



## Barney is about the very fluid ways in which identity is

The syllabus for your survey class on postwar art includes Mathew Barney but neglects important postwar figures like Ruscha, Baldessari, and Wall. Why Barney? The artist that I'm currently working on, Blinky Palermo (see *Artforum* Sept. 2002) is not even on my syllabus! I have to strike a balance between doing a survey and discussing artists in depth. If I had only one artist to teach for the nineties it would be Barney.

You require supplemental reading and a full screening on Barney. Why do you teach him in greater depth than other artists included in your syllabus?

I don't think that I teach him in greater depth. I assign the literature that I can find, like the text by Norman Bryson who is a major art historian. In this case [Bryson] is venturing into art criticism by writing an essay for

*Parkett*. It's a very funny and accessible article that deals with *Cremaster 4*. The reason why I screen a full *Cremaster* is because I think one can't teach Barney without showing a movie. I don't always expect my students to see the real art, it depends on the work. I think you can get a better sense of Kiki Smith from a slide than you can get from a still from a Mathew Barney movie.

How do you teach Mathew Barney? There are so many ways of approaching the work.

I absolutely agree and he is difficult but I think that is why he needs to be taught. One of the reasons he is important to teach in the context of postwar art is his approach to the subject of identity. He begins to make work at a point in the late eighties where the model of activist identity politics, represented very extremely by someone like Bar-

bara Kruger, was exhausted. That kind of work didn't seem as relevant after the Reagan Years. Barney represents a movement away from that one-dimensional identity activism towards what I would call a more quiet identity. This is a more playful way of dealing with identity, a more open-ended approach.

When I teach Barney this year, I will trace the theme of masculine prowess and masculine striving. I show examples of how it surfaces in the different *Cremaster's* allowing me to explore the continuity of the theme and track how it keeps reoccurring. My students get a sense of the complexity of Barney that way; certainly they get a sense of the tremendous humor in his work. I haven't had a single lecture on Barney in which they don't laugh about what they've seen. Uncomfortable laughter?

I think it's genuine laughter. In many ways Barney is about the very fluid ways in which identity is constructed and this is why he's so important. The eighties tended to think about identity in terms of binaries. Barney begins to think beyond just male and female; there are all of these other dimensions of sexuality that enter in: auto-eroticism, transvestitism, pregenital states. In that sense I think he gives us a more adequate sense of what it is like to be a human being. The whole subject of masculine prowess opens broader human issues like hubris and excessive ambition. All those things are woven into his movies. It's important to teach these themes in the context of a Western Art survey where we approach the grand themes of art. What surprised you most about the *Cremaster Cycle* at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne?



constructed and this is why he's so important.

I was most surprised by the way in which the show actually managed to be both a very adequate representation of the work and to make a very interesting addition. I had worried that a comprehensive show would leave out a huge part of his work and would not be able to capture what is in the films. How could you ever create a retrospective of Barney's work or even just the *Cremaster* series? The show somehow manages to succeed in doing this on all these different levels. first of all by giving you the sense that you are entering into Barney's world and almost entering into one of his movies. Not so much in terms of a stage set, but really for real. Basically, the carpets of the movies being laid out and you actually being on them ...

**The flags...**

Exactly, and the padded door frames and the picture frames.

But all of these happenstance side-effects suddenly became part of your whole experience of the show so that the guard that's guarding the Irish Bar made out of Vaseline is obsessively guarding this piece and you are entering a kind of competition or struggle to get as close to this bar as possible and the guard becomes like a character in this movie. The complete excessiveness with which they were actually fulfilling their roles as guards was completely ridiculous and kind of suited the work.

You brought up the sculpture and that's another one of the reasons why I really was surprised by the show. In earlier shows when I had seen the sculptures I had worried about them becoming merely props—something marketable. But they increasingly are becoming self-sufficient works. It's interesting that a lot

of sculptures that are not in the movie are being displayed.

**The cement sculpture.**

Exactly, that was one of the best pieces in the show—the incredibly skilled making and impeccable attention to detail. Of course you get this to some extent with the movies, but in the real objects you see on such a different scale and with so much more awe. The big concrete block was so amazing in the way the materials were so perfectly joined; he beat Donald Judd.

**That's saying a lot (laughs).**

I might be overstating a little bit (laughs).

**What do you think about Barney's inability to edit himself in *Cremaster 3*?**

I don't know whether he's unable to edit himself although I think that's an interesting question. There is obviously a kind of movement up and down from

*Cremaster 1* through *Cremaster 5*. The first is short, the last is short. *Cremaster 3* is the centerpiece and it is the longest movie.

**When you consider the series as a whole, are you more prone to seeing the narrative as 1,4,5,2,3 (the order in which the films were released) or as 1,2,3,4,5?**

This is one of the tricks that Barney plays; I think that there are ways in which one can see the cycle in both ways, and I think that he's playing with that. But in terms of the narrative you do see that he has constructed connections between *Cremaster 1* and *Cremaster 2*, where the end of *1* picks up at the beginning of *2*. I think that he conceived of it as *1* through *5* in terms of the details of the narratives and the ends and beginnings of each of the movies. Taking that into account *Cremaster 3* functions as a fulcrum for the cycle, and I think that when



planning the cycle he planned to have that central cycle be longer than the rest. It makes some sense although I definitely was losing some of my patience in the first half of *Cremaster 3*. I think everyone was. People got up and left.

I know a lot of people who left and I can't believe anybody would do that (laughs).

**They missed the best part, which was the last hour.**

The more distance I have from seeing it, the more I wonder whether that was actually a very effective and conscious choice that he made—dragging out the first half and the scene of the Chrysler getting smashed and crashed for so long. That pacing builds up tension at the central moment of this whole cycle, which is an important thing to consider in terms of the overall narrative. Thinking about the idea of competition and striving is a way in which we experience that scene. That's the part that for me dragged on forever, the destruction of that car kept coming back again and again. That, and also the bar scene which dragged on for a very long time, particularly the part with the bartender.

I didn't even mind that so much. I think it was mainly with the car because it was always the same thing happening. But then that tension and boredom that built up was somehow so amazingly and funnily released at the moment where the Chrysler is fist-size and Serra stuffs it into Matthew Barney's mouth. That totally made up for the first half. *Cremaster 3* is very different than the other movies; I think the other movies are much faster paced. **Much tighter.**

Yes. But the cycle as a whole seems simultaneously tight and connected as it needs to be and open-ended. One thing to add is that Barney, by dragging out the

first half for so long is consciously subverting your expectations of how his movies should unfold. **Nonetheless, he does present us with the most quintessential Barney movie yet. It's the most elaborate and has the highest level of production...**

I think his lengthening of the movie allows you some space to reflect and think and have a different relationship to what you're seeing. And I think that might be important at the middle point in the *Cremaster Cycle*, to introduce a different attitude of viewing. There's a way in which the overflow and excess of detail is something that becomes stressed more and more through the contrast of building tension.

The reason I posed the question about Barney's inability to edit himself is because there are all of these mechanisms of control that surround his work and him as an artist. For example, in *Cologne*, the sculptures are shown in the context that he established for them: from the selection of the fluorescent light bulbs, to the wallpaper and the floor coverings. When you see his sculptures out of that context, I think they lose something. That's the strength of his early work *Transexualis*, the walk in freezer can exist anywhere. Exactly, because you have the room as the context for that sculpture. It's harder when you exhibit only one concrete slab sculpture by itself without anything around it. You may lose something, but this is true if you take any Renaissance mural outside of its church context. It was interesting to me with the concrete slab, to suddenly see it in the context of abstract sculpture. I said, 'He beat Judd in the making of that work' and I had never looked at his work in that context. This is interesting given that Serra appears in *Cremaster 3*. **Why the Guggenheim, and why Richard Serra?**

I think it's absolutely hilarious that Barney picked Serra, even more hilarious that Serra agreed to do it and to play an architect because of how much hatred he has for architecture. I think that Serra stands for something in the art world. He stands for New York in a way that many artists don't because of *Tilted Arc*. Because of the danger of his work, the scale of his work and the legendary photographs of him throwing lead. I think there's something about Serra in terms of his persona and in terms of masculinity. *Tilted Arc* was in one of the reading comprehension stories on my S.A.T.'s.

That's amazing.

How do you think that Barney approaches the idea of Richard Serra and the idea of the Guggenheim?

I think it's a sense of reflecting on the distance he has travelled from that generation. Where we are now is very far away from the early seventies.

Is he curating himself here? Is he telling us what his work is, what it has done, what it is for?

Yes, I see his choice in terms of a self-reflexiveness that you can find in all great art. I think there's a dimension of self-reflexiveness in his work that is healthy and interesting, but I don't think that it is strictly autobiographical. It's interesting to think about *Cremaster 3* in relation to commerce, especially in light of Guggenheim Director Thomas Kren's controversial relationship to business, and Richard Serra's current Gagosian show. I felt that show was mercenary—the walls are lined with twenty nearly identical drawings designed to sell. Clearly the movie cost a fortune to produce, and the knowledge of that is something that you can't avoid thinking about while watching it.

The work is about spectacle and it is itself a spectacle to a large degree, but there are also ways

in which that type of viewing you have vis-à-vis spectacle is undermined by the circulatory and constantly meandering metaphors and narratives. With spectacle you don't get the same kind of gratification that comes with closure. So he provides you the initial gratification of a spectacle but then frustrates you tremendously.

**So you equate the idea of spectacle with the idea of commerce?**

Yes, the way in which a spectacle advertises itself to be consumed. **Are there aspects of his work which you find problematic, or unresolved?**

I think that's the exciting thing for an art historian—that you can think about Barney's work endlessly, and potentially write about it endlessly. There is so much to say and so much to think about. If you think about *Cremaster 5* as the supposed ending, by shifting the scene to 19th Century Budapest he adds a completely different dimension and you can imagine that it would go on from there.

•  
*Christine Mehring is Assistant Professor of art history at Yale University. In 1999 she curated and wrote the catalogue for WOLS Photographs, at the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University. Mehring is currently co-editing an anthology of primary documents of postwar European art and finishing a book on German artist Blinky Palermo. Her article Four of a Kind: The Art of Blinky Palermo, is featured in this October's issue of Artforum.*