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## THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BARNEY

by Ben Davis

Existentialist guru Søren Kierkegaard once quipped that, had Hegel concluded his *System of Logic* by stating that it was all a joke, he would truly have been the greatest philosopher. "As it is," he went on, "he is merely a buffoon." Similar sentiments might apply to Matthew Barney, particularly with regard to his recently debuted feature-length film, *Drawing Restraint 9*, and the accompanying show at Gladstone Gallery, Apr. 7-May 13, 2006.

As everyone knows by now, *DR9* is the latest installment in a long-running series of "Drawing Restraint" projects, which involve the athletic artist hooking himself up to various encumbering apparatuses and attempting to express himself artistically. More to the point, however, the piece is an attempt to answer the question, "what's next?" after his epoch-making, explanation-defying, Guggenheim-filling five-part *Cremaster* cycle of films.

Critics are evenly split on whether to love Barney's films for their neo-baroque sense of spectacle, or despise them for being bloated and empty (the *Village Voice* film review of the new work featured the adjective "cremasterbatory"). But the *Cremaster* cycle made Barney a star, and, fittingly, his latest is much more decisively presented as a star vehicle than any of the previous works, with a (comparatively) coherent narrative focused around the artist and his real-life partner, experimental pop diva Björk. The film has a deliberate, epic pace, and is full of memorable imagery. It is also massively, unintentionally funny.

The bulk of the plot takes place aboard a Japanese whaling ship, of the kind usually pictured firing harpoons at Greenpeace vessels. The action of the two-and-a-half hour film is actually quite slight, most of the effort having gone into the lovingly conceived props, not plot. Barney and Björk arrive separately to the ship as "occidental guests," and get dolled up in elaborate costumes -- including sea urchin-like berets for Björk's hair, flaps of fur for Barney's forehead and massive shells strapped to both of their kimonoed backs -- before participating in an intricate tea ceremony.

This action is intercut with images of the Japanese crew going about its business: dining on Barney-invented Japanese delicacies, blowing off steam spearing a whale-shaped piñata stuffed with shrimp and filling a giant mold with Barney's signature symbolic fluid, petroleum jelly, which we watch congeal, freeze and, finally, melt.

The whole spectacle comes to a climax in the already famous, excruciatingly lengthy scene in which the two lovers are sealed inside a cabin that slowly fills with jelly from the melting mold. As the murky goo rises, Björk and Barney gaze intensely into each other's eyes, dipping razor-sharp flensing knives below the surface to carve hunks from their legs, devouring their cannibal sashimi in silent, seething passion. At this point, the two have grown blow holes in the back of their necks, and they rim one another with gusto, the whole



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**Matthew Barney**  
*The Department of the Host*  
2006  
Gladstone Gallery

ritual concluding with the implied metamorphosis of our heroes into sperm whales.

This is memorably wacky stuff -- and it is all shot with an air of stately high-seriousness (the soundtrack to the leg-munching scene is portentous moaning). In fact, in the entire odyssey, the only moment when *DR9* seems cognizant of its loopiness comes in the form of Barney's reaction when, upon first arriving on the ship, he realizes that a Japanese attendant has shaved a path down the center of his head as he slept (part of his film-long transformation). This fleeting moment of self-awareness, however, only serves to highlight how absolutely convinced the rest of the movie is of the seriousness of its symbolic universe.

The thing is, this universe doesn't really have that much gravity. There are repeating motifs, particularly in the form of lingering images of objects sticking together and pulling apart, meant to reference the "restraint" theme: long ropes of glue as Japanese builders tear up boards, during the prologue on land; the web of streamers holding the ship to the dock as it lumbers away on its voyage; the scaly skin the crew peels off the cakes that their cook serves them; and, of course, the vividly realized tearing off of leg chunks. There are also repeating images, like the bisected lozenge symbol that the large mold forms, which makes several cryptic appearances (including in the shape of the abovementioned cakes). All of this is part of Barney's dream-like, nouveau Surrealist appeal -- but it's not really symbolic, more symbol-like; the form of meaningfulness without any deep or urgent meaning.

The associated show at Gladstone Gallery (Barney's representative and a producer of *DR9*), comes on the heels of the film's New York debut and capitalizes on its star power, featuring a variety of sturdy thermoplastic sculptures depicting objects associated with the film, crafted mostly in antiseptic white to give the appearance of being made of frozen petroleum jelly (complete with lovingly rendered rifts and "crumbled-off" chunks). These include an altar featuring a crossed harpoon and flensing knife, a pile of twisted girders and a Rachel Whitereadesque mold of the cabin where the happy couple flense one another.

Near the gallery entrance, there is also a sculpture incorporating a metal platform and a wedge of congealed petroleum jelly, the remains of *Drawing Restraint 13: The Instrument of Surrender*, a filmed performance executed behind closed doors on Sunday, Apr. 2, during which Barney emerged from a crate atop the platform dressed as General Douglas MacArthur, fell into the jelly and then proceeded to sign several of his works with the aid of two actors (the film of *DR13* will be released at the upcoming "Drawing Restraint" overview at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *DRs* 10-12 were similar promotional events, executed on the occasion of the film's recent debuts in Japan and Seoul).

The pieces in the Gladstone show that most encapsulate the spirit of the film, however, are the small, graphite sketches and diagrams, mounted in shaped white plastic frames in a side gallery. Some are pseudo-scientific or architectural notes, capturing the conceptual scaffolding that overdetermines and justifies the Barney cosmology. Others feature images like a whale-man with a giant erection, penetrating a spread-eagled human woman, capturing the hammy vibe.

How best to appreciate all this? In the aptly titled *Matthew Barney: No Restraint*, Alison Chernick's behind-the-scenes chronicle of the creation of *Drawing Restraint 9*, we hear New Museum curator Richard Flood testify about the discrimination that Barney had to face as a good-looking man in the art world: "The fact that he was a



**Matthew Barney**  
*Torii*  
 2006  
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model was being used against him," he intones solemnly, an implicit rebuttal of all who would challenge the importance of the work. This statement teaches one lesson relevant to present considerations: Total conviction is a prerequisite for unintentional comedy.

Following the film's luxurious theatrics, the gallery exhibition can't help but come off as a bit of a letdown -- it's basically a collection of props, depending for their meaning on the movie. But I think this is the right idea. Hopefully, *DR9* can be reborn as a *Rocky Horror Picture Show*-style interactive camp spectacle, with audience members shaking plastic harpoons and flinging shrimp and petroleum jelly at the screen.

*Drawing Restraint 9* may be, as many are saying, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But then, as the man says, that's life. I say, enjoy.

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**Matthew Barney**  
 Props from *Drawing Restraint 13: The Instrument of Surrender*  
 2006  
 Gladstone Gallery



**Matthew Barney**  
*Occidental Guest (Groom)*  
 2006  
 Gladstone Gallery