

# GLADSTONE

"Chains or Whip," *Downtown Critic*, March 21, 2024

*Downtown Critic*

## Chains or Whip

Matthew Barney at New People's  
Cinema Club

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Matthew Barney's mode has always been epic: hours-long films, feats of endurance and athleticism, themes of myth and human nature. NPCC's screening of Barney's work in March both confirmed and complicated this mode, distilling the epic into epyllion's mini-epic. Initiating the incantatory unspooling was the early *SCABACTION* (1988), which was screened in its entirety, as were two or three other works. Other portions excerpted brief snatches from larger works or consisted of new juxtapositions. *OTTOblow* and *AUTOblow* (both 1991) were originally presented as loops on small monitors as part of a single installation but here played in split-screen and on a cinematic scale. By toeing the line between self-archiving and self-cannibalization, the event manifested an unusual take on the genre of the retrospective — something closer to sampling than to a monographic review.

At the well-worn Cinema Village, to dismantle was also to reassemble, to bring new connections to light. Questions of divergent production value, resolution, and format (such as when the screen suddenly cut from blurry 1980s video to 4K) quickly receded, and instead, symbols and shapes made connections, becoming narrative. The body's cruciform, centering on the anus; the plan of a football field, seen from above; viscous substances, impressionable yet oozing — these *idées fixes* link the earliest work and the latest in a chain of visual associations that are palpable and embodied more than conceptual. Metamorphosis' illogic drives this aesthetic of the visceral, defying form's contours as

matter edges from one state of being into another. In *Hoist* (2006), what at first appears to be an industrial node turns out to be a very erect penis rubbing up against a spinning wheel, compounding pleasurable friction and flaying. Barney's favored motifs are Marsyas-like and destructive or, at least, onanistic — not unlike the re-editing animating the night.

These new forms of compiling, recycling, and extracting felt contemporary, as if modeled upon XHamster edits of a thousand money shots in quick succession or the algorithmized way in which Instagram sends you directly from one “Reel” to another. And yet absorptive attention was both demanded and rewarded. The evening went a long way toward disproving art critical orthodoxy around Barney, which has accused him of spectacle, of reification, and of being an unrepentant producer within the culture industry. What always mattered in Barney was not the blockbuster, these novel juxtapositions showed, but the avant-garde; the wild symbols and seething imagination are as fully formed in the student work as in the Guggenheim-scaled work.

*SCABACTION* makes what should be idealized—the nipple of the jock—grotesque, as it is bandaged, plucked, massaged, squeezed like a pimple. Signifiers of virility merge with evocations of 1970s-era gay male sexuality: Vaseline, the jock strap-like harness in which Barney floats in *Field Dressing* (1989). Do I want to *rim Matthew Barney*? Is that one of the potentialities this film sketches in its dungeon-like futurism? Maybe here these signs

simply point toward a total physical freedom accessed in submission. Ritual both ancient and modern, the classical Greek body degraded into something baroque and twisted, the man-meets-machine steampunky dystopia of it all—there’s a look of yearning as Barney hangs from the ceiling and encases his face in encaustic-like, but also Crisco-like, gel.

Isabella Achenbach, who curated the screening in collaboration with the artist, described the compilation as an exploration of “non-comprehensive, and non-monolithic ways” to present moving image work. Watching bootlegs of the Cremaster Cycle on YouTube doesn’t provide much aesthetic reward, but it does satisfyingly contest the market ethos of the limited edition in which much of Barney’s art remains bound up. The NPCC screening worked toward the same ends, yet rendered the experience high-res and collective in a way that reactivated the dream of cinephilia as something social. Starting close to midnight, hordes gathered in the standing-room-only theater. Was turnout driven by the combined exclusivity and rarity of the screening’s one-time-only status, or the pleasures of participating in a scene? Microcinema feels like one fringe mode of exhibition that can be mobilized today without nostalgia: there’s something genuine about Light Industry, a sincerity to the Film-Makers’ Cooperative. This unironic enthusiasm is perhaps tempered by the chic air of NPCC. But still, new forms of intimacy were on offer. Follow Barney into the locker room; let the crowded theater become a gang shower.