recession hit, and the film moves through quite a few industrial contexts: a car repair shop where two Eastern European men beat each other up; a concrete river bed; an auto lot where a marching band plays. The characters are always consciously costumed and appear as mute forms, almost like sculptures.

“For an art film, there were many more people of color,” says Shin. “One black woman had a glass eye, and the portrayal of her felt very exploitative, but I felt like everyone was pretty exploited.”

“Both [men and women] just seem like forms,” says artist Rachel Mason, of Barney’s work in general. “Like with all of his characters, their identity seems entirely wrapped up in their appearance, form, and gestures. Even when characters engage in activities such as singing, tap-dancing, driving cars, etc. That’s why I do very much think that the way he describes himself as a sculptor really does feel apt.”

“It didn’t feel like anyone Barney was working with had agency,” Becker says.

“But then, why does everyone have to be a community engager?”

“There really doesn’t seem to be any attempt to care whether or not a narrative is comprehensible to the viewer,” adds Mason, who’s just performed her live one-woman rock opera in Seattle.

She worked to make the narrative comprehensible on a scraped-together budget.

“The question of budget does seem to come up almost immediately in conversations surrounding [Barney’s work], at least in artist circles,” continues Mason. “I sometimes wonder if it’s because the earlier precedents of artists making feature films were primarily women who worked with microscopic or no budgets, creating their own universes, with somewhat impenetrable languages.”

She’s thinking of Eleanor Antin, Joan Jonas, and even Miranda July, whose early films were thoroughly idiosyncratic.

“But queers and feminists have ebbed and flowed in embracing that sort of low-budget aesthetic as a political strategy,” says Becker.

She cites trans artist Zackary Drucker, whose videos mimic television’s smoothness. Work made with a budget can still be probing.

“There’s no edge to it,” she says of Barney’s show. “Did I see anything that complicates my understanding of white male privilege in capitalist society?”

At MOCA, Barney’s work relies very palpably upon privileged access to high-profile people as well as expensive resources. Salman Rushdie, Fran Leibowitz, Lawrence Weiner, and Elaine Stritch all appear in his film. Some of his watercast bronze sculptures weigh nearly 25 tons.

Is ambitious production somehow supposed to equal depth of meaning?

“It feels like a profound example of male space,” says Becker.

“What really struck me visually was the toxic quality of the materials, a sense that I should not breathe deeply around them,” says writer Sarah Bay Gachot says. “For a show about death and reincarnation I guess this makes sense,” she adds.

“I wanted to laugh at things like the hood of a car decorated and installed in a sarcophagus, but it just wasn’t funny,” says Gachot. “Too earnest.”

Gachot does very much like an idiosyncratic moment in the film’s second act, shot in Detroit. Machinists make steel violins as performers come up and pluck them from the assembly line.

“They just keep being produced and more and more people play and then a woman comes out and sings,” says Gachot. “A nice metaphor for the loins of Detroit...”

There are parts like this, when the film feels tied to an intimate present. Still, the gorgeously shot scenes that veer toward high-gloss Hollywood hero-worship and the “dead” car part sculptures installed throughout the galleries show Barney at his most self-aggrandizing.

After Barney staged and filmed Mailer’s wake in New York last year, Mailer’s son told the *Wall Street Journal*, “my dad is up there dancing a jig—he’s so happy about how Matthew has taken the ball and [ran].”² Running with the great white male novelist’s ball? Talking to women and gathering together still raw, intimate observations is probably an attempt to kick that ball off course—and to point out how strange it is that the course still exists, and is being theatrically reincarnated.

1

Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler, *River of Fundament* (2014) (production still). Image courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo: Hugo Glendinning.

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