

Matthew Barney on Idaho



October 6, 2016 - Matthew Barney was born in San Francisco, but his family relocated to Boise, Idaho when he was six. He was initially recruited by Yale to play football, and he entered the school as a pre-med student with plans to go into plastic surgery. In 1991, two years after graduation, Barney had a solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art at the age of 24.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2021 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#).

I want to talk to you about the importance of Idaho in your work.

I think like a lot of people, when I left home and came to New York, it took me a while to get back to wanting to go back. Eventually, the thing that brought me back was the specificity of that landscape, and also the way that I found myself looking for traces of that landscape in New York—in the verticality of the landscape in the city, in Manhattan in particular.

Where I started going back to was not specifically where I grew up in Boise, which is a larger valley, but into the Sawtooths, which are much more vertical, where these ravines follow rivers for miles and miles, and the sun drops behind the mountain. Quite steep ravines compared to, let's say Montana, where the sky is bigger, and the ravines are wider, and the view onto the mountains tends to be from a further distance. The Sawtooths are more dense.

Idaho has been that for me recently—both a place to spend time and visit and also as a place to locate some specific narratives that I grew up with, and to articulate them in my work.

Particularly after my daughter was born, I started going back and camping there, and returning to the same places each summer. Eventually, with *River of Fundament*, I spent some time there filming along the Salmon River, following the spawning route of the Pacific Sockeye salmon back to Red Fish Lake, where they lay their eggs and eventually die. Also, in the home of Ernest Hemingway, where he committed suicide, and running a kind of parallel narrative between the salmon spawn and Hemingway's return after Cuba to the house where he finally died.

Idaho has been that for me recently—both a place to spend time and visit and also as a place to locate some specific narratives that I grew up with, and to articulate them in my work. The salmon spawn and Hemingway's narrative were mythologies that I grew up with. As a kid in that area, whether you're particularly tuned in to fishing or to the ecological concern around the salmon, you know about the salmon spawn, and you've seen some aspect of it, so it had both this mystery and this familiarity to it. I think that that area continues to have that for me.

It's a quite extreme landscape, and it's much larger than you are, which makes it similar to living in New York. New York never loses its mystery, because it's so extreme. Even as one neighborhood becomes more domesticated, another one falls apart. There's no way of fully domesticating a city like New York.

I think my habit as an artist is something like a hunter gatherer, going out to places and gathering the narratives and materials that I need to bring back to the studio to distill down into the work.

My first trip back to Idaho for work was with *Cremaster 1*. That was about five, six years after I left. We shot *Cremaster 1* in Bronco Stadium on the blue AstroTurf there. This felt natural, as an extension of my home turf, but was also a provocation that I needed to make. I think I needed to displace the activity that takes place on the football field, and to displace my experience on that same field as a young athlete, with this very slow feminine choreography.

That piece had a lot of these long passages where these air hostesses were looking out the window, and just sort of waiting for something to happen on the field, where a young starlet was surrounded by a chorus of many more women. It was the first time I had really replaced myself with another performer as the protagonist in one of my narratives. I did that with a woman.

River of Fundament had a more naturalistic relationship to its locations and its mythological narratives, whereas *Cremaster* was far more artificial. I guess it has worked both ways for me.



CREMASTER 1: MS Goodyear, 1995 C-print in self-lubricating plastic frame

Do you find that as you've gone on, that as you get older that you can look back at the place with less of a need to subvert it in some way?

I would say the place that I'm more engaged with now in Idaho is near the River of No Return wilderness area. It's less to do with the culture in Idaho that I grew up with in and around Boise. As a younger artist, I was more interested in dealing with the aspect of the culture in Idaho which I found oppressive as a kid. Through those years in the Cremaster Cycle, both in *Cremaster 1*, but also in *Cremaster 2* which was made in the Mormon basin in northern Utah, I was carrying a narrative with me that had been brewing since my youth, growing up in that area. I think my interest in that area has shifted, and yes, I think it's now easier to just let it be what it is.

Do you feel like you're seen as someone from Idaho, or do you feel like you are more often identified as someone living in New York?

I think I'm seen as somebody who lives in New York. Idaho doesn't have a real strong visual arts culture, so in a way there isn't a scene to engage with. My engagement there is really with old friends and family.

Do you feel the pull of New York in your work too?

The starting point for me has always been place. There have been, at this point, many places that I have used as primary sites for the work, many of them outside of this country. Although, I would say that the pieces that I feel closest to take place in the United States, simply to do with my familiarity with the place, and being able to engage with it both personally and abstractly. That said, I think sometimes it's a relief to deal more objectively with a place, and engage with it just as deeply, but not necessarily on a personal level.

It isn't about having a full time residence there. I think it's about having a place to retreat to, to be able to make work, develop work, but to continue to return to the studio.

New York, for quite a long time now, has been my home base, and the place where the distillation happens. I think my habit as an artist is something like a hunter gatherer, going out to places and gathering the narratives and materials that I need to bring back to the studio to distill down into the work.

You're going to Idaho tomorrow. Are you going to make work or just to go?

I'm going to set up a piece of property there that I'm using as a second studio and as a more permanent place to return to from time to time. I'm also researching a new project there which I'll be working on over the next year.

Do you imagine yourself living there for long periods of time, or is it important for you to be in New York and to go back to Idaho less frequently?

It isn't about having a full time residence there. I think it's about having a place to retreat to, to be able to make work, develop work, but to continue to return to the studio. I work with a group of people—we're kind of a collective—and I need that kind of hive model to exist with the studio.

I think a place like this is really more about writing and drawing, and possibly making smaller projects, but I think I'm still very interested and engaged by the larger studio setup that I have here, where a group of people are working together.

Some things that were influential to Matthew Barney:

"Block Buys" in Darmstadt, Spiral Jetty/Double Negative in the American West, or Bernini's St. Teresa in Rome to consider sculpture made in situ.

Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, or Capodimonte Museum, Naples to consider paintings in natural light, next to an open window.

N.F.L. Films

The Atrocity Exhibition, by J.G. Ballard

Idaho Highway 75, between Galena Summit and Challis.

Was there a significance to Hemingway killing himself in Idaho, or do you think he just reached that point in his life? It didn't happen while he was in Cuba or happen elsewhere, but he was in this house, a sort of a domestic space. As you've researched that, does it seem like there was any kind of planning or just that's where it happened?

I think that it was at that point in his life that there was an accumulation of things, including a mental illness, that caught up with him at that point. I know that that house in Ketchum, it's constructed in the same way that the Sun Valley Lodge is constructed. It's a cast concrete house that has been faux finished to look like wood. I think Hemingway, at a certain point in his career, had lost much of his archival material and he was terrified about losing them again, so he made this fireproof bunker in Idaho. So there was a way in which he entombed himself as a way of dealing with his paranoia of losing his life's work. That's very specific to that place, but it sounds to me like he was really struggling at that point in a number of other ways.

How far is that from where you grew up?

It's a couple of hours.

When you were a kid, was it something that you knew about, the whole Hemingway thing, or is it something you learned about as you got older?

It's sort of like with the salmon. Yes, I knew about it, but I wasn't fixated on Hemingway. It was just part of the landscape in a way. When you would go to that area, to the Wood River Valley, it was one of the mythologies that existed there, along with the Hemingway legacy. There's a kind of heaviness to it, but I think for me, as a kid, there was also a kind of naturalness to his story there, as horrifying as it was. It's a little troubling to feel that way about a suicide.

Has it been important for you to have your own child get a sense of where you came from?

For sure. At this point, we've spent quite a lot of time there, both in the winter and the summer. I feel like I've lived several lives since I lived in Idaho, so even if it is like a past life regression, it's a real pleasure to go back and share that place with my daughter.



RIVER OF FUNDAMENT: Sawtooth National Monument, 2014, Engraved brass in brass frame

When you go back, do you feel like an outsider, or do you still feel you know enough of it is in you that you can say, we're in Idaho?

These cities in the northwest, and Boise is one of them, they were growing during times of recession in the northeast. They were growing as technological bases, after the tech companies moved in the early '80s. That area of the country has changed so much since I was a teenager when I was living there.

I'm bewildered with how different it is, but there are still ways of engaging with the things that haven't changed, and the things that I feel quite close to. The landscape is probably the strongest of those things. And that's the thing that I've been trying to share with my daughter, and to bring into my work as an artist.

Name

Matthew Barney

Vocation

Visual Artist, Filmmaker, Performance Artist, Metal Fan, ex-Football Player

Fact

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Photo: Ari Marcopoulos