Matthew Barney’s Cremaster Cycle and the Ordeal of Value

The following thesis makes a critical attempt for approaching the concept of artistic value based on case-study of a unique in its kind contemporary artwork. A cultural production that peculiarly illustrates a paradoxical process of preconsecration as high art, within the both the aesthetic and art professional fields it is hosted within. The Cremaster Cycle of Matthew Barney, a notorious and at the same time, enigmatic production of contemporary art, illustrates a process of contemporaneous art historical indexing and to the creation of cultural capital. Such processes, facilitated by private and institutional patronage, are understood as integral to the art production from the 1990s and onwards, making the professional field of art equally important as the aesthetic one. Within this particular frame, we will see the faithful coming together of various agents, in support of an aesthetic idea or else, a cultural product, whose form seems intrinsically bound to both a social and an economical agenda, while at the same time it expresses a very particular aesthetic one. Due to such characteristics the research and analysis of the case study was carried out against the background of Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘field theory’, echoing therefore the aesthetic ‘field of the Cremaster Cycle’. Using as disciplinary pillars from one side, the abstract and idiosyncratic realm of art theory and on the other the practical world and language of commerce, the thesis will attempt to look into the specific conditions that contributed to the Cremaster Cycle’s immediate valorization as high art. In this route the question of artistic value is one of great importance and yet, it is not one that could be sufficiently answered. Though, what becomes definite through this research project, brought forward in such times when the notions of both, artistic production and value are so expanded and malleable, is an intense urgency for new definitions. Somehow, it seems that the core problematic of this necessity for reconfiguration evolves around the notion of autonomy. This time not of the artwork but of the ones that attribute its value, namely the field; And this is exactly what the Cremaster Cycle offers us in perspective. Is there the possibility of objective or autonomous artistic value within a knowingly non-autonomous art?

Abstract or Description


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Matthew Barney as the satyr in Cremaster 4. Photograph: Supplied. 

Jordan: I've done my share of movie marathons. 

Alex: The Cremaster Cycle is named after the muscle that controls the height of the testicles; I'm sure every man has noticed its operation when swimming in a cold sea (or less pleasantly, getting socked in the balls). and the beast drop dead. Cremaster 2 sees the production values take another leap forward and there are some stunning images here, not least the camera speeding over the Columbia Ice Fields and disappearing down a crevasse at the end. Yet perhaps it's the fact that a story seems just out of reach that makes this such a frustrating and ultimately tiring experience.