Michael Kimmelman, "The Importance of Matthew Barney", *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999

The New York Times Magazine / OCTOBER 10, 1999

The Importance of Matthew Barney

In his new 'Cremaster' film, the most crucial artist of his generation takes on sex and Gary Gilmore, the two-step and Harry Houdini, with a few dollops of surrealism and one of Vaseline. By Michael Kimmelman

It's a sweltering Monday at the Bedford-Stuyvesant armory, a huge vaulted shed, almost the size of a football field, decorated with flags and multicolored bunting. Two men in red wool Canadian Mountie uniforms climb onto a stage in the middle of the room. A woman, 50-ish, bizarrely wasp-waisted (she models for fetish magazines) and dressed in a Victorian costume, with veil and muff, lingers in a corner.

Moving between them, instructing first the woman to wait, then the Mounties where to stand, is the artist Matthew Barney, in camouflage shorts, T-shirt and black boots. When he came onto the scene in 1991, with his surreal sculptures and videos, he was instantly successful, a phenomenon. Since then, his work has only got better and stranger: he has mostly been making an ambitious series of increasingly elaborate films, called "Cremaster." At the moment, on this hot August morning in 1998, he is directing a scene for "Cremaster 2," which is actually the fourth and next to last in the series. (It opens in New York at the Film Forum this week.)

He and his crew, a dozen people, including his mother, spent the weekend turning the place into what, up to a point, is supposed to resemble a hall at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Paul Pisoni, a quiet, gentle man who helps to make some of Barney's sculptures (you might say that the sculptures function roughly as characters in the films), tells me he once found himself in a crane, 80 feet high, during a storm, hanging the logo for "Cremaster 1" on the scoreboard of a football stadium in Boise, Idaho. "He's sneaky," Pisoni says. "You don't know what you're getting

Photograph by Richard J. Burbridge

Michael Kimmelman, “The Importance of Matthew Barney”, *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999

Michael Kimmelman, "The Importance of Matthew Barney", *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999

'I'm having a bad day,' says Barney's assistant. 'We lost a clown and one of our Mustangs, the male posse backed out — I'm told it's hunting season — and don't even ask what's going on with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.'

The one obvious thing about Barney's films is that nothing is obvious. In "Cremaster 2," opening this week in New York, he somehow connects the dots between Harry Houdini, Gary Gilmore, the Mormon Church and more, and turns it all into art. Norman Mailer, left, is Houdini; Barney is Gilmore.

into until you're doing it." During an earlier "Cremaster" film, T. J. Davey, who does rigging and construction for Barney, discovered that part of his job involved climbing the proscenium of the opera house in Budapest as a stand-in for Barney. Davey was in Budapest to help Barney bungee-jump naked off the city's Chain Bridge.

Barney's enterprise is vaguely akin to one of those movies in which Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland's little gang pitches in to produce a play, except that in Barney's case the results are, to put it mildly, different. Chelsea Romersa, Barney's assistant, says dryly, "The perversity makes it less boring than most jobs."

NOW 32, BARNEY IS THE most important American artist of his generation. He produces films and videos, most of which he performs in. He and his crew also make sculptures and objects for the films and turn out photographs, books and installations derived from the films. The sculptures include dumbbells made out of tapioca, a weight bench made of petroleum jelly, a mirrored saddle and nylon chairs with backrests curved at the waist so that only contortionists could sit comfortably on them. Barney doesn't regard any of his works — the sculptures, the photographs, the books, the films — as subsidiary to any others. To him, they're all expressions in different forms of the same ideas.

Those ideas are nearly impossible to explain simply, and the tendency when talking about Barney is to get lost in the minutiae of his art. The work can seem ingeniously complicated or nonsensical, depending on one's inclination. Suffice it to say that it is a mix of autobiography, history and private symbolism, and it has involved him doing various death-defying acts and wearing elaborate makeup and prostheses that have turned him into a woman, a satyr and, for "Cremaster 2," Gary Gilmore, the double murderer from Utah.

Michael Kimmelman is chief art critic of The Times.

A good way to think about Barney's work is probably just to accept its ambiguity, which, in a sense, is his basic point. Art is unresolved, otherwise it is uninteresting, he says. Sometimes, as in the "Cremaster" films, he has stated this idea as a sexual metaphor: he or one of the characters in the films is presented so that you can't quite tell whether the sex is male or female. You might say that the fundamental goal of "Cremaster," like other works by Barney, is to maintain, through one phantasmagoric image after another, a state of creative redolence — which, once you get down to it, is not unlike what the Surrealists and abstractionists earlier in the century were after. Barney considers himself an abstract artist.

People who think he is just a bad late Surrealist or a sensationalist are particularly upset by the scope of his success. Probably not since Jasper Johns made his debut 40 years ago has a young American artist received so much attention so fast. Barney had just graduated from Yale, where as an undergraduate he made sculptures and videos, and word had already begun to circulate about him among a few influential artists, dealers, critics and editors in New York. More buzz spread after he was in a pair of group shows in New York in 1990, at an obscure gallery called Althea Viafora, now defunct. One work he showed was a video, "Field Dressing (Orifill)," of him naked climbing up a pole and cables and applying dollops of Vaseline to his orifices. He was then invited to have a solo exhibition at Petersburg, another New York gallery, which closed before the exhibition could happen (a victim of the straitened economy of the early 90's). After that, he was taken on by two galleries, one on each coast — Barbara Gladstone in New York and Stuart Regen in Los Angeles. By then, he was a phenomenon, more intriguing for not having yet had a solo show. It was, in a sense, the first example of what would become something of a trademark: his absence enhancing his presence on the scene. He made the cover of Artforum before the exhibition at Gladstone opened in 1991.

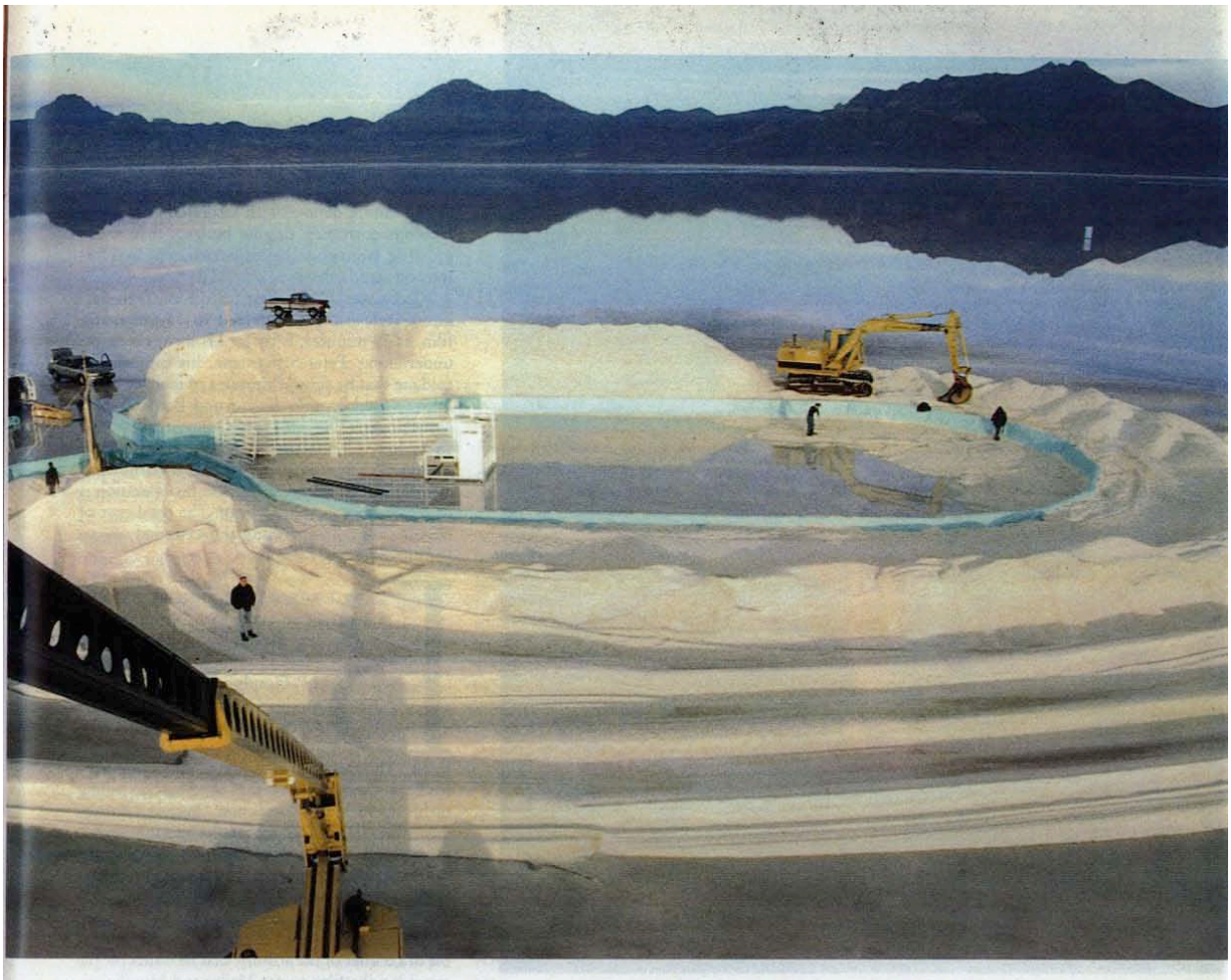
Because of the bad economy, galleries like Gladstone were clearly more willing than they had been a few years before (or probably are now) to risk showing someone without a track record. It helped that Barney was marketable apart from his art, with Yale connections and model good looks. For his first solo show, he videotaped himself climbing naked, this time via ice screws, across the Gladstone Gallery's ceiling, down a stairwell and into a huge walk-in refrigerator containing the weight-lifter's bench made of petroleum jelly. The 87-minute videotape was called "Blind Perineum," and the show consisted of it and other videos, the refrigerator and bench, mouth guards, a gynecological speculum, cast wedges of uncooked tapioca and the ghostly traces of his pitons and hand prints on the ceiling and walls. Some of the titles he gave to the objects in the show referred to the escapist Harry Houdini, whom he had begun to see, some years earlier, as an alter ego.

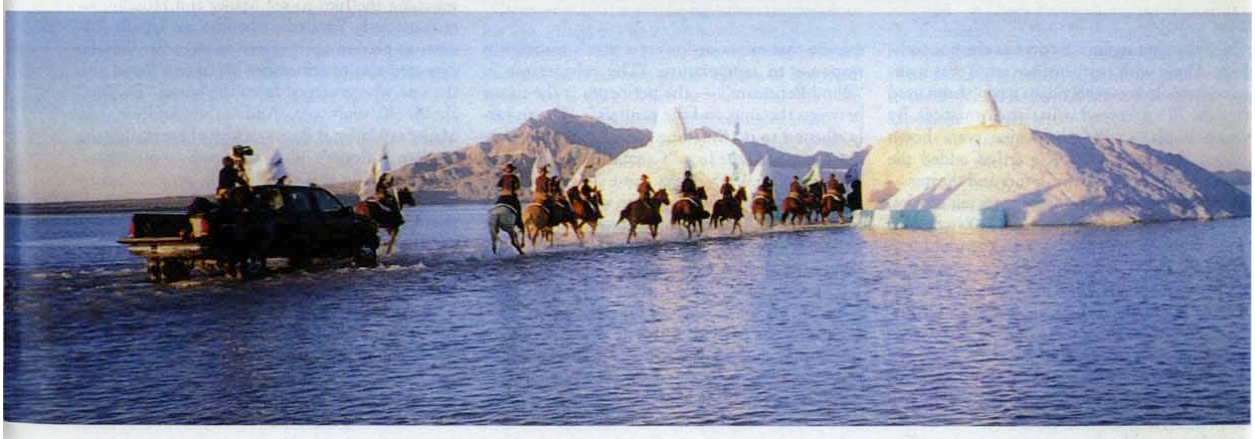
His early work was full of elaborate sexual and biological allusions and references to sports and fashion; the obvious links were to 60's and 70's predecessors like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and Chris Burden. Barney's good reviews were so extensive that they almost seemed orchestrated. The bad reviews, like Hilton Kramer's, were predictably dismissive and only heightened his profile. He had captured the art world Zeitgeist of the early 90's. His emergence coincided with a spate of preachy conceptual art about identity politics, the body and sex, much of it visually meager. It reached its peak at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, where the art world seemed to be doing its version of penance for the excesses of the 80's. Some people said that Barney was a video version of Mapplethorpe; if he wasn't naked, he was, as in one video, pushing around a football player's blocking sled while dressed in a cocktail dress. Gay artists darkly joked about the fact that the most successful young gay artist had turned out not to be gay.

Barney's work was gender-bending, body-oriented and idea-laden. But it was also funny and silly — obviously he meant us to laugh — and in its visual extravagance, it had its own strange glamour. It certainly didn't preach.

In formal terms, it was also in tune with a younger generation's new priorities. Installations and cross-media work replaced painting as the dominant forms. Video, not traditionally a col-

Michael Kimmelman, “The Importance of Matthew Barney”, *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999





Barney had salt shipped to the Bonneville Salt Flats, top, so he could make a bullring out of it for “Cremaster 2.” Below, filming the Evanston Cowboy Days Ladies Flag Posse as it enters the arena. The dots do get connected.

lectible, was coming into its own as the hot technology. Along with performance art, it was making a comeback, low-tech videos having been used during the 70's to record artists' performances. By devising the places where their videos were shown — video installations — 90's artists added the complicating elements of sculpture and theater.

Above all, video enabled them to tell stories. One upshot of that earnest, early-90's conceptual art about diversity politics and gender identity was the belief that every artist had a story to tell, the more eccentric and individual the better.

Barney had plenty of stories to tell, and they were all eccentric. People began referring to him as the Wagner of contemporary art because, like Wagner, Barney operated in a mythological language that seemed willfully irrational, and he had a plan for a cycle of works (the five "Cremaster" films) that would take years to complete. The hubris alone seemed Wagnerian.

Cremaster, as everyone remotely interested in Barney quickly came to learn, is the name of the muscle that raises or lowers a man's testicles in response to temperature. (The refrigerator in "Blind Perineum" — the perineum is the tissue between the anus and the genitals — was an early allusion to it.) Working out of sequence, Barney completed the first "Cremaster" film, "Cremaster 4," in 1995. Next came "Cremaster 1" and "Cremaster 5." They were wordless, except for increasingly lavish soundtracks by Jonathan Bepler, a serious young composer from Brooklyn whom Barney came to rely on. "Cremaster 1" was 40 minutes long; the others, longer. They were shown on video monitors, along with his sculptures, as part of elaborate installations, or sometimes they were screened by themselves in theaters. Barney also sold the films as limited-edition laserdisks, which he elaborately packaged so that they became sculptures.

Slow-moving and weirdly hypnotic, the films had fantastic, desolate settings — an empty football stadium in Idaho, the Isle of Man, a nearly empty opera house in Hungary — a sequence of sites that, not coincidentally, charted an eastward arc from Boise to Budapest — from where Barney grew up to Harry Houdini's birthplace.

As the series went on, the films also became visually more deluxe, with saturated colors and fabulous costumes, despite budgets that, while growing, were nonetheless nonexistent by Hollywood standards.

"Cremaster 2," his first feature on high-definition television, transferred to 35-millimeter film, at 79 minutes, is by far his most extensive undertaking. Peter Strietmann, his cameraman, told me that he shot 17 minutes of tape for every minute used, a ratio far beyond Barney's previous norm. (The ratio for "Cremaster 4" was 1 to 1; for "Cremaster 5," 7 to 1.) Big-budget Hollywood movies average 12 to 1. Barney can afford to be extravagant because his operation is otherwise extraordinarily lean. The total cost of "Cremaster 2," a ravishing and extremely peculiar picture, was $1.7 million.

BACK IN THE ARMORY, BARNEY is on stage with Norman Mailer. Mailer has volunteered to play Houdini in "Cremaster 2," Houdini having performed at the Columbian Exposition. Gary Gilmore, played by Barney, was the subject of Mailer's book "The Executioner's Song." Directing Mailer, Barney mimes the gesture of a magician rolling up his sleeve. Mailer copies him. "Perfect," Barney says, then has Mailer repeat the motion several more times on film until it gains a slow gravity. Barney manages to get what he wants without actually seeming to do or say much.

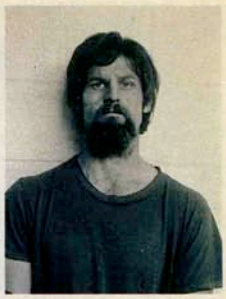
He tells me during a break, grabbing a bite and coffee from the spread of catered snacks on a table in a corner of the armory, that he wants people watching the film to see Mailer and Houdini simultaneously. Similarly, when he got Ursula Andress to play an aging queen in an earlier film, he expected you to remember her as that Bond girl, the one who emerged from the sea in "Dr. No" almost 40 years ago. Andress as Andress, like Mailer as Mailer, is Barney's way of expressing the modern sculptor's adage of "truth to materials," the material in this case being a person. Barney says he recalls thinking that Andress's wide shoulders rising out of the water added a violence to her sexiness, something suddenly he likened to the pieces that Richard Serra made in the late 60's by throwing hot lead into the corners of a room, where the lead hardened, which he said in a similar way added violence to Minimalism. Barney is always making these sort of connections.

OF MEDIUM-HEIGHT, WITH LIGHT BLUE EYES and a clean, open, all-American face, Barney has an easy charm. He laughs readily; he is honest and likable, smart, intense just underneath the surface, charismatic in a soft-spoken way and not the least ironic. His looks are changeable. I

LEFT: PRODUCTION STILL, "CREMASTER 5," BY MICHAEL JAMES O'BRIEN/ BARNEY STUDIO. OPPOSITE LEFT: PRODUCTION STILL, "CREMASTER 4."

Michael Kimmelman, "The Importance of Matthew Barney", *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999

'If a work is shown too many times, something gets stolen from it,' Barney says. 'You come to it with preconceptions, or you get tired of it.... So I try to protect myself and my work. I want there to be a fraction of the art that even I don't understand.'



Barney as the Queen's Giant in "Cremaster 5," far left, and as the Loughton Candidate in "Cremaster 4," above left, and Gary Gilmore in "Cremaster 2." Given his mythological muse and his plan for a cycle of works, he has been called the Wagner of contemporary art.

stopped by his studio every few weeks over the course of a year, as he was making "Cremaster 2," and each time he seemed slightly unfamiliar. Partly this was because he was appearing in the film, so that at one point he had to grow a beard, but partly it was something else, a cipherlike quality that dovetailed with his friendly but indefinite manner. It wasn't just that he was private. It was something else — a certain calculated distance you can also sense in his art, despite what can seem, on the surface, like its narcissism. He withholds part of himself. If he is savvy about the art world, he is also strangely remote from it at the same time. He is not so much self-absorbed as living, it seems, in his own world. He works incredibly hard. Most of the time, it is all he seems to do.

Barney, in his reticence, is a paradigm of the American art star in the 90's. He shows little and says less, which enhances his allure. He has no public profile, no social ambition or interest in money as far as anyone can see. His cachet has partly to do with his mystery. When his films are screened at the Film Forum in Manhattan, they play to a young art crowd that doesn't necessarily have any idea what it is looking at but reveres him from afar. He earns back the cost of his films (the money for them being put up in the first place by his dealer, Barbara Gladstone) through sales of limited editions of his sculptures, photographs and laserdisks. There are private buyers for his work, but it is the big museums that compete for his installations, which is clearly how a 90's star like him thrives: not by the grace of rich collectors but as a cult figure with institutional support, if that is not a contradiction in terms.

"Art needs to be defended," Barney once told me. "It's fragile. If a work is shown too many times, something gets stolen from it. You come to it with preconceptions, or you get tired of it. And it's the same with an artist. So I try to protect myself and my work. I want there to be a fraction of the art that even I don't understand."

Barney was born in San Francisco in 1967, the second of two children. (His older sister works for a software company in Seattle.) When he was 6, he moved with his family to Idaho after his father got a job administering a catering service at Boise State University. Six years after that, his parents divorced, and his mother, an abstract painter, moved to New York City. Barney stayed in Boise but regularly went to visit her, which is how he got to know what was going on in contemporary art. He contemplated playing college football but was too small for big-time athletics, and by the time he got to Yale as an undergraduate, he had settled on an art career. The summer before college, he answered an advertisement for a $250 modeling gig, was spotted by a model scout and for the next five years paid his way through school modeling.

"When I was modeling, I found it interesting," he told me one morning over breakfast at Florent, the stylish bistro where he's a regular, "that you could step outside yourself and let yourself be used as a coat hanger or puppet, especially in the performance sense: to let your body be a tool, to leave the body in the work and not really to occupy your body when you are performing."

THINK OF BARNEY'S ART AS A JIGSAW PUZZLE. IN "Cremaster 2," it is as if he has taken the details of his life, Houdini's and Gilmore's, the history of the Mormon Church, the history of art and the material from his own earlier films and laid them all out on a table. Then he sees what fits with what, making predictably unpredictable links.

"Matthew hates anything obvious," Chelsea Romersa, his assistant, says. "Like the color red. The crew's job is to buy the scrims for the windows, to get the materials, to build the sets, and often we have to ask practical questions, but we never ask direct questions about content. By osmosis, you begin to make connections yourself, which is the real point of art anyway, don't you think?"

For a while I was confused about everything Barney did and stupefied that his crew wasn't. "I'm having a bad day," Romersa once told me when I stopped by the studio. "We lost a clown and one of our Mustangs, the male posse backed out — I'm told it's hunting season — and don't even ask what's going on with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir."

Eventually I caught on, however, which is how it goes with art: give it time and the penny usually drops. At one point, Barney showed me rough cuts of a scene of a man and woman in cowboy hats dancing a two-step. He explained it this way: The thin-waisted woman in the Victorian costume plays Faye Gilmore, Gary's grandmother, who once claimed to have had an illegitimate son by Houdini. The story isn't true, probably, but if it were (which is good enough for Barney), Gary would be Houdini's grandson. Gilmore was the son of a Mormon, and when he elected to be shot by a firing squad, he may, at least subconsciously, have hoped to achieve immortality according to the Mormon doctrine of blood atonement. In Barney's mind, this would be the ultimate escape, an escape from fate, although Barney prefers the word that Houdini used, "metamorphosis," which suggests a defiance or contradiction of one's normal condition (like the weight-lifter's bench made of Vaseline or the artist in a cocktail dress).

In the film, Gilmore's execution is turned, mythically, into a bull-riding scene at an arena made out of salt in the middle of the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. From there, the film shifts to the Columbia ice field in Canada, where Barney is reimaging the World's Columbian Exposition. (The Brooklyn armory was used to stage the interior shots.) The switch between execution and exposition is therefore twofold: in terms of time, two generations backward, from Gary to the scene with Faye, his grandmother, and in terms of geology, from the flats, once a prehistoric lake, to its source, the Canadian ice field.

Get it? A two-step, which is why images of the dancers will be interspersed with images of the flats and field. But there is even more, involving the shape of the room Barney designed for the dancers doing the two-step, which is adapted from a drawing of the universe by Joseph Smith, the Mormon founder. Ultimately, the cabala is less complicated than Barney's cosmology.

IT IS NOW LATE OCTOBER 1998, AND I'M DRIVING west 120 miles from Salt Lake City to the Bonneville Salt Flats at Wendover, Utah, on the border with Nevada, where people in Utah go to gamble. Barney is filming the bull-riding scene

BY PETER STRIETMANN/BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY. RIGHT: PRODUCTION STILL, "CREMASTER 2," BY MICHAEL JAMES O'BRIEN/BARNEY STUDIO.

Michael Kimmelman, "The Importance of Matthew Barney", *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999

For his first solo show, he videotaped himself climbing naked, this time via ice screws, across the Gladstone Gallery's ceiling, down a stairwell and into a huge walk-in refrigerator containing the weight-lifter's bench made of petroleum jelly.

His debut in New York consisted of an 87-minute videotape called "Blind Perineum," containing the above-mentioned naked climb, as well as other videos, mouth guards, a gynecological speculum and wedges of uncooked tapioca.

— his version of Gilmore's execution — in which he plays Gilmore, although doing the actual riding will be two professionals, who, like him, will be made up to look like Gilmore. Gabe Bartalos, Barney's prosthetics and special-effects wizard, a cheerful, burly man from Los Angeles, has manufactured a fake bull, incredibly realistic, for the part of the scene when the bull is supposed to be dying, with a pump inside it to simulate breathing. Bartalos loves working for Barney because he gets to do more on Barney's films than he could on any Hollywood movie and because Barney is blue collar: "He works harder than everyone else and he listens."

Salt has been shipped by trucks to the flats to build the bullring, which is Matt Ryle's job. Ryle, who has a wry sense of humor, is a short, sandy-haired, squarely built master of heavy construction. He devised installations for casinos in Las Vegas, among other things, and more than anyone else he is responsible for figuring out how to build the things Barney imagines. What Barney imagines in this case is a horseshoe arena on the flats — basically, an immense hollowed-out salt mound, almost 20 feet high, with an opening on one side and four huge Fiberglas beehives, the Mormon symbol, ornamenting the top.

Barney knows the area from childhood. He went to football camp in Provo. The landscape west of Salt Lake mostly is a salt plain, flat and barren. The Bonneville Speedway, where the rocket cars race for land-speed records, is a stretch of it bounded by the snow-capped Silver Island Mountains. That's where Barney is.

Every few years the flats flood: knee-high with runoff from the mountains, making a shallow icy lake. This is one of those years. The arena that Barney's crew has built is an island in the middle of the ice water, two miles from the end of the single paved road to the flats. With the flood, the road has become a pier, itself two miles long. The arena is therefore about four miles from land. When I arrive, I park at the end of the road and then hop into a truck driven by Chris Winget, a tall soft-spoken photographer whose landscapes illustrate Barney's book for "Cremaster 2." By a circuitous route, to avoid deep water, Winget steers the truck through the flats at 10 miles an hour. The arena, glistening white-blue in the middle of nowhere, looms ahead, a rising apparition.

Barney initially had trouble receiving permission from the Federal Bureau of Land Management to build the arena because people here worried about damaging the flats. He was vague about making an art film based on Utah's least favorite former citizen, Gary Gilmore. He stressed that the film was really about landscape. It is not clear how much of the film's story is known to the brigade of women on horseback — the Cowboy Days Ladies Flag Posse, from Evanston, Wyo. — who will parade in the arena before the execution. There is an X-rated sex scene (between Gilmore's parents, to illustrate his conception), which would probably offend some of them if they knew about it.

People around Barney often find themselves in unexpected, alarming circumstances. That evening, after watching the bull riders, I'm driven from the arena in a jeep by someone who doesn't know the way back in the dark and gets stuck in the lake miles from the paved road. I volunteer to walk through the icy water for help, get lost and only much later stumble onto the road. Mary Farley, Barney's wife, throws my wet clothes in the laundry with the crew's and, to be nice, pretends not to notice that I'm pale and queasy.

Farley and Barney met when she worked at the Petersburg Gallery. She has just received her master's in forensic psychology and raises exotic birds, a few of which Barney included in "Cremaster 5." A thick-drawling, wisecracking blond Southerner, Farley is as voluble as Barney isn't, at least when they're together; he becomes much more outgoing on his own. She calls him David Koresh. "He's the evil Pied Piper."

Recalling the death-defying predicaments he has frequently led his crew members into, it occurs to me that like all good artists, he is a little ruthless. Art depends on resistance and risk, he thinks — it thrives at the limits of coherence, patience, endurance, whatever. Having played football, he particularly likes the metaphor of a muscle being built up through exercises that break down tissue. In some early videos, he strained at the end of a tether, trying to make marks with a piece of chalk on sheets of paper affixed to a wall; then he jumped off a 40-foot pier in "Cremaster 4" and off a bridge, attached to a bungee cord, in "Cremaster 5."

In a sense, he expects his crew and his audience to take a leap, too.

BACK IN MANHATTAN, BARNEY'S studio, a rabbit warren in the recently chic meat-packing district, is about as glamorous as a sweatshop, but big. Late in the spring of 1999, Barney is editing "Cremaster 2" and preparing an exhibition for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where the film will be screened. Downstairs from the studio is a new restaurant, opening today. Barney and his crew are on the street carving thousand-pound blocks of salt with chain saws for the upcoming show. The managers of the restaurant are apoplectic.

Barney is a strange mix of vulnerable and impenetrable. He told me once that his bad reviews are much more memorable to him than his good ones. "I'm afraid they may be on to something," he said. "And they hurt." But he is incredibly strong-willed and, in a sense, divorced from outside influence. He tells me that a portion of the new film, including the sex scene between the parents, was shown to some students at Vassar recently and they complained that it was pornography. What did he make of that? "I think it's simply not true," he says.

It is not clear how much he sees or thinks about anything other young artists are doing or saying. The gibe is often made about him that his sculptures are, in the end, just film props transplanted to a gallery. But evidently he pays no attention, insisting that he is primarily a sculptor and that his films are, if anything, sculptural.

They do have an odd sculptural quality: scenes often begin and end with framing shots, like brackets, that slow the pace and set one image apart from another, making them seem almost like separate objects. You sometimes feel as if you're circling an image, the way you would circle a sculpture, considering it from different angles. I realized that it is possible to become so fixated on the iconography of Barney's films

LEFT: VIDEOGRAPHY BY PETER STRIETMANN/BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY. CENTER AND RIGHT: PRODUCTION STILLS, "CREMASTER 2," BY MICHAEL JAMES O'BRIEN/BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

Michael Kimmelman, "The Importance of Matthew Barney", *The New York Times Magazine*, October 10, 1999

that one can forget how much Barney is focused on pure visual effects: colors, shapes, the relationship of forms.

I asked him one afternoon an obvious question, whether the "Cremaster" series is on some level about his own sexuality. "Sure, it has to do with my own identity," he answered. He uses a particular medical analogy: in utero, there's a period when a person's sex is still indeterminate, the fetus seeming to have the potential to be either sex, before the testes have descended or the ovaries settled. Plenty of images in his films and many of his sculptures imply body parts that relate to this theme — the goal posts on the football field in "Cremaster 1" are schematic versions of the still-undifferentiated reproductive system; motorcyclists on the Isle of Man in "Cremaster 4" trace ascending and descending paths. "Cremaster 5" ends with a scene in which Barney's character's testicles descend into a pool of water.

But I came to think that Barney, the actor, is only what you see on screen; he is not necessarily the subject of his work, a distinction worth making with someone for whom the body is a flexible metaphor. In fact, "Cremaster 2" doesn't really have much to do with gender or sexual identity in the end. If it is at all autobiographical, it is in a different sense. The West is represented by the isolation and insularity of the Mormon hive. Barney, the boy from Boise, left the West for New York and a life as an artist. He once described Boise to me as "a valley full of pressure, the pressure of that wall of mountains combined with the great distances between places: it was something to overcome." "Cremaster 3," the next and last film to be completed in the cycle, will take place in Manhattan.

Barney is ultimately the most important American artist of his generation because his imagination is so big. In "Cremaster 2," a few scenes drag; some parts look tacked on. Snippets of dialogue, which Barney has added partly to make the film more comprehensible to general moviegoers, come across as stilted; they won't help you unless you're already clued in, and if you're clued in, they're superfluous. This is one example of why it's wrong to think, as some people do, that Barney is an artist aspiring to be a Hollywood director. His work has nothing really to do with films in the sense that most people think of them, except, maybe, for Buñuel's and Dali's films. He is a visual artist using moving images.

Parts of "Cremaster 2" are laugh-out-loud silly, intentionally or not, but mostly the film is dark, the colors dense, the images kaleidoscopic and solemn — beginning with an image of a saddle, which segues into a frozen landscape that mirrors the saddle's form, later becoming the film's best special effect: a recreation, with choir, of the Mormon Tabernacle. If you've seen a few other Barney films, you begin to spot familiar images — the women on horseback at the salt arena echo the dancers in "Cremaster 1"; the inside of Gilmore's car is like the tunnel in "Cremaster 4" — and these recurrent motifs create an incantatory effect.

Art is supposed to stick in your mind, and sometimes your craw. Barney's films do both. In the end, the "Cremaster" cycle can be seen as an allegory of the creative process itself, with sexual identity as a metaphor within it, but not the only metaphor. "I've begun to see the five parts differently," Barney says at the end of our conversations, in his office at the studio, surrounded by plans for the next "Cremaster." "I've begun to see them in terms of having an idea in '1,' rejecting it in '2,' experiencing a kind of narcissistic interlude in '3,' panicking in '4' and resolving the idea in '5,' which ultimately kills the thing.

"After I understand something completely, I'm not interested in it anymore," he says, raising a familiar topic. "Being in fashion was useful to me because I know how people can be used up, how they're hot and then they become yesterday's news. I find this curious, the way energy dissipates from a source through that kind of exploitation — and I want to figure out how to make it into art." ■

"Cremaster 2," which was shot as high-definition television and then transferred to 35-millimeter film, cost $1.7 million and is Barney's largest undertaking to date. More dots to connect: on the left, Gary Gilmore's first victim; on the right, dancing the two-step.