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Aspen Art Museum Another Hit by Daniel Merritt



Matthew Barney, *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax*, 2026. Cast aluminum, bronze, and stainless steel, rolled stainless steel, stainless steel chain, paint. Photo: Lance Gerber. © Matthew Barney

In a field framed by the haphazard and ancient peaks of the Rocky Mountains stands *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax*, a new sculpture by Matthew Barney. It is an enigmatic architecture, an interlocking assembly of white rods that appear to ascend and bow in accordance with the ballast of barbell weights that hang by chains and straps from the structure. Its crowning intersection carries two football jerseys, one black and silver, the other red, white, and blue. Against the forces of wind and weather that unfurl within this geological recess, the sculpture remains still. All-over trompe l'oeil painting hides its metal infrastructure: strata of bronze, steel, and cast aluminum. The sculpture wears its concealment. This form is contained, too, framed by a systematized

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arrangement of ten fluorescent endzone markers that map the phenomenon of the parallax, composing a perimeter of shifting sight lines. In this confluence of pressure, line, and color, the sculpture feels close to an act of drawing, or an arcane diagram.



Matthew Barney, *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax*, 2026. Photo: Lance Gerber. © Matthew Barney

Positioned in this way, *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax* is both a companion to and consequence of its antecedent, *TACTICAL parallax*, a performance that occurred on July 30, 2025, in a converted drill hall at nearby McCabe Ranch. Looking towards the surrounding hills from the field that hosts the sculpture, one can make out the yawning arch of the building's roof. *TACTICAL parallax* saw a convergence of two recent projects by Barney: *Redoubt* (2018), a myth of the goddess Diana, recast as a wolf-hunting sharpshooter in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, and *SECONDARY* (2023), a deconstruction of the tragic, televised accident that took place between Oakland Raiders' Jack Tatum and the New England Patriots' Darryl Stingley in 1978. These stories of violence and how they live within the American imagination were synthesized through a new exploration of the Broadway revue, itself an aggressive and frenzied collage of vocal and choreographic force, embodied by the character Stella Wolf (Okwui Okpokwasili). Within her showstopping number, she sang to the audience:

*I'll sing you a song and it's gonna be a tough one
playing zone defense. It starts with the eyes,
in the spaces between.
The receiver scans. The safety waits.
You don't chase in zone. You wait. You listen.
You contain the space. It's your Territory.*

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Matthew Barney, *TACTICAL Parallax*, 2025. Production still: Maria Baranova. © Matthew Barney

Somewhere between a threat and an instruction, she invokes the practice of zone defense: a defensive system that prioritizes the protection and coverage of space, rather than another player. This strategy was at play when Tatum dealt Stingley the punishing blow in 1978. In the later acts of the performance, two dancers inhabiting the roles of Tatum and Stingley (Raphael Xavier and David Thomson, respectively) begin to interact with two Zone Tools, large structures built from white plastic tubes with articulating arms. The Zone Tool, designed by Barney, is inspired by the athletic strategy of the zone defense. The 35-foot-long, unwieldy, pliable form is manipulated by the performers, with it bending in response to their stance and movement. In its scale, weight, and constant change in geometry, it resists its carrier's total control. In a hypnotic pas de deux, the two men position the form into a skeletal tower, with its arms extended as supports. Around it, they exert themselves, stepping over its arms with speed and precision, allowing it to collapse when it can no longer counter gravity. Their choreography emphasizes its unpredictability. Following these distinct interactions, Tatum and Stingley charge one another with their respective Zone Tools, brandishing them like spears, and with a tenuous link, forge a unified, curved apex. The men move within the structure, a precarious container for the two opposing players, who threaten its stability as they threaten one another. Yet, as if it were a miracle, the Zone Tools stand, the ground beneath them demarcated and claimed within the arena.

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Matthew Barney, *TACTICAL Parallax*, 2025. Production still: Maria Baranova. © Matthew Barney

This prior action is the genesis of *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax*, where it emerges from a grassy expanse. Though not a replica of the final Zone Tool construction in the performance, the sculpture articulates the transition of movement into form. Despite its diagrammatic quality and indexical inclinations, the work trades in illusion. Through its detailed surface painting, in which all metal elements are disguised as plastics and fabrics, it possesses an element of trickery and deception akin to a theater prop, a shapeshifter governed by belief. In that depictions of their jerseys crown the work, Tatum and Stingley and the mythology of their encounter reside in the sculpture, though this story sits more as an accent or footnote. This is a study of weight and of grounding, an approach that is less fixated on the authenticity of material than the abstraction of thought and action. At the base of the sculpture, Barney casts seven weight plates in shades of red, blue, and yellow: the enduring palette of Mondrian, Rodchenko's notorious triad. In its sinuous form and balance of slowness and heft, the sculpture might even conjure the uneasy equilibrium of Alexander Calder's outdoor sculptures. Barney's shades of modernism—dusted with chalk for a stronger grip—pull on the upward propulsion of the work's line, shape, and pattern, as well as the embedded histories of competition and game. In this balletic collision of earthbound things pulled skyward, the weight of red, blue, and yellow returns it to the ground.

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Demonstrations of readiness, moments of rehearsal, and the potential energy that comes with training reach across much of Barney's practice. Let us not forget that the athlete is the artist. As such, it is worth noting that the host site of *ZONE DEFENSE: Old Snowmass Parallax* is a former polo field. The sport has ancient roots in Persia, where it served as a means of preparing cavalry for warfare starting around 600 BC. The field, a verdant void, now is left with no markings. It is as if Barney's sculpture portrays the schema of the sports field lifted from the ground. As with *TACTICAL parallax*, where the former drill hall was reassembled as a working cattle ranch arena, there is a sense that Barney inhabits these spaces after their intended use has run its course. The artwork arrives after the preliminary action has transpired, both alluding to and disrupting its history. But myths are capable of time travel once they condense in a collective imaginary; here in Old Snowmass they form a nexus laden with tales of aggression, self-preservation, showmanship, guile, and persistence. "Forms are always tending toward realization," writes Henri Focillon. "They do, in fact, realize themselves and create a world that acts and reacts... Forms never cease to live." [1] We encounter Barney's sculpture picking itself up, locked together. In a network of terrain and a tapestry of parcels, on earth that will remain after we collapse, this ascendant vertex dances in the longtail of what we called wildness.

[1] Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 127.