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Matthew Barney Isn't a Celebrity Artist Anymore The art world made him a star, then moved along. That turned out to be for the best.

By Zachary Woolfe

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Photo: Catherine Opie for New York Magazine

There isn't anything luxurious about Matthew Barney's beat-up white pickup truck. No leather seats, no touchscreens, and whatever shock absorbers it had when he bought it 20 years ago have mostly worn away. As he drove us from his Long Island City studio on a warm day in early April to visit the foundry in Kingston where his new sculpture was being made, every vibration on the road registered. The truck has 120,000 miles on it; that's not so many, Barney conceded, for a 2006 model, but they're "hard miles."

Of course Barney drives a truck. Ever since he broke onto the scene in the late 1980s, he has been perhaps the most American of American artists, making enigmatic, intense work inspired by the country's fraught history, weight lifting, football, guns, the military, muscle cars. His own image is both ruggedly masculine — the work boots and Carhartt pants, the athlete's upbringing in Idaho, the brawny materials, the jaw still square even as the stubble has whitened — and gentle, brainy, soft-spoken.

At the foundry, the sculpture was a tall, spindly construction of metal tubes propped against one another to form something like the skeleton of a mountain, which would eventually be painted to look like white plastic. Two football jerseys — also metal, in this case intended to be painted to look like fabric — hung from the peak. Barney slowly walked around it, moving in close to inspect the details and stepping back to take in the whole effect. He tried on augmented-reality goggles that had been programmed to superimpose on the sculpture a ghostly vision of the finished product. Certain elements, he thought, needed to be shifted infinitesimally to give the impression he wanted of weight, of reality. "There was something about the way that the jerseys were hanging," he told me. "With something like that, it's meant to be affecting my gravity, and if it's off by a half an inch, it's going to look wrong."

Though it loomed, the sculpture had a slightness, like a sketch in the air. Barney said he considered it to be a kind of drawing. Once painted, it would evoke a tangle of bleached, gnawed bones, with a pared-down quality very different from that of the sprawling productions of his earlier years. Barney came to prominence with self-punishing solo performances and hourslong, casts-of-hundreds, years-in-the-making, oozing, elaborately costumed, densely symbolic film epics. For many, he has remained frozen in that moment, forever the young, fiercely intelligent ex-quarterback ex-model who would suspend himself naked from the ceiling in a harness and strain to apply Vaseline all over —and inside — his body, who would construct an enormous arena out of salt in middle-of-nowhere Utah to film a rodeo that was also a metaphor for the execution of a notorious murderer.

He made his grandest mark on art history with the Cremaster cycle: five films, some six and a half hours total, that dominated his career for almost a decade and took over the Guggenheim in 2003. He pressed even further with the 320-minute River of Fundament, a meditation, which took nearly seven years to complete, on Norman Mailer, ancient Egyptian mythology, Rust Belt deindustrialization, sex, and human waste.

When River was released in 2014, it was greeted coolly, even by people who had adored Cremaster, and for the first time since his stratospheric rise in the early ’90s, there was talk that Barney’s best and most significant work was behind him. The enfant terrible — who had become a household name, at least in certain households, for his surreal, innovative art and his romantic and creative partnership with Björk — was no longer at the forefront. An overtly political approach to art-making surged into vogue that left little room for his cryptic style and raised questions about the immense resources that had long been placed at a straight white man’s disposal. Painting, never part of his practice, took over the market. His celebrity ebbed.

Barney didn’t see River as a failure. (This month, he gives it a rare screening at the Masonic Hall in Chelsea.) And he kept making uncompromising work that reflected, obliquely as ever, on Manifest Destiny, horror films, high-concept footwear, the rewilding of mountain wolves, the grotesque impact of head injuries in football, masculinity run amok. He tried out new materials — ceramic, burned tree trunks, copper plates scorched by electricity, molten bronze that he exploded downward into clay silt — and, increasingly, new forms, especially live performance and dance. Out of the spotlight, the work got less elaborate and more profound.

“The art world is fickle; it turns its attention,” said Stuart Comer, the chief curator of media and performance at the Museum of Modern Art. “But inevitably, certain artists return to the conversation. The work took on a renewed urgency in the last decade, and we all saw it differently.”

Friends say Barney didn’t shift in response to the criticism but homed in, distilling the overflowing dream logic of his early days down to the essentials. “I’m not convinced that Matt is as dependent on feedback as people might think,” said the artist Roni Horn, who has known him since college. “I’m sure it was the cause of some degree of introspection or questioning, but I don’t think it was a big influence on his decision-making. He’s not going to deny knowledge of things; he’s a very sensitive person. But he continued on, in his own way. As he does now.”

“He’s making art. He’s living in the world. He’s doing something incredibly vulnerable in an incredibly public position. Give the guy a fucking break,” said the artist Jordan Wolfson. “Everyone always wants to talk, ‘He’s down, and now he’s up again.’ He was always Matthew Barney to me.”

When I first met Barney in March, he was beginning to talk about his next piece, a two-person short film co-starring Clarissa Dalrymple, the cool-seeking curator who discovered him 36 years ago. Dalrymple, now 85, had a stroke a few years ago that affected her mobility. After watching her exercises in a physical-therapy session, Barney proposed a kind of stylized pas de deux in which they would trade off balancing each other’s weight, a way of quite literally supporting someone who once supported him. “We have a history,” he told me. “That’s certainly a part of this. There’s no way it’s not going to have that kind of intimacy.”

When it’s completed, the film will capture Dalrymple pressing against her physical boundaries — and Barney pressing against his too. In this, it isn’t all that different from the work he has been creating for decades. But his inquiries into injury and mortality, deterioration and perseverance, climbing and dragging, failing and transforming, are now far from metaphorical. His age has begun to catch up with the obsessions that have preoccupied him since he was a student. Next year, he will turn 60. His daughter with Björk, Ísadóra, is now almost exactly as old as he was when he became famous.

The death in 2024 of Barbara Gladstone, his longtime dealer and champion, was a personal loss. He also took it as a signal of something larger: the passing of a generation, a sensibility, a sense of possibility. “I think it coincides with a real change in the art world,” he told me. “So not only is Barbara missed, but so too is Marian Goodman, and with each of these people passing, it’s a little bit like, Okay, we’re in a very different era.”

For Barney, that new era is one of muted bombast, fewer epics. “My body is changing,” he said in his calm, airy voice. “I’ve done projects that consumed me for so long. I question whether I sort of have that — you know, whether I have it in me, or whether I would even desire to do it if I did.”

The Cremaster's Cycles: Four Decades of Matthew Barney



1989 | *Field Dressing* finds the Yale undergrad, whose clean-cut, all-American good looks landed him in preppy fashion catalogues, applying Vaseline all over and inside his body. Matthew Barney, courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

On our drive back to the city from the foundry, Barney recalled growing up in Boise, which instilled in him a lasting fascination with the West and "the violence that lives in that landscape." In the Northeast, he said, history is so densely packed that it can be hard to read; in the frontier and the mountains, there are fewer distractions. "There's more space," he said. "To be really simple about it, you know? There's more space between things."

A wrestler in high school and a quarterback on his state-champion team, Barney was the president of his class and ended up at Yale, working his way through by modeling for J.Crew and Ralph Lauren. His mother, trained as a painter, had moved to New York in the early '80s after she and his father divorced. During college, Barney split his time between New Haven and her place in Little Italy, increasingly interested in art as he came into contact with her circle of friends. "It was definitely an entry point for me, just seeing her and her work," he said. "That this was a possible thing to do."

Using the iconography of sports — wrestling mats, power racks, swimming caps, cleats, splints, foams, pads — his earliest pieces took to an extreme the cycles of buildup and breakdown familiar to any athlete. The physical exertion and flexing muscles of the performances, the triumph over constraint, tended to mingle with degradation and humiliation. Tied to a rope, Barney grappled his way up a wall as he struggled to scrawl marks on it as part of a series he began as a student, called "Drawing Restraint."

The first time Dalrymple encountered him was in 1990, when she was running the Petersburg Gallery in Soho. "Matthew was doing this terrible, precipitous climb, and we were going to show it," she told me. "Maybe I didn't get it right away, but I saw the obsessive, focused way he was working out exactly how to do this climb. It was astonishing."

Weeks before the opening, Petersburg Gallery shut down, and Gladstone, Dalrymple's friend, visited Barney's studio in the Meatpacking District. He had guided Gladstone downstairs to a freezing-cold basement, she later recalled to the journalist Calvin Tomkins, which was empty except for a bench covered in Vaseline that "made me gasp. It was unearthly and ghostly."

Vaseline, another element drawn from Barney's sports background, had become a signature ingredient: everyday yet uncanny, solid yet soft. He covered himself with it and began to cast it into slouchy, cloudy sculptures of free weights. This summer, I went to see one of those pieces in a Queens warehouse, where Barney's head of curatorial projects had organized a group show of artists young and old. Displayed in a bright-red picnic cooler, propped atop blue ice packs to keep it firm, the Vaseline dumbbell seemed as if it could be the white in an abstraction of the American flag. It reminded me of an organ about to be whisked away for transplantation, delicate and meaty at once.

"It was about the athlete and athleticism," Comer said, "and it was also about the opposite: an abject approach to the powerful, masculine, white male body. That push and pull in the work has always been there, this ping-pong between virility and abjection." Butch but vulnerable, these pieces stood out in an art scene then defined by overpriced Neo-Expressionist paintings. A still from Barney's video piece *Delay of Game,* a close-up of a gloved hand holding a silvery pearl between two fingers, appeared on the cover of *Artforum,* and before 1991 was out, he had shows at Gladstone's gallery in New York and at her son's, Stuart Regen Gallery, in Los Angeles. An exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and appearances in the Whitney Biennial, the Venice Biennale, and Documenta IX in Germany soon followed.

"It felt like things were moving faster than I could keep up with," he later told *The Guardian.* "I was 24 and I didn't really understand what was going on. I made a conscious decision to take something on that I knew would slow everything down. That's how the *Cremaster* series came about."

Enormous, glacial in pace, and largely nonverbal, *Cremaster,* named after the muscle that controls the rising and falling of the testicles, evolved into a visually stunning pageant that expanded Barney's vision way beyond solos. It brought, he told me, "a chorus into my vocabulary."

Inspired by the process of sexual differentiation in the womb and full of weird, intricate symbols, the cycle eventually grew into a sweeping, dreamlike narrative — if nothing like a standard plot — that traveled from the American West to New York to the Irish Sea to Central Europe. "There's an existential message in *Cremaster* that has haunted me ever since my university days," Wolfson told me. "The idea of systems — weather systems, tectonic plates — all running independently but being connected. This idea of nature perpetuating itself with an indifference toward animals or human beings, their survival."

Some of Barney's images and notions are easier to get than others. Scenes of swarming bees and interiors resembling honeycombs in the production design clearly tap into themes of pollination and fertility — but they also, less obviously, conjure Utah (the Beehive State, after all) and then the rigid, hive-mind hierarchy of the Mormon church. Barney invented a symbol he called the Field Emblem, a lozengelike oval bisected by a line, which he saw as shorthand for a self-imposed restraint on the body. The emblem appears throughout the cycle, as does Barney himself in roles that include the killer Gary Gilmore and a tap-dancing satyr. Norman Mailer plays Harry Houdini, who has always fascinated Barney. *Cremaster 5* sprawls across Budapest, where the escape artist was born, with the aging Bond girl Ursula Andress magisterial as a queen — another bee analogy — and Barney in her service. There's blood, intestines, Goodyear blimps.

Everything made sense to the artist, who tended to explain with serene lucidity what it all meant. "He has a world in his head," Dalrymple said, "and he thinks we all know it." If the experience was far more opaque for most viewers, it didn't seem to matter: The perplexity had its own allure, and there was something exhilarating in all the intellectual and aesthetic excess, in Barney's charismatic confidence. Filling the Guggenheim's rotunda, the work brought him notoriety beyond the usual museum circles; the Björk connection didn't hurt. (Their breakup a decade later inspired the stark ballads of her 2015 album, *Vulnicura.*)

Cremaster was "what has come to be referred to as 'world-building,'" said Nat Trotman, a media and performance curator at the Guggenheim who was a research assistant for the show in 2003. "It wasn't the first sealed alternate reality, but the way that he was able to create a world with its own immersive logic, and to shape it into an architectural space, was just very special and defining."

What new world could he create but one even bigger and more baroquely clotted? *River of Fundament* is an operatic film with speak-singing and choral chant set to a hypnotic score by Jonathan Bepler, Barney's longtime composer collaborator. It had its origins in Mailer's loopy 1983 novel, *Ancient Evenings,* which is set in the Egypt of thousands of years ago, but in the film Mailer (who died in 2007) is the protagonist. Played by three actors, including his real-life son — and symbolically represented by three generations of American cars — he dies and is reincarnated several times.

Elaine Stritch gives a eulogy at the memorial; Paul Giamatti plays (in contemporary street clothes) an ancient Egyptian philosopher; Maggie Gyllenhaal and Debbie Harry make cameos. It all originated as a performance in Barney's studio, and the action, such as it is, is a hybrid of

traditional filmed scenes and live events captured on-camera; a car drives off a bridge at one point, another is melted in a furnace. Huge swaths of imagery are solemnly unsparing, verging on the unwatchable. There is graphic sex, including coupling with a car engine, and masturbation, including a sequence with a dildo that appears to be made from feces.

It seemed like a way for Barney to escalate his ambitions. He didn't know at the time that it would mark an end point — in size, in subject matter, in density. "It was an enormous trust fall," he said, "a collective trust fall for everybody involved. There was a lot of risk to take on with that piece. And with the way things operate these days, it's a little — it's kind of hard to imagine making that piece now. It is a particularly conservative moment in art right now."

River was clearly the work of an artist with a Rolodex, and viewers couldn't tell whether to take all the celebrity appearances as winking or self-regarding. Huge and outrageous, the whole thing was, Trotman said with considerable understatement, "very laden, with a lot going on." In its wake, Barney's reputation took a hit. But Horn doesn't remember him wobbling. They got to know each other at Yale, where she was a graduate student when he was an undergrad. "At that time, he was already doing 'Drawing Restraint.' I connected strongly with the athletic aspect, using his body as a mechanism of drawing. It was very physical or visceral, very sensual or sexual," she said. "He is now very like what he was then. Very thoughtful, oddly generous spiritually, real, intelligent. Carries his doubt but also his confidence."

Barney moved forward by taking strands of *River* and isolating them, cutting out the grandiose narrative and focusing on materials and their behavior. The film had riffed on the myth of Isis, the Egyptian goddess whose tears were said to cause the annual flooding of the Nile, so he experimented with the displacement of water. "I was initially thinking about just pouring molten metal into the East River and going down to retrieve it," he said. "And then we started doing tests." The tests showed that plain river water wouldn't provide enough resistance for the metal to be shaped into anything interesting.

"So we started trying wax, ice, clay," Barney told me. "Different things, basically, that would be added to the water to give it a little bit more body." Brainstorming with a foundry in Walla Walla, Washington, he arrived at a slurry of water and a clay called bentonite, which is liquid at rest but becomes solid when a force — say, a whole lot of molten metal — is shoved against it. The metal flowed into crevices before it hardened, and the resulting sculptures were explosive, unpredictable, fractal shapes, violent and elegant.

Barney's newer projects mingled, as before, performance and film, sculpture and drawing, but he concentrated their scope. *Redoubt,* unveiled in 2018 and far quieter than *River,* transposed the ancient tale of Diana and Actaeon onto the hunting of wolves in today's American West. Five years later, *Secondary* revisited an old Barney fixation, a tragic accident during a preseason NFL game in 1978 in which Jack Tatum, a defensive back for the Raiders, delivered a bad hit to Darryl Stingley, a wide receiver for the Patriots, breaking Stingley's neck and leaving him largely paralyzed from the chest down. In a filmed duet with the breakdancer Raphael Xavier, Barney's clay-covered head bashed against the wall, making marks. He wrapped yet more clay around plastic to create sculptures that evoked broken pipes and spines.

"Much of the work was about decay from the get-go," Comer said. "And now you have an artist whose body is aging and in a world that feels precarious. So the work changes too. My sense is that his own aging is actually making the work more articulate."

In his earlier pieces, despite their immaculate look, Barney didn't pay much attention to rehearsing the action in a conventional sense. "I had accepted the performance-art ethos of, you know, 'No rehearsal, no repeat,'" he told me. "And I've become a total rehearsal junkie. I love it. There's less control, I think, in the live situation, which is exciting, and yet there's typically more preparation."

Last year, in a former military field house in Aspen, Barney put on a performance that was something like an old-fashioned Old West musical revue with a brass band, as indebted to razzle-dazzle, golden-age Broadway as to experimental art. A pack of huskies raced into the space. An Indigenous dance marked out positions to place assemblages of white plastic tubes. A drum line accompanied a riflewoman symbolizing Diana shooting toward the mountains. "It was almost surgical, going from one element to the next," Wolfson said. "It was a performance, but it was a ritual."

That performance, *Tactical Parallax,* inspired the sculpture being made in Kingston, which Barney called *Zone Defense: Old Snowmass Parallax.* In late June, I went back to the foundry with him. The steel now looked eerily like plastic, and the skeletonlike form was reminiscent of the outline of a tepee, Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2),* the Iwo Jima memorial. As always with Barney, you could let the free associations run wild.

Trompe l'oeil blue, red, and yellow weight plates, like the kind you find at the gym, now gave the illusion of anchoring the tubes and bending them into curves. Draped at the top — a forlorn flag or perhaps a crucifixion — were Stingley's and Tatum's jerseys, one black, one white, easy to mistake for real fabric.

Barney slowly circled the sculpture, giving notes about the positioning of the weight plates and the textures of the paint on all the distinctive surfaces. At one point, five artisans swarmed, buffing the poles until they looked milkier, duller, more plasticky. It was the first time Barney had created a sculpture that attempted to trick the eye. He is, at heart, still an old-school formalist; not letting materials be themselves was a transgression. “It felt like such an unusual thing to be doing and maybe even on the verge of feeling a little bit sacrilegious,” he told me bashfully. “To paint a metal sculpture, you know?”



After he was invited to lecture at Yale, Barney and I took the Metro-North to New Haven. He has been making occasional trips to his alma mater for years, but especially since *Secondary*, young artists have been reassessing his work, intrigued by his way of mutating personal histories and preoccupations into strange forms. "He's an icon," Wolfson said. "One of my assistants is a zoomer in his 20s, and he's been obsessed with Matthew since he was in high school."

During a studio visit, John Shen, an M.F.A. student, showed us a series of videos in which he walked around American landmarks dressed like a cowboy, filmed as if he were the protagonist in a third-person-shooter video game. "There's a real kind of myth around him," Shen said later of Barney. "That he does what he wants to do, that he is pretty singular and doesn't compromise. He has a very specific vision of what he wants, and that is one thing to learn from him. But for me, the real lesson with him is resisting the urge to overexplain everything."

The lecture to the School of Art progressed through Barney's body of work, project by project — the kind of survey he has shied away from doing with a museum. When you're a major artist nearing 60, you start getting asked to be the subject of retrospectives. One institution in Asia recently approached him about such a show, and he demurred, proposing a juxtaposition of *Secondary* and his early work instead. "Some artists do surveys regularly throughout their career," he said. "It's just a kind of normal thing for them. I haven't done that. Until rather recently, I have been kind of avoiding that."

He still doesn't think he would want the usual career-spanning exhibition. Instead, he has been moving toward making little retrospectives within individual works, taking materials and images from different eras and remixing them. One piece he's currently developing uses burned-out trees from *Redoubt,* harvested this summer and milled down past the burn, to construct a power rack through which a charred tree will pass and rest on the carved wood console of a Chrysler Imperial, the car that participates in a demolition derby in the lobby of the Chrysler Building at the climax of *Cremaster 3.* "I never tend to think of anything in a permanent way," he said. "I'm really turned on by the process of reinterpreting something in another context."

Planning the *River* screening, the first time the work would play in New York in nearly a dozen years, Barney was excited that some of Bepler's score would be performed by live musicians. But it was clear that something of that scale is not in his future. This year, he considered an offer to direct a production of *Licht,* the steroidally expansive, barely stageable cycle of seven operas — about 29 hours in all — the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen wrote between 1977 and 2003. (One notorious scene calls for the members of a string quartet to play from inside four different helicopters in flight.) Stockhausen drew on a batty cosmology he had invented for the highly symbolic work. Few projects would seem like a better fit for Barney, and maybe at a different moment he would have enthusiastically gone for it. But besides the project's logistical issues, the time commitment was untenable; he had heard the conductor alone would essentially be devoting himself single-mindedly to *Licht* for two years.

"I don't think I can quit my job for two years," Barney said, laughing.

Superhuman scale and immersion was once a selling point for him; now, it's a drawback. "Being trapped inside something for many years, I think that really used to be a driving force," he said. "I remember deciding before *Cremaster* started that I wanted to make something that took a long time and would take place over many locations and that structurally was much bigger than any exhibition. But being inside something for that long is intense."

When we met at his studio in early September, Barney had gotten back from Idaho, where he owns a place near *Redoubt*'s filming location, amid lots of geothermal activity and exposed granite peaks, and a trip to Aspen, where *Zone Defense* was installed in a vast field among the Rockies. While out there, he worked on a new script for a project set to be screened in California a year from now. It's another short film, with, Barney insisted, the structure of a sitcom.

It will follow the Dalrymple project, which has been in the works since last year. Initially, she didn't know quite what to make of Barney's idea. "I thought maybe he was being a bit perverse: 'Here's this poor old crip,'" she said. Her physical limitations ended up being even more daunting than they had anticipated: Barney had to put off shooting for months and revise the choreography as she worked to regain her strength after a fall this summer.

An early version of the script begins with the two of them standing barefoot in a dance studio, each holding on to a barre. Dalrymple dusts her hand with chalk, lowers herself, and begins to slowly drag herself forward. Then she rises to her feet, steadies herself at the barre, lets go of it, sways lightly from side to side, sits down, and begins pulling herself forward again.

The action emerged from trial and error in sessions in her small apartment overlooking Union Square. "He'd come over and he'd say 'Lie down' or 'Move your head like this,'" Dalrymple said. "Today we were being dogs. He's much more observant than me, and he said that dogs

don't look with their eyes; they look with their heads. It's very small movements, as you might see from all his films. There's not much."

The completed film promises to be, like all of Barney's art, a labyrinth of references, cultural and personal, puzzling and suggestive, rigorously unsentimental yet emotionally charged. As it turns from a pair of solos to a gentle duet, it will evoke hippie-chic 1970s contact improvisation. Sequences that take place in a dark, mirror-lined dream space with Dalrymple in a shimmering black top and Barney in a satin tux, neither of them speaking, will be a suave homage to Busby Berkeley and to Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz*.

It will be a love letter to a mother figure from the man she nurtured and a portrait of a body that's aging, that doesn't work the way it once did, that's dying. Early in the process, Barney's daughter, who is now a performer and artist herself, played Dalrymple's part as he experimented with the movement. In his studio earlier this year, he displayed a series of smoky drawings he and Ísadóra had made during lockdown. They had put a furnace in the center of a room, and Ísadóra would burn sticks in it and hold them in her hands and tape them to her feet to make drawings on pieces of paper attached to the wall.

"It was a way," he said, "that she and I had discussed, like, 'How do we capture this moment?' She was about to go to college, and she was leaving home, and it was just 'Let's make a kind of improvised piece about this moment.'"

The Dalrymple film too is about capturing a moment of change, about transfers of energy and power. The camerawork will be even more pristine and objective than in the *Cremaster* cycle, like an alien's scanning eye. But it is sure to be moving as a study in coming and going. When I asked about his work with conservators, with whom he is in constant consultation given the unconventional, fragile materials he has used, Barney said, "I need to make decisions about whether something's going to be replaced or if we're going to try to use a technique to fix it but also sort of let aging be a part of it. There are certain things I would like to stay the same forever and then other things I really enjoy watching change."

With Dalrymple still recovering from her fall, it was too early to gauge what might be possible for her physically. "He wants to make something; he has a vision," she told me. "I don't want to disappoint Matthew." But the plan would likely need to be altered. "Some of the things that she was really interested in doing involved standing," Barney told me at his studio. "I think it felt good for her to be able to bring that into the movement. And now, let's see if we have to remove some of that, some of those moves from sitting to standing, those things that require a little bit more strength."

The final lines of the early script suggest that Barney joins Dalrymple as she moves into some other realm. He gives her a final gift, a lozenge-shaped object made of petroleum jelly that the text calls the "Hubris Pill" — a throwback to a knotty concept of his from the early '90s related to metabolic conversion, to energy and overreach and male competition. We see Dalrymple in close-up, her expression warm as she is spotlit, according to the script, "against the infinite background."

Then the camera shifts to Barney, also in close-up, also gazing warmly. He raises the Hubris Pill — the same kind of ambiguous, fascinating object he has been making for decades — and lowers it. The pill sinks onto Dalrymple's fingertips and then bends over them. She and Barney focus on it as it slowly transforms, and the film fades to black.