

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Boris Pofalla, "Here, Europeans no longer understand American football" *Welt*, June 30, 2024

WELT

CULTURE MATTHEW BARNEY

Here, Europeans no longer understand American football

By Boris Pofalla



Matthew Barney, "Secondary" (in production in 2023)

Source: Matthew Barney/Production still: Julieta Cervantes/Production still: Jonathan O'Sullivan/Courtesy the artist & Gladstone Gallery

The creator of the visionary "Cremaster" cycle is back - with an American tragedy. The artist Matthew Barney is now performing a "superposition of violence and spectacle" in five locations simultaneously.

D The American Matthew Barney is the Richard Wagner of contemporary artists. His multimedia, opulent works are created in cycles that revolve around a few leitmotifs. This is very complex, which is why this summer his four galleries (Max Hetzler in Paris, Gladstone in New York, Sadie Coles HQ in London and Regen Projects in Los Angeles) have joined forces with the Paris Fondation Cartier to present the latest work in five exhibitions at once.

The main stage is the Fondation Cartier. In the glass exhibition hall of the museum, which Jean Nouvel designed 30 years ago for the foundation of the jeweler, which is part of the luxury goods group

Richemont, there is a plastic carpet in the colors orange, yellow, red and purple, which is the size of a football field.

A jumbotron hangs from the ceiling, a giant television with four screens that are slightly tilted towards the floor. Jumbotrons are usually used at concerts and sporting events and show close-ups to spectators sitting far away from the action. However, this device does not show the same image on every side, which encourages people to wander around.

Matthew Barney explores the mythology of modernity

From the first floor you have an overview - and you can see an oval in the carpet that is crossed by a horizontal line. This symbol, the "Field Emblem", was already present in the "Cremaster" cycle that Barney created from 1994 to 2002 and which consists of five films and countless individual works of art. The oval represents the organic, the bar the limitation chosen by the artist himself, which he is working on.

Born in San Francisco in 1967, Matthew Barney once played college football for Yale University. Here he quotes himself and, as in "Cremaster," continues to explore the mythology of modernity - with a particular focus on the physical.

His new work "Secondary" (2023) lasts one hour and is about the tragic football match between the Oakland Raiders and the New England Patriots on August 12, 1978, in which two players collided. Darryl Stingley suffered a spinal cord injury and was paralyzed as a result.

What is playing on the screens is not a historical football game, but the anti-theatrical abstraction of one, a sequence of gestures and actions in the artist's studio in Long Island City, which resembles a hangar. Here, sculptures are made of lead, aluminum, and terracotta. These are materials whose elasticity, fragility, and ability to store memories Barney compares to character traits - there is a bit of Joseph Beuys in him too.

Dancers and actors, singers, musicians and choreographers, all of whom are middle-aged, perform in the NFL team jerseys - as does Barney himself, who plays quarterback Ken Stabler. The soundscape is idiosyncratic.

You can hear physical exertion, a cappella singing, the sound of tools and moving objects, scraping and pushing, panting and warbling. A masculine, physical art that almost seems a little out of time.

Everything runs in a loop

“Secondary” presents the viewer with several challenges. In Paris and in Europe in general, hardly anyone knows the rules of the game of American football. Their own lack of knowledge prolongs the run-up that one has to take to approach the work, and it is already long.

Barney never allows us to simply let ourselves drift along in the stream of images, as he did in his “Cremaster” films or in the visually powerful and disturbing “Rivers of Fundament” (2014). There is no designated place from which one should view the installation or a beginning -everything runs in a loop.

But you know that there is an event that everything is leading up to and so you watch and watch and wait for the Hollywood moment, which never comes. What is called the flow of the game, the flow of actions, successful or unsuccessful, leading to a goal or failing due to the defense, there is no such flow in “Secondary”.

Matthew Barney, who showed his first film, “Cremaster,” at the Fondation Cartier thirty years ago, speaks of the “complex layering of violence and spectacle inherent in American football and, more broadly, American culture.” He says he knows the extreme physical and psychological conditions of the game himself, and they influence his work.

But for all his references, Barney is a cryptic at heart. His work is mostly self-explanatory or in relation to an arcane system, such as ancient Egyptian mythology in Rivers of Fundament.

In an art world that can no longer take three steps without a work’s good intentions spelled out at the outset without becoming afraid of the dark, this is quite a relief. While Europe is currently sitting in front of the television night after night cheering on its national football teams, watching “Secondary” can make you think differently about sport and art - and what they might have in common.

In the late 1980s, as a student, Matthew Barney would tie ropes around himself, attach them to the room, and use the strength of his body to resist their resistance, just to make a drawing under the ceiling or on the wall. “Drawing Restraint” is the name of this series of videos that began in 1987 and whose interweaving of athleticism and creativity continues to this day.

In a second room of the Fondation, Barney has installed a new ceramic sculpture. It is a life-size imitation of a so-called power rack, such as those found in gyms: an expandable metal frame on which you can do squats, bench presses, shoulder presses or pull-ups, as well as store dumbbells and other weight training equipment.

The fragility of the terracotta, its surreal exchange with the sturdy metal, creates a tension that Barney releases in the basement. Here lie deformed weight plates, the white walls bear smears, here and there a lump of clay sticks.

For the film "Drawing Restraint 27", the performer Raphael Xavier tied himself to the ground with snap hooks and then fought against the resistance of the rope. Instead of training with the dumbbells, he slams them against the wall. The lonely fighter against the emptiness and his own muscles, which can only grow through overexertion - that's a pretty good, lasting image.