

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Matthew Barney

GLADSTONE GALLERY

In 1967, the critic Brian O'Doherty described "the ideology of the gallery space" as "idealized," "sealed off," "untouched by time." If this were true when O'Doherty penned these words, by 1991 the white cube was neurotic, with the airs of a padded cell, or so Matthew Barney suggested in "Facility of DECLINE," his solo exhibition at Gladstone Gallery that year. To mark that show's twenty-fifth anniversary, the artist has reformatted the exhibition, with a number of the original works on display.

Upon first entering the gallery, there didn't appear to be much to see (especially for a Matthew Barney production), and in fact, one of the show's most important components was the least visible: a track of mounts running along the ceiling, which Barney had used in the original installation to traverse the space. Both a structuring device and a narrative arc, this obstacle course, which dipped down in places to the upper reaches of the gallery walls, also gave rise to a number of the objects in the exhibition, including two great videos—*BLIND PERINEUM* and *RADIAL DRILL*, both 1991—the former featuring Barney, mostly naked, with a mix of determination and grit in his eyes, some rock-climbing equipment around his waist and a blue helmet on his head, hanging from the ceiling. The videos played on small monitors, hung in the corners like surveillance equipment. Envision CrossFit for gallerygoers live-streamed on the internet. Of course, it's not so difficult to imagine.

The rest of the exhibition revolved around ideas of sport, the body, and exercise, with works resting somewhere between sculpture, artifact, and prop. An oversize flesh-pink wrestling mat spilled out across the floor of the first gallery, a vast homogenous expanse differentiated only by a couple of strange shapes, which somehow looked like both testicles and handles, emerging from one side; a disconcerting, medical-looking contraption, incorporating socks, glass tubing, and an Olympic curl

bar fabricated from petroleum jelly hung from the ceiling. There were numerous other incarnations of exercise equipment on display as well: Olympic weights and dumbbells, alternately made of Cramergesic ointment or cast in wax; droopy locker doors; football jerseys with 00 on the back (the number of the beleaguered Oakland Raiders player Jim Otto); and massive gel packs splayed on the floor. There were pads on the doorways, pulled taut with binding belts, which looked as if they

belonged in a sanatorium. The coup de grace was a huge freezer in the back gallery that visitors could enter, which housed a decline bench press made of petroleum jelly. All these components appeared less as discrete objects than as parts of an environment, and yet this effect was achieved with a light touch, as if energies latent in the gallery were being exposed for the first time. (The exception was a number of little drawings scattered throughout the show, in their own fleshy frames, which were elevated to the level of relics.) If we need another metaphor, it's as if the gallery had been reincarnated as an icebox, preserving a new form of life.

It felt a bit strange to see this work from 1991, given the "spandex craze" that has preoccupied contemporary art in recent years: Filtered through Cronenbergian body horror and *DIS* magazine aesthetics, yoga pants have come to symbolize the arrival of our cyborg selves, and bottled water the obvious fact of our posthumanism. But whereas many of these subject-object hybrids are made manifest today in the form of prosthetic bodily appendages and severed part-objects, Barney's exhibition put the emphasis on the *apparatus*: the demanding course that bodies run. And yet for all its contemporary resonance, the exhibition read as very much of its moment as well: Similar to the contemporaneous work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, it presented an identity politics of the cis, white, straight male, replete with the requisite anal eroticism and jock anxiety—no surprise that a related body of work was included in the watershed 1993 Whitney Biennial. At this moment, Barney made it clear that the strength of his subject position was no longer guaranteed; while much of his subsequent work—marked by Wagnerian efforts to revivify myth—tacitly acknowledges this imperiled status too, its interest in overscaled production points in another direction. Indeed, amid the nostalgia for the '90s that we see around us today, the tension between precocity and bombast continues to be the order of the day.

—Alex Kitnick

Matthew Barney, *REPRESSIA (decline)*, 1991, wrestling mat, Pyrex, cast petroleum-wax and petroleum-jelly Olympic curl bar, cotton socks, sternal retractors, skeets, large-pearl tapioca, petroleum jelly, video. Installation view. Photo: David Regen.



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