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BOOKS & ARTS**Matthew Barney****Sex, life and video games**

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If you don't get it, ask your kids

EPA

**Ginger genius**

A CRITIC once dismissed Matthew Barney as having “no composition, no structure, no emotion, not even any irony to speak of”. So why has the Guggenheim Museum dedicated its space to him for the next three months?

The answer lies with the artist's daredevil humour and intractable openness which seem to respond particularly eloquently to our rule-bound, post-ironic times. He certainly speaks to the young, who have been flocking to this show ever since it opened last year at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne before travelling on, with similar youthful acclaim, to Paris and now New York.

Though he prefers to call himself a sculptor, Mr Barney is best known for his performance films. A former high-school football star and Yale University biology student, he suddenly came to the notice of the New York art world in 1991 with a filmed performance piece called “Blind Perineum”. Using titanium ice screws and a climbing harness, Mr Barney clambered naked across the gallery's walls and ceilings and

into a walk-in fridge that held nothing but a bench press made of cast petroleum jelly.

The five "Cremaster" films that form the core of the Guggenheim exhibition take their name from the testicular muscle that responds to temperature, external stimuli or fear. The erotic and the athletic have always come together in Mr Barney's universe, though his explorations of it are now bigger, better financed and more elaborate than they were a decade ago.

As an artist, he harnesses an impressive narrative talent to a private world—half medical-research laboratory, half training camp—which he creates with the help of prosthetics, wrestling mats and sternal retractors coated in wax, Vaseline and tapioca pudding. The show's curator, Nancy Spector, describes Mr Barney's cycle of films as a self-enclosed aesthetic system, and the project is rife with anatomical allusions to the position of the reproductive organs during the embryonic process of sexual differentiation. "Cremaster 1" represents the most ascended, or undifferentiated, state; "Cremaster 5" quite the opposite. The cycle returns over and over to those moments during sexual development when the outcome of the process is still unknown, and which represent in Mr Barney's mind's eye a state of pure potentiality.

The films were shot out of order over eight years, from 1994 on, though they allude to each other at every turn. The heady mixture of myth, history, high art and popular culture that they contain refuses to resolve itself into an overall logic, and Ms Spector has honoured this in both the exhibit itself and in its weighty catalogue, which is worth its price for her excellent introductory essay.

Meanwhile, the dramatic energy of the films, which screen continuously during the show, comes from the compelling stillness and solidity of the camera with its high crane shots, slow zoom and proscenium framing. The editing is clean enough that we leave and enter each scene as if it were set on a stage, while the juxtaposition of shots—the films cut back and forth between seemingly disparate narrative patterns—act as an archaeological dig, the camera carefully cutting through layers of imagery.

This, along with Jonathan Bepler's musical scores, creates a sense of impending danger, and it is easy to recognise Mr Barney's taste for the horror genre. "Cremaster", with its horror-film aesthetic of hybrid creatures and haunted spaces, is filled with characters that challenge the norm and surroundings that stand out, like Stanley Kubrick's hotel in "The Shining", for their vitality and menace.

Architectural metaphor is also an important element of "Cremaster 3", the last of the cycle to be shot. The longest—at nearly three hours—and most accomplished of the five films, it takes place mainly in New York's Chrysler Building and the Guggenheim Museum itself. At one point, five 1967 Chrysler Imperials encircle a 1930 model of the same car in the Chrysler Building's lobby, then drive into and smash the older model to pieces, the lobby filling with smoke from their squealing tyres. Meanwhile, Mr Barney, as a character known as the Entered Apprentice, climbs into the building's lift shaft and fills one lift, bucket by bucket, with cement, creating an ashlar—a Masonic symbol of perfection—that eventually causes the lift to plummet to the bottom of the shaft. For this betrayal of the Masonic code, the Entered Apprentice is fitted with a set of metal dentures retrieved from the remains of the destroyed Chrysler Imperial.

In the film's climax, Mr Barney, dressed in a kilt and hot-pink headpiece, climbs the Guggenheim's five levels in a bizarre competition that echoes the structure of a video game, overcoming a number of obstacles including a plastic sheep/bagpipe, a leopard woman played by Aimee Mullins, a double amputee who performed in the Paralympics, and Richard Serra, with his sculptures of hot lead thrown at an empty wall. Mr Serra also plays the Master Mason in the Chrysler segment.

It is in this blend of the video and plastic arts that Mr Barney's talent can best be seen, as any teenager will tell you. But it is in his exploration of his ideas—at once so explosive and so disciplined—that more and more people are coming round to the view of Michael Kimmelman, the critic who has described Mr Barney as the most important American artist of his generation.

"Matthew Barney: The Cremaster Cycle": at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, until June 11th. Catalogue published by Harry N. Abrams; 544 pages; \$65 and £45

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