

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Andy Battaglia, "In Five New Shows, Matthew Barney Turns His Abstract Football Film Into Sculptures and Paintings,"
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In Five New Shows, Matthew Barney Turns His Abstract Football Film Into Sculptures and Paintings

BY **ANDY BATTAGLIA**
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Matthew Barney, *Sanguine Atlas*, 2024.

PHOTO DAVID REGEN/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GLADSTONE GALLERY, SADIE COLES HQ, REGEN PROJECTS, AND GALERIE MAX HETZLER

Making his way through his new studio a few weeks back, **Matthew Barney** stopped to inspect a strange set of alchemical dumbbells and tried to describe the elements of stress, vulnerability, and frailty he saw embodied in them. "These are some tests for the transition from ceramic to plastic," he said, while holding up

castings of 8-pound weights that showed signs of a metamorphosis in the middle. “I’m always looking for a way to create a kind of conflict between materials, particularly in sculpture that has an afterlife around different narratives.”

Barney was talking about a new series of artworks related to *Secondary* (2023), a video installation he **premiered last summer** in dramatic fashion and is revisiting in a new array of exhibitions that opened Thursday night at Gladstone Gallery in New York. The show last year served as a sort of send-off for a storied destination, his massive studio on the East River—just across from the United Nations and all the rest of Manhattan—where Barney staged outlandish happenings and filmed scenes for *Secondary* and other works. (Barney also used the studio to film sections of *River of Fundament*, his six-hour 2014 film derived from a Norman Mailer novel about ancient Egypt.)

The inspiration for *Secondary* is football, the cultural juggernaut known as “America’s game” and a subject familiar to Barney as a sport he once played. But as with all things related to Barney, an artist who makes work in grand cycles, the premise is just one small part of a much more expansive whole.

“It’s usually true that I make a film first and then step back from it a bit and develop work out of the narrative,” he said of a process that he also enlisted for his most renowned work, *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002), and the more recent *Redoubt* (2019). In the wake of *Secondary*, an abstract tone poem of a film about a tragic professional football accident from decades ago, he made a new series of works that include surreal reimaginings of sewage pipes, brittlely transfigured weightlifting equipment, and cryptic forms wearing NFL jerseys, as well as drawings and paintings focused on the impact of a fabled play that left Darryl Stingily—a wide-receiver for the New England Patriots—paralyzed after a violent hit by Oakland Raiders safety Jack Tatum in 1978.

The Gladstone exhibition in New York features sculptures, drawings, and a painting, whereas four other shows opening over the next several weeks—at Sadie Coles HQ in London, Regen Projects in Los Angeles, and, in Paris, Galerie Max Hetzler and Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain—will include the film along with other new related works. Many of those works involve ceramic, a material that Barney was surprised to find when he dug a hole in the floor of his old studio and reached a pipe buried below the concrete. In *Secondary*, that organic piece of city infrastructure appears as a sort of living/breathing entity whose rupture allows water from the nearby river to fill the hole as it rises and falls with the tides.



Matthew Barney, *Sanguine Atlas*, 2024.

PHOTO DAVID REGEN/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GLADSTONE GALLERY, SADIE COLES HQ, REGEN PROJECTS, AND GALERIE MAX HETZLER

“I didn’t know this, but New York is a ceramic city,” Barney said of clay pipes he was surprised to learn still figure in Gotham’s drainage and sewage system. “We learned more about ceramic sewer pipes than we certainly knew.”

Barney had worked with clay in the past while constructing molds but never as an artistic material, and he was intrigued by its mix of earthiness and ethereality. “I like the liquid state of it, a sort of soft, formless state along the lines of materials I’ve used over the years—things like petroleum jelly that can be cast under certain conditions but won’t hold up to other conditions,” he said. “Ceramic is mysterious in that way. It has its own set of rules.”

Barney was attracted to ceramic’s resonances with certain scenes and themes in *Secondary*, and used it in works like *Supine Axis* (2024), a large floor sculpture that takes the form of the original pipe he found—but covered with dumbbells and supports rendered in a mix of other materials including steel, epoxy resin, and high-density polyethylene. A number of other new works are fashioned after the kind of weightlifting power racks used by football players to build strength, with ceramic, metal, and plastic trading places in remixed arrangements.



Matthew Barney, *Power Rack / Iron Inversion*, 2024.

PHOTO DAVID REGEN/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GLADSTONE GALLERY, SADIE COLES HQ, REGEN PROJECTS, AND GALERIE MAX HETZLER

“This group of pieces is an iterative project,” the artist said. “I’m making the same parts again and again, and each piece has potential for different use and then different ways that the material is failing. That’s true throughout this body of work—ceramic is being used to exhibit stress, in much the same way that, in the casting choices for *Secondary*, I was interested in working with older performers, to think about the different kinds of positions that athletes put their bodies in. Ceramic, plastic, metal—each material shows stress in different ways. These pieces have a lot to do with vulnerability.”

Another new large floor sculpture is *impact BOLUS* (2024), an abstract rendering of the moment of football-frenzied impact that inspired *Secondary* and remains a sort of macabre milestone in American mythology. Anyone of a certain age who grew up with even a little bit of sports fandom in their surroundings knows the story: during a pre-season game, in a play not dissimilar to any number of others that are routine in football to this day, Darryl Stingily jumps to catch a pass and is instead blindsided in a savage tackle by Jack Tatum. The instantly paralyzed receiver slumps to the ground and lies motionless as the players all around him slowly begin to realize the gravity of the situation.



Matthew Barney, *Raider Nation*, 2024.

PHOTO DAVID REGEN/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GLADSTONE GALLERY, SADIE COLES HQ, REGEN PROJECTS, AND GALERIE MAX HETZLER

“I saw the replay, over and over again,” Barney said of his experience of the tragedy as a kid in the ’70s. “I wasn’t tuned into that game and didn’t see it happen—it was more the replay of it, which was relentless. It went on and on, both in terms of its currency as an image but also in terms of a drama that played out between two men.”

Recalling the cinematic way the tragedy was presented on TV, he added, “It was also around the same time that the broadcasting of sports was changing, depending more on close-ups that were able to bring the players closer to you as emotional characters. In my teens, I would always watch footage made by this company called NFL Films. It was great, and important in filmmaking history, even beyond sports broadcasting. Sam Peckinpah cited NFL Films as a major influence. There was something about the long lens and the use of slow motion, to gain access to something that was so emotional and so vast.”

The force of the Stingily-Tatum play and the fragility it exposed figure in Barney's interest in clay, which he and workers at his studio twisted into unorthodox shapes that had to dry over time without breaking. In his studio, different clay forms were airing out, supported by foam blocks and other arrangements. "A really interesting part of this work for me is the way an object like this is made, with probably six people holding it," he said while looking at twisty extensions of elastic cords and wavy gym towels rendered in hardening clay. "We rehearsed it with a rope, so we knew which loop had to be done first and which had to be done second. It's quite choreographed in that way. That is also true of the towels—they're rolled out flat and have to be supported by a bunch of hands. Then we lay it down and perform different moves with it in unison, rehearsing it in real time. With clay, if you bend it back and forth more than once, it'll start to fall apart. It's really an interesting extension of the choreographic nature of the project."

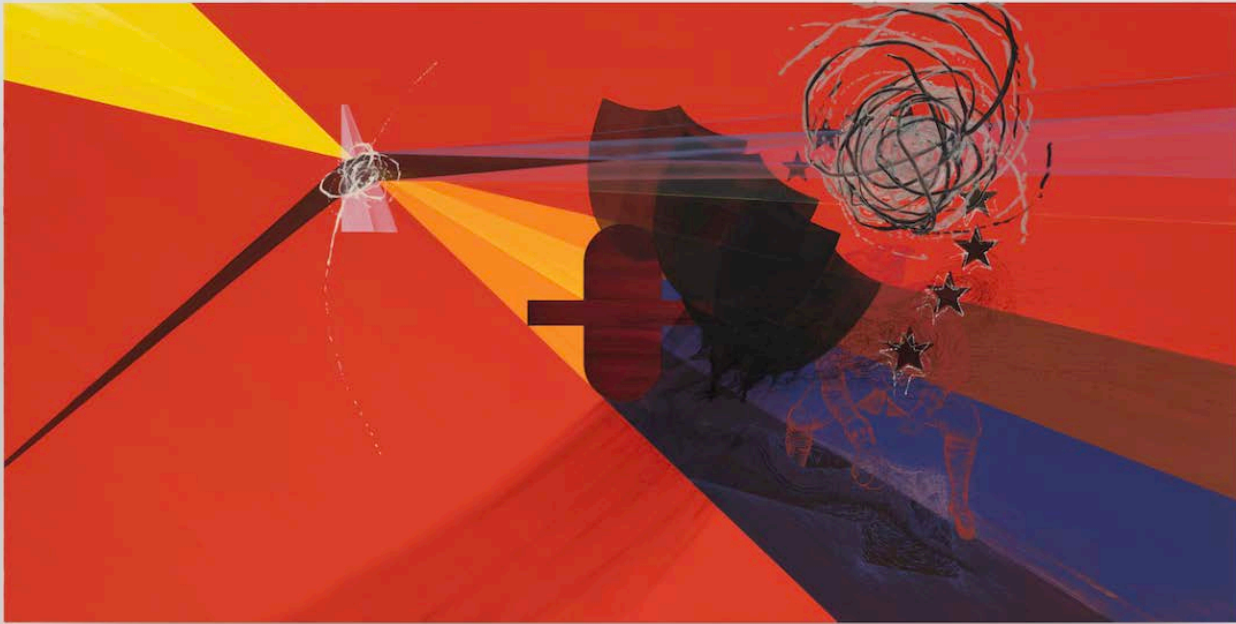


Matthew Barney, *Secondary*, 2023. Production still.

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By "choreographic nature of the project" he meant the ways in which *Secondary* is as much a dance piece as a film, with its story told less by way of words and more by way of movement that extrapolated football's gestures and feats of footwork into an abstract form of modern dance. Describing the hand movements of a referee in a scene meant to mimic the confusion on the field right after the Stingily-Tatum play, he said, "In the film, the back judge does this choreography where she's trying to signal an incomplete pass but also a personal foul. She can't decide which one to land on. She's kind of stuck."

The moment of impact and its aftereffects also figure in a series of large paintings Barney made, with an eye toward analyzing the whole of the action as a sort of spectral happening. "These I started as a kind of color field study of the field itself, and thinking about the way the field creates a kind of narrative of its own," he said. "In this one, yellow light on the left passes through what would be a prism, between yellow and orange, and then hits an object—a red object in the center—and then casts a shadow onto the space where the impact happens on the field. These panels are a reiteration, in different colors and different opacities, of the same structure again and again."



Matthew Barney: *Field Panel: Patriot*, 2024.

PHOTO DAVID REGEN/COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, GLADSTONE GALLERY, SADIE COLES HQ, REGEN PROJECTS, AND GALERIE MAX HETZLER

Another form of looping manifests in the ways that Barney's newest body of work calls back—in some cases very directly—to the earliest work with which he made his name, in 1991. Looking at *Raider Nation* (2024), an assemblage of hand weights rendered in metal and clay, he compared it to earlier weight sculptures in petroleum jelly and said, “There are a number of dumbbell pieces from 1991 that were the starting points for this project. I’ve been thinking about that era of works and then trying to approach it in a different way, using some of the same characters even. How this body of work functions compared to that work has been on my mind.”

He continued: “The way that violence lived in the work from the '90s was kind of sublimated into a structure that was very much about interiority. Over time, I did that in different ways, in different projects, with violence—and I carried it forward as a material, in a way. As the world shifted in my perception and became more explicitly violent, I wanted to think about taking it on more directly rather than sublimating it.”

While his early work from the '90s took historic figures and forms and ground them up into an abstract logic, he said, *Secondary* is different in that it looks at a specific event—an accident, a moment of trauma in a person's life—and doesn't abstract it in the same way. “It allows for that story to be told, and it doesn't go through that same kind of grinder, where differences are eliminated. I was obsessed in the '90s with dissolving and getting rid of difference, so that there wasn't any kind of binary left in relationships that appeared very black and white. I wanted to approach some of the same subject matter with *Secondary* and allow it to be more in the world—for power relationships and the role that violence plays to be more legible.”