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ARTnews

Matthew Barney on His Latest Sculpture, Remote on a Colorado Ranch



Matthew Barney, *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax*, 2026.
Photo Lance Gerber/©Matthew Barney/Courtesy the Artist and Aspen Art Museum

Matthew Barney has been an integral part of the first two editions of the Aspen Art Museum's AIR festival in Colorado: last year, with a performance in a former military drill hall on a cattle ranch; this year, with a related sculptural installation on a nearby tract of open land. The performance, an abstract sort of musical revue titled *TACTICAL Parallax*, drew elements from Barney's previous works *Redoubt* (a 2019 film and related sculptures engaged with pioneering and alchemical spirits associated with the American West) and *Secondary* (a 2023 film and set of sculptures inspired by the violence and

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grace of football and a notorious incident in the 1970s that exposed the sport's darkest side).

The new sculpture, titled *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax*, debuted at the **AIR festival** in July and remains in place through the summer, with visitation upon request. Formally, the sculpture connects with last year's performance by way of a standing structure that, in the live event, was PVC piping that was welded and rose up into a similar position in the end. For all the ways it looks the same, however, the structure in the sculpture is not PVC but, instead, stainless steel that was painted over, to illusionistic trompe l'oeil effect. Similarly, the "weights" at the bottom are in fact cast bronze painted to look like their gym-inhabiting counterparts (complete with the residue of hand powder that bodybuilders use), and what look like two draped football jerseys at the top are a cast-aluminum memorial to Darryl Stingley and Jack Tatum, the two players at the heart of *Secondary*.

What follows is a conversation with Barney that transpired during the half-hour drive from Aspen to Snowmass, where the sculpture rises against the Rocky Mountains, and the return ride back.

How did the idea for your performance in Aspen last year originate? Had you had a performance in mind from the start?

I was invited to come and make live work for the AIR festival, and they showed me the drill hall at McCabe Ranch. It was that piece of architecture that synthesized the idea, in part because the architecture is so specific and has such a specific history. Where drill hall is now is a cattle ranch, and they use it as a barn. We did a site visit during calving season, and they were bringing newborn calves into it. But the story I've heard is that after World War II ended, the military base at Camp Hale was dismantled, and they auctioned off or gave away different works of architecture, and then they had to fly them piece by piece to different places in the area. Given *Redoubt* in *Secondary*, it immediately became compelling as a military training site and essentially a field.

There was very little time to develop something, so I decided to take material I already had and work with that. Jonathan Bepler [a frequent collaborator with Barney who composed the live music for the performance] and I started thinking about ways that the material could be used again, and what kind of conventions there are for a kind of revue or medley, taking material from other narratives and creating a new situation out of them. It was a response to a prompt, but it turned into something that's been quite generative for me—thinking about what happens when you collide different narratives and where the intersection creates a kind of jarring moment of dissonance. If you think about the way medleys work, it's the moment of a cut when you go from one source to another that is exciting.

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Did that interest in the collision of narratives precede *Secondary*? That's such an elemental part of that work.

I'm interested in aspects of alchemy, where you put two unlike things together and create a compound. You can create a third space somehow, and the more reactive the two elements are, the more potential there is to create a change. That kind of thinking has gone into a lot of the work that I've made, where unlike elements are placed even within a scene to create tension and a reaction. I tend to think about storytelling that way, and I create structures within stories that are made from combining unlike materials and elements. The idea of working with a kind of musical revue structure is not unfamiliar to me, but I've never really gone fully into that vernacular the way that we did with this piece.

With this sculpture, there's a way in which a reaction comes from the placement of the piece within the landscape. What carries over the dynamics of *Redoubt* is the setting and confrontation with the Western land. From *Secondary* is a part of the piece that is not the first thing you look at: the orange end-zone markers that diagram the field and also a boundary or a kind of demarcating of land, which in *TACTICAL Parallax* was enacted by the hoop dancer from *Redoubt* surveying the scene and the drawing that the groundskeeper [Barney himself, in Wranglers and a cowboy hat] made of the parallax structure on the field. The end-zone markers are, for me, as important as anything in the sculpture.

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What is behind their orientation and the way they are placed on the land?

It's the size of an American football field as a rectangle, but the markers are placed such that if you connect them, they make the drawing of the parallax structure [intersecting diagonal lines crossing the length of the field] that was made in the performance, but at a larger scale.

Did you know that sculpture would come out of the performance? Had you preconceived that or did the notion arise after having seen the configuration at the end?

That object [the white piping] was used improvisationally in both *Secondary* and *TACTICAL Parallax*, and there's something magical that happens when the performer steps away, and it either falls or stands. A lot of the objects that were made out of *Secondary* have to do with structures that are enacted by the body, like a power rack, for example. But as an object in space, there's a sort of absence of the body in the way the power racks function as sculptures. They're figurative in form, and at the same time, there's an absence of a figure. This object, which we called a "zone tool" while we were performing with it, is like that. It's figurative—*and* there's an absence of the figure. When we were rehearsing with that object, it would stand and feel like it was on the verge of collapsing, and that resonated with me as a potential sculpture.

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What was it like when you started working on the land?

The way weather moves through is incredible. It's often a completely different weather system than Aspen. When we started installing, a lot of the people who have ranches around the area would stop and visit and talk to us. There was a kind of open curiosity about what we were doing. But as soon as I started placing stakes in the ground to figure out where the end-zone markers would go, the mood completely changed. The tone of the questions became: "What *are* you doing? Why are you marking territory the way you would if you were building a house?" There was a bit of suspicion. It's interesting how, in this part of the world, in the Western United States, issues around property are so pregnant.

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What were your conversations like with the local ranchers who might not know much about art?

I'm interested in talking about the work with anyone who wants to talk about it. I love working in the West and have done quite a bit of work here now. I feel a familiarity with the sensibility out here, and I'm really interested in the way the landscape pushes back onto what you're doing. Along with that comes unexpected conversations with people who aren't necessarily engaged with this aspect of culture, and I enjoy that. A lot of the time, what I'm making has to do with material behavior and a kind of elemental force of sorts that's expressed in the sculpture.

What's unusual about this piece is that it doesn't operate that way. It is a cast metal work, but it isn't showing its intrinsic material behavior the way my sculptures usually do. It's sort of operating as an illusion, through the trompe l'oeil paint. I've been able to relate to this piece more through my drawing practice—the way that drawing uses the pressure of the mark and the line, and also uses color and diagrams in organizing ideas on the page. This piece is very diagrammatic. I think of it as an aerial view of what's happening with the end-zone markers and the parallax, and how the object exists in the intersection.

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How did that connection to drawing figure into the making of the work?

At the foundry, I expected the relationship between the two jerseys to be the subject of the piece, but I couldn't stop looking at the weights. The pressure put upon objects by the performers is now enacted by the weights. There's something else in this piece that has to do with Modernism. It's almost like a failed Calder, or a collapsed piece of Modernism.

Does that figure in the primary colors of the weights? There's a sort of Bauhaus look to them.

Yes. But that's also the actual colors of Olympic bumper plates. The 45-pound weight is red, 35 pounds is blue, and 25 pounds is yellow. Different brands do it slightly differently, but they usually use primary colors.



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What are the materials beneath the trompe l'oeil paint?

The weights and straps are bronze. The lower part of the structure is stainless steel. The upper part is cast aluminum, including the jerseys. We did that for weight, to make the top lighter and the bottom heavier. As I said before, the material choices have less to do with the intrinsic behavior that every material has, which is how I would typically make those choices. In this case, knowing that the entire thing was going to be painted, it was a more practical set of choices about weight and knowing that it would be outside. The end-zone markers are cast polymer.

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What led you to the trompe l'oeil idea? You haven't done anything quite like it so fully.

In the studio, while setting up a model for the piece using real weights and real jerseys and making a one-to-one maquette, a couple of things happened. The way the primary colors of the weights evoked Modernist history became another layer in the way I was thinking about the piece, and I wanted to hold on to that. Casting the weights in metal and not keeping their colors didn't feel like an option. Then there were the colors of the jerseys operating in terms of opposition and the American flag—I also wasn't ready to let go of that. The color narrative became important to me, so I started exploring how we could keep that and met a very talented painter who was working with the foundry.



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The way that jerseys are draped is very dramatic and moving. Do draped jerseys in that form figure in *Secondary*? I can't recall...

Not in the film, but in a couple of related pieces I made after. In 1991, I made works called *Home Gown* and *Away Gown*, where I took Jim Otto jerseys and hung them on hooks made of prosthetic plastic. For a lot of the *Secondary* work, I looked at those pieces I made in the early '90s and tried to find ways of putting those pieces in dialogue with new work. So I did make some new pieces with hung jerseys. They weren't in

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the first round of exhibitions [after *Secondary*]; they came a little later. They were called "Wall Racks," and in most cases they are ceramic racks holding weights that are deflated or deformed, with jerseys of the same color as the different types of clay draped on the racks. I have only exhibited them in a fair.

Do you have plans for the future of this sculpture?

Not yet. One thing I would say is that I'm definitely looking forward to installing it inside. I think the way it feels within the compression of architecture is really exciting. It is definitely different. What I said before about the weights being a primary part of it is even more true inside, where you can feel the point of contact between the weights and the ground, rather than here on grass. It gives the piece a sense of touch, from an absent hand.