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## Transformative Sculpture

### The Visionary Work of Matthew Barney



Matthew Barney, *Virgins* (2018). © Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

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Last week, I viewed the most ambitious and thrilling new sculptures I have seen in a long time. They are by [Matthew Barney](#), and are part of a triad of works (which also includes etched drawings and a film, *Redoubt*) that he has been making over the past six years, on show at the [Yale University Art Gallery](#) in New Haven (until 16 June). In fact, the last time I saw such exciting and paradigm-shifting new sculptures was five years ago when Barney showed work connected to his previous film, *River of Fundament* (2014) at the Haus der Kunst in Munich.

Barney burst forth as a mature artist in the late 1980s straight from Yale. He is one of the few true visionary artists of our time. These new sculptures are both radical and classical, innovative in process, exquisite in execution and ambitious in scope. Their remarkable detail, shiny surfaces and depiction of the transformative made me think of Bernini while their alchemical aura bring Beuys to mind.

They were made by casting trees killed in a forest fire, in a process that might be best described as “the lost tree” process, a kind of metamorphic means of forcing molten metals into the trees, which are themselves destroyed as the scalding metal hardens into sculpture. One work is fashioned like a giant rifle. In another, the artist suspended the destruction of the tree midstream, twisting the charred wood and the metal surrounding it into the suspended state of a chrysalis.



Matthew Barney, *Virgins* (2018). © Matthew Barney, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Each of the sculptures is shrouded in rippled lacy wondrousness formed by an improvisational process the artist defined as he made the works, whereby molten copper and brass are poured a clay slurry. This results in an instantaneous and abrupt halting of the process which produces uncommonly delicate forms. These fineries of the sculptures function as we would never expect cast metals to do: like hair, the wind, and plankton in a permanent state of transforming. Each is encased in mythological references to Diana and the hunt (themes brought into complex narrative form in the film), while also very much being the embodiment of life—its fragility and transience—and the essence of sculpture, the processes by which it is made, its existence in its own right, and its metaphoric power in the cosmic unfolding of life.

Fifty years from now, few of the artists we now exalt will have stood the test of time (like most artists of the decades and centuries before them). While I am confident in the likely longevity of few, I am relatively certain that no artist of such exquisite and singular vision as Matthew Barney has emerged since Matthew Barney.

I find it both revealing and grim that Barney—one of the greatest artists to have emerged in the past 50 years—is hardly known to the generation of collectors who are driving and defining today’s art market. It seems yet more bleak that the profound and phenomenally inventive work he has been making since the turn of the century has not been the subject of a major New York museum exhibition. Indeed, this remarkable new body of work is not being shown in New York, which is

symptomatic of how the professionalization of art has turned so much from the market to museums into a numbers game.

This is not intended to denigrate our museums, all of which have done extraordinary programming in recent years. Nonetheless, this is clearly a very different moment and climate than that of 2003, when Barney's electrifying *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002) literally took over—and cascaded from—the atrium of the Guggenheim Museum. The museum was jammed like a Happening, bursting with 20-year-olds who somewhat mystifyingly and ebulliently found their way to an art museum where such a crowd had not been seen before, especially in such numbers—well before the advent of Instagram.

But today, the slots at most museums for the rigorous, the risky, and what could often be thought of as remote to today's art scenes are decreasing in numbers. One could hardly fault the museums which are becoming increasingly dependent on the popularity of exhibitions for essential earned income and major funding. It is a reality of our time, and of much of the art of our time (and one that the next issue of *In Other Words* will explore in detail).