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## **Anatomy of an Art Star**

### **Matthew Barney and the Whitney Biennial**



Production still from Matthew Barney, *CREMASTER 4* (1994) © 1994 Matthew Barney, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.  
Photo credit: Michael James O'Brien

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Published 14 March 2017 in [Analysis](#)

Matthew Barney was just 25 when the Whitney Museum curator Elisabeth Sussman asked him to make a new work

for the museum's 1993 biennial. Rewind two years to 1991: the New York art world was still reeling from the 1987 stock market crash that definitively ended the excesses of the 1980s. There was barely a market, let alone a market "darling". Galleries were closing and one of the casualties was Petersburg Gallery, run by the inimitable Clarissa Dalrymple.

Dalrymple had planned to hold the first New York solo exhibition of Barney, a recent Yale art school graduate who burst onto the scene fully formed from college and with few precedents in art (though one might point to Bruce Nauman). Dalrymple had seen a work by Barney in a group show at Althea Viafora gallery, *Field Dressing* (1989), which included a video in which the artist climbs a ceiling-to-floor rope, scoops up petroleum jelly and applies it to every orifice on his mostly naked body.



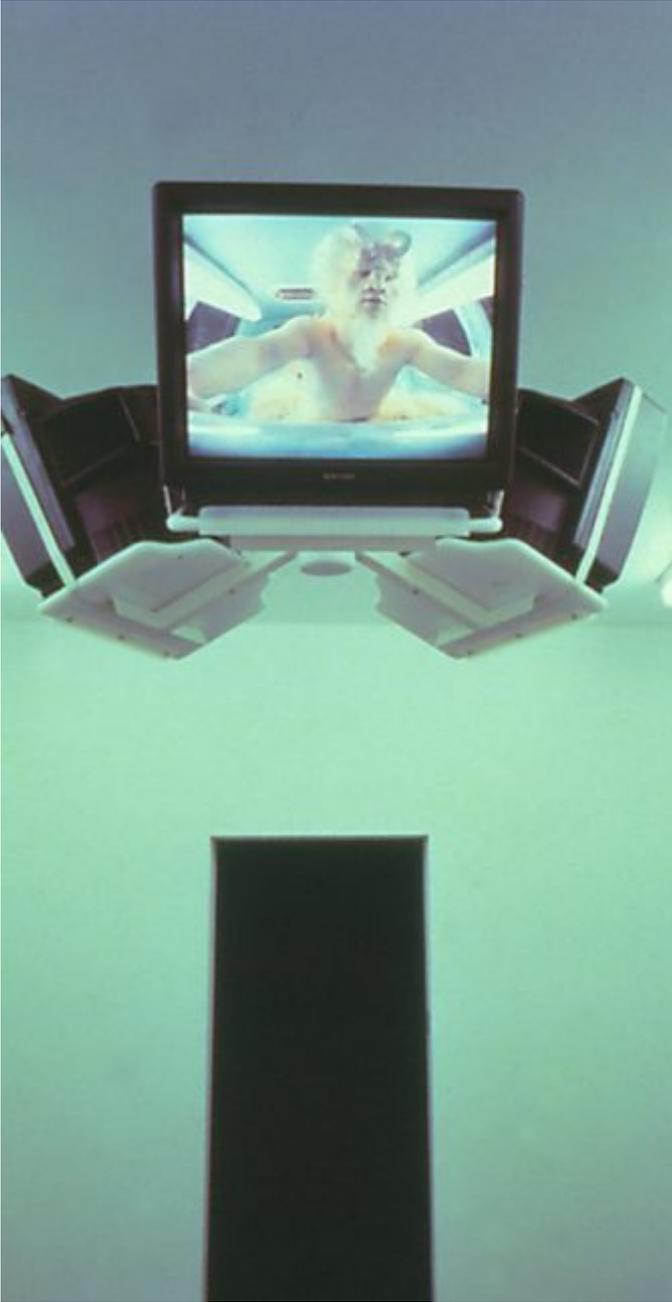
Matthew Barney, courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels © Matthew Barney. Photo credit: Hugo Glendinning

When her gallery closed abruptly, two weeks before the Barney show was due to open, Dalrymple suggested to Barbara Gladstone that she visit Barney's studio. The trip made an impression and Gladstone quickly planned an exhibition for that autumn. She also introduced the work to her son, the dealer Stuart Regen, who showed it in his Los Angeles space that spring. Artforum put Barney on its cover shortly thereafter.

By October, people were lining up outside Gladstone's gallery to watch *Blind Perineum* (1991), a video of both unsettling vulnerability and masculine athletic prowess. Barney, testing the limits of his bodily endurance, scales the gallery's walls and ceilings, naked except for a rock-climbing harness. The New York Times hailed it "[an extraordinary first show](#)".

The body was a major theme of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. The curators, Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G Hanhardt and Lisa Phillips, tackled identity politics, dealing with issues of race, gender, the AIDS crisis and imperialism. Some critics panned the show for being preachy and didactic while others hailed its inclusiveness.

Barney's contribution, *Drawing Restraint 7* (1993) was "a breakthrough in his practice", says Allyson Spellacy a director at Gladstone Gallery. The three-channel video, which played on monitors suspended from the ceiling, had been filmed in a limousine as it drove around New York City, the mythic narrative focusing on a pair of costumed satyrs struggling to draw while engaged in a strenuous, erotic pas de deux.



Matthew Barney, *DRAWING RESTRAINT 7* (1993), courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels © Matthew Barney

Two editions of the work were bought immediately by museums: the Whitney and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. “For a young artist to have work directly acquired by museum was especially meaningful,” Spellacy says. The patron and collector Elaine Dannheisser, who would go on to donate her collection to MoMA in 1996, bought the third.

### **The first certified art star of the 1990s**

Two years later, Barney appeared in the 1995 Whitney Biennial showing works related to *Cremaster 4*, the first of part of *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), a series of five feature-length films described as “[one of the most imaginative and brilliant achievements in the history of avant-garde cinema](#)” by the Guardian critic Jonathan Jones. Meanwhile, in *The New Yorker*, Hilton Als called him “the first certified art star of the 1990s”.

*The Cremaster Cycle*, produced in an edition of ten and sold in a sculptural vitrine along with other works of art, was reportedly priced around \$500,000 at the time of Barney’s Guggenheim Museum retrospective in 2003. The Guggenheim owns a complete set of the Cremaster films, and Barney’s work has been snapped up by some of the most important private and museums in the world, such as the Schaulager, the Tate, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and can be found in private collections such as the Sammlung Goetz in Munich.

Works by Barney rarely make it to auction. A public sale of *Cremaster 2* (1999) in November 2007 at Sotheby's realized \$571,000—still one of the highest prices paid for a video work at auction. More recently, *Drawing Restraint 8: Condition* (2003) sold for \$1.m at Sotheby's New York in 2014.

Rather, Barney's private market has been both consistently active and discreet for the past 25 years. Arguably one of the most visionary artists of his time, his market remains mysterious and unknowable—somewhat like the work itself—to all but those invested in it.