

Modern Painters

These Weary Territories: A Conversation Between Matthew Barney and Okwui Enwezor

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**MATTHEW BARNEY**  
AND **OKWUI ENWEZOR** IN CONVERSATION

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# THESE WEARY



## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MATTHEW BARNEY AND OKWUI ENWEZOR



# TERRITORIES

On a frigid December morning in 2013, as production on Matthew Barney and composer Jonathan Bepler's seven-year project, *River of Fundament*—loosely based on Norman Mailer's 1983 novel *Ancient Evenings*—was wrapping up, Barney sat down with Okwui Enwezor and the editors of *Modern Painters* for a conversation in the artist's studio in Long Island City, New York. Enwezor is director of the 2015 Venice Biennale and the director of Haus der Kunst in Munich, where the exhibition "River of Fundament" is on view through August 17.

**MODERN PAINTERS:** How did you come together on this project?

**OKWUI ENWEZOR:** I had wanted to work with Matthew years ago when I did Documenta 11, in 2002, but circumstances prevented it. Then in 2011 I went to see Matthew's exhibition "DJED" at Gladstone Gallery, and for me it became really obvious that I wanted to know more about the development of the piece. Rosalie Benitez sent me information. I had just taken the position as director of Haus der Kunst, and that was the first project that I said I wanted to do.

**MP:** And where did the project itself begin?

**MATTHEW BARNEY:** With a conversation with Norman Mailer, about *Ancient Evenings*. I wasn't familiar with this book at all. It was critically panned, and although I think he considered it essential, it wasn't considered essential critically. Mailer said to me, "You should read this. There's possibly something in there for you." This was shortly before he died, and the estate at that point was reaching out to filmmakers to work with different Mailer books. *Ancient Evenings* was probably the odd one out. And so a conversation started at a time when I wasn't really thinking about filmmaking, having lost my interest during the production of *Drawing Restraint 9*. Jonathan Bepler and I had started talking about working together in a live capacity, with a structure like opera, and along came this text. We needed a text to work with a libretto, and so we started looking at *Ancient Evenings*. It has something in it structurally that appealed to me very much, a lot of shifts between the body and the landscape, shifts in scale and time—things that I found easy to like. That said, the text came with these seemingly impossible challenges of dealing so directly with Egyptian mythology. All of the frontal sexuality in the book felt like another problem that I wasn't interested in. So there were a number of things that I didn't like about it. But I liked the challenge, and that's where the project started.

OPPOSITE  
Matthew Barney  
and Okwui Enwezor  
at Barney's studio,  
December 2013.

We began working on an idea that was for stage, like an evening-length piece, but that idea didn't go anywhere. And we did a little sketch in Manchester in 2007, which was interesting to do, as an aspect of the writing, but it proved to me that the stage was not what I wanted. So we started developing a multisite live sequence, for locations in L.A. and Detroit, and began planning others in different locations.

When I started cutting together the film that I had, the documentation from L.A. and Detroit, it got me thinking there's something very interesting about this as a film. It's certainly different from what I've done before, and it rekindled my interest in making a film again, combining the documentary material with the more scripted narrative footage. In the live scenes, it was difficult to maintain a controlled point of view, and I learned I needed much more of that controlled perspective. So I started designing scenes for the camera, without an audience, and balancing that with the live documentation, and it went from there. We ended up with something that is sort of a hybrid.

**MP:** When you staged those performances in L.A. and Detroit, at that point it wasn't necessarily going to be a film?

**MB:** I didn't know what I was doing. I knew what I was doing within the performances, but in terms of the bigger picture, I really didn't know what the form was going to be, and that's not so unusual for me. Even going into this exhibition in Munich, there's a lot of improvisation that happens along the way, and it's a huge leap of faith that the institution has to make when they take on something like this. It's a body of work that isn't finished. Twenty days out, we're still working on it. That's typical; it's organic.

**OE:** The language and the grammar of the film and the performances struck me as much more tightly scripted than improvisatory. It's so unexpected and rich and really incredibly experimental in many ways—sonically, for instance—and yet controlled.



There was a very clear attempt to map Mailer's sprawling work. When you read the opening of *Ancient Evenings*, it's very much like the overture, or very much like poetry. I thought this was part of the ambition of the work. The more I looked at it, the more I looked at the grammar or the language of Matthew's work and the interest in different forms of subordination and subjection. The way they played out in the film was just incredibly powerful. And, of course, I saw much of this in snippets. I'd go to Matthew's editing suite in Brooklyn and spend two hours just looking at rushes. This piece is quite dense, it's quite long, but it doesn't feel suffocatingly long because of all the different parts—it's like the notion of the landscape and the body—it's all two different sonic landscapes. Voice, for example, instruments, just the kind of guttural sounds that come out of the singers. For me, this particular body of work really brings out something extraordinary that an artist can attempt—this level of masterful control, even though it's improvisational. That was what attracted me initially, and also the shift in the language of the sculptures. There's an immediacy to the material, all of these base metals, which seem sort of archaic. So it is that struggle with the immediacy of the material, the physical presence of the sculpture in the space. My second shock was seeing the sprawling landscape of "DJED," where something that seems so light that you think it could levitate was in fact so heavy. That was very powerful and beautiful, with this dimension of the sublime in it.

**MB:** I think that was a starting point too—visualizing all of these cast-metal sculptures in Haus der Kunst when considering the history of Haus der Kunst and its relationship to architectural monument, and on some level to Egyptian mythology, and how this body of work would feel in that space. That was the beginning.

**MP:** What did it suggest?

**MB:** Well, I guess in the same way that *Ancient Evenings* opened the door for me to experiment with a range of elemental metals—cast copper, cast zinc, cast iron...

**MP:** That's all directly from the novel, those materials?

**MB:** Not exactly, but I think what you have in *Ancient Evenings* is an extended description of the body as an elemental compound, and as the body is dying in the narrative, there is an interchange between the kinds of strata in the earth and the workings of the body. The way that those systems start shutting down, the way they're reactivated, the way that life begins and ends in this sort of excremental state, which Mailer describes by way of describing the sulfuric off-gassing of the earth. In the novel, those two physical states are always running in tandem, and so out of that text came permission to deal with these elements and material. This was really galvanized by working in Detroit and seeing a place where you have layers of mineral wealth, a prehistoric history, with all of the materials that Henry Ford saw that he needed to make steel to build the automobile. Simultaneously, aboveground you're seeing everything that's left over from the boom of the Industrial Revolution and all of the wealth that came out of that period, and you're seeing the resultant failures. There is an aspect of the Haus der Kunst that has a very complex



OPPOSITE: Production stills from *River of Fundament*, 2014. 4K digital film with 7.1 sound, 5 hrs. 50 min. with two intermissions.

historical, institutional layering that's embodied in its building, including the Egyptian narrative. I think placing these works in the context of this building is powerful.

**OE:** In many ways it's the tension between the idea of the museum and the idea of the mausoleum. It kind of suggests these two things. Matthew's initial design of the show was very quick. It was almost as if he had mentally mapped the procession and precision of the spaces. This really gave it that structure of the body at rest and works on display. In Egyptian mythology it's not sufficient to have a good birth; you must have a good death. Your entire existence, in fact, is really finding the proper place to be buried. So, this is a very interesting tension between the museum and the mausoleum. Not in a way that makes it look macabre, but it activates the space in a very particular way—because it's like a procession of works entombed in different chambers.

Maybe Matthew could talk about American masculine archetypes in the film, Mailer, Ernest Hemingway, and Richard Serra. It's an exploration of the exhaustion of that archetypal figure and the exhaustion of the landscape of Detroit, these weary territories. Norman's wake in the film tries to bring back the fragility of the masculine self.

**MB:** I was influenced by Harold Bloom's review of *Ancient Evenings*. Bloom suggests that the book was autobiographical in some way, that Mailer had, in his fascination with journalism, with film, with politics, with all of the things he experimented with, started to feel that the great American novel was out of both his grasp and potential as a writer and that the very construct was obsolete in a way. *Ancient Evenings* has a protagonist who worships the pharaoh and wants desperately to have what the pharaoh has: everlasting life, the right to live again. Bloom offers that the pharaoh is Hemingway, or a writer like Hemingway, and that the protagonist is Mailer. According to Bloom, Mailer, in the guise of the protagonist, develops a very complicated toolbox full of devices and trickery. In the text, the protagonist is a sorcerer; he eats excrement to learn what other people have learned. What passes through them is full of knowledge, so he eats it. He learns that if he makes love with a woman in the last breath of his life, he is able to live again, fathering himself in the womb of that woman. They are all devices. Along the lines of what you're saying, I was very interested in that relationship between the very pure, reductive form that Hemingway created and the more pluralistic practice of Mailer.

It's not a value judgment. What's interesting to me is that, with the passing of time and the ways in which the channels of communication have changed, you can't compare something as pure as Hemingway with something as multivalent as Mailer. It isn't necessarily about obsolescence, it's about change. It's similar to my relationship with Serra. I'm fascinated by someone who can work in a reductive way—in a way that's not available to me at all in terms of how I've learned to absorb information and communicate.

**OE:** What compels you to start a project?

**MB:** By now I know my pattern. I know it's going to take a long time, and in order for a project to gain momentum and sustain itself, it needs to have a solid frame and a major potential to parent a whole family of objects. The frame is the starting point,

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHRIS WINGET, MATTHEW BARNEY, AND GLADSTONE GALLERY; NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS; TWO IMAGES, HUGO GLENDINNING, MATTHEW BARNEY, AND GLADSTONE GALLERY









and what works best for me is for the frame to have a narrative which is both independent and also able to relate to my narrative. In the past the frame has most often been a place. With *River of Fundament*, it is a novel.

I'm very interested in momentum, working at the scale where many people are involved. A lot of people's input goes into the work. My studio is somewhere between a film-production and a sculpture studio, but either way it's a company of creative people. At a certain point when a project begins, you have enough creative energy behind it that the project starts moving itself. What interests me most is that point where I can step away, where my ego is displaced by the ego of the collective.

**OE:** Perhaps it might be interesting to talk about *The CREMASTER Cycle*. It's almost as if in merely 15 years of work you had exhausted yourself. Was it difficult stepping back into the studio after *CREMASTER*?

**MB:** A bit, yeah. After *CREMASTER* I did a project in Brazil, *De Lama Lamina*, which was radically different. It was an experiment with performance and with letting go. What I needed after all of those years was to let go of some of the control and figure out a way to experiment with failure. With a project like *The CREMASTER Cycle*, toward the end of the process, so much energy goes toward distillation and refinement and squeezing down the essence of the thing. And there's a struggle with control in that. By contrast, at the beginning of a project, you're making bigger gestures, while the filmmaking or the performance is taking place,

Production still  
from *River of  
Fundament*; Ba.

OPPOSITE FROM TOP:  
Production still  
from *River of  
Fundament*; Ren.

*Canopic Chest*,  
2011. Cast bronze.

and it's riddled with so many compromises. As the process moves on to sculpture making, those compromises become fewer. In that stage, it's really a fight against those compromises. Whereas in filmmaking, it's about finding a way to work with compromise.

**OE:** For me, what is interesting is how *The CREMASTER Cycle* is, sculpturally, so technological. A lot of the work was bound by technological possibilities of things being in a liquid state that were converted to a solid state. Whereas *River of Fundament* is completely different in that it's less technological. It seems to me that there is a greater sense of intimacy with the material. *CREMASTER* had a photographic piece, it had a filmic piece, it had video pieces, and, of course, sculptures. Was *River of Fundament* an attempt to relocate your sculptural practice in a completely different medium?

**MB:** I'm very opportunistic as an artist, and I jump at the opportunity to make a shift in my sculpture making. Casting sculpture has been part of my practice for a long time, but this notion of investment is different, burning the soul out of the form and investing it with metal. In Iron Age Nordic casting, human remains were found near these foundry ruins, and what is believed to have happened is that when they were making swords, they were ritualistically throwing in the bodies and bones of great warriors to invest the metal with the fighting spirit of the warrior. The bones and fats in the human remains increased the heat in the furnace, and made stronger metal and greater swords. By accident, these guys were carbonizing iron into steel. A



transformation like that is extremely exciting to me. A piece like *DJED* is about that kind of investment.

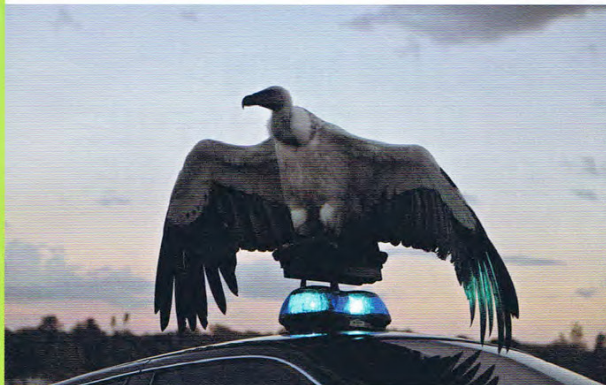
**OE:** Was the casting of *DJED* challenging?

**MB:** Yes. That's the largest nonindustrial iron pour that's ever been attempted. It was done in Detroit, and people from the international iron-casting community flew in from around the world to work on the foundries that we built. For them it was like climbing Everest, something that may never happen again. We took the medieval principle of pouring iron right into a mound in the ground, and combined it with the DIY techniques of backyard iron casting. A 25-ton iron pour of this nature is just unheard-of; it was hugely ambitious and hugely dangerous.

**OE:** Talk about the conception of that, because obviously you were attempting the impossible, and the impossible was realized and is a monumental piece, which at the same time seems so fragile. Was the idea to attempt to undo the very principle of what could really be realized?

**MB:** Because we were performing this work live, the drama of the situation was certainly considered: What it would be like to stand in front of that pour and the heat you would feel. That was not something we could rehearse. There were a lot of questions about what would happen and how far away a person could be positioned. On the other hand, I wanted to tie together the myth of Osiris, the dismemberment of his body, and the resurrection of his body, on the site of this steel-making plant on the Detroit River that has been closed for 15 or 20 years, where we built our furnaces on the ruins of the blast furnaces.

**OE:** Bearing in mind the historical relations, from medieval iron casting to the ancient Nordic warrior ethic, Detroit is a site that engenders a completely different mythological power. It is one that is very



**“WHEN I WAS READING ANCIENT EVENINGS, I THOUGHT, WOW, I FEEL LIKE I’VE ALREADY MADE THIS FILM.”**





**“A 25-TON IRON POUR OF THIS NATURE IS JUST UNHEARD-OF. IT WAS HUGEY AMBITIOUS AND HUGEY DANGEROUS.”**



central to the power of the American imagination, this industrial might, and the sudden decline of that. How can you relate the myth of Osiris to the American body, as it were? Does *DJED* represent a site of American imagination? I'm wondering. Because it's not for nothing that you went to Detroit and not Oklahoma.

**MB:** One of the starting points of the project was to take a protagonist from *CREMASTER 3*, the Chrysler Imperial, and to use that as a protagonist in this new work. To take that body back to its birthplace seemed nearly obvious. When I first started reading *Ancient Evenings*, it reminded me of the beginning of *CREMASTER 3*. The apprentice finds himself beneath the Chrysler Building and starts wandering up to the lobby, goes into the elevator, and explores the different floors. He doesn't really know where he is. It's very similar. When I was reading *Ancient Evenings*, I thought, Wow, I feel like I've already made this film, both in terms of the structure, through the monument of the Chrysler Building, as well as in the way that the Masonic narrative relates to the Egyptian narrative. I felt that I had been as direct as could be in *CREMASTER 3* with how I could deal with something like Egyptian mythology. Then along comes Mailer's text and I'm thinking, I'm really going to tell the story of Isis and Osiris. It seemed ridiculous, but that problem ended up being fascinating to me. Mailer saw *CREMASTER 3* after he had worked on *CREMASTER 2*, and we spoke about it the night he asked me to consider *Ancient Evenings*.

**OE:** How do you feel about the project at this stage of its completion, looking at its totality, seven years and an enormous amount of technical, physical, artistic, intellectual, and theatrical investment?

**MB:** Right now, the objects are nearly completed, but a good deal of finishing work remains. The forms are resolved. The catalogue is that way as well, in terms of its visual layout. The film is finished in terms of picture editing, but sound design, music editing, color correction, visual effects—that's still going on. This is probably the phase I enjoy the most, when something's not quite finished, but you can now see clearly what it is and what it will become. I'm in that zone right now; there's a lot of pleasure in that phase.

**OE:** Unlike your previous films, this one is designed for a proscenium or an opera house. Why is it important for the film to be shown in these specific theatrical or operatic settings?

**MB:** Well, there are a couple of reasons for that. One is that this project does have the ingredients of opera, and Jonathan and I were interested in playing with that convention, right from the start. But I think it's also to do with realizing that the piece is going to put a lot of pressure on its viewer, in terms of duration and concentration. I don't think it would function well to present this work in the art-house cinema—I learned this from the marathon *CREMASTER* screenings where all five films are shown in sequence and a person sits in place for nine or so hours. It's difficult. I think there's an operatic paradigm for a five-and-a-half-hour piece, with two intermissions, as an evening. You get up during intermission and you have a drink, you take a pause and go back in. Thinking about



that format influenced the way we edited the piece as well. The three acts are really cut in a way that depends on an interval, and each one has an arc. To watch it without those intervals would be a mistake. The third reason is that the film will tour, often as part of performing arts festivals. I think in that realm it will find a natural audience because of the nature of the piece and its relationship to experimental music, opera, and theater. In the way that *CREMASTER* has a stronger relationship to cinema, this piece has a relationship to the performing arts.

**OE:** You wrote a libretto for *River of Fundament*, so there is a clear script. Was the music done the same way? Was it scripted or written?

**MB:** For some scenes, Jonathan wrote for the performers in a standard way, and in other scenes, the music was improvised through a set of guidelines that Jonathan set. The music in the Mailer house set was really divided that way. The group of musicians in the wake context was largely made up of improvisational musicians, while the vocal scenes that come later in the film were mostly written. Jonathan has always worked that way, oscillating between a written, traditional way of working and a more improvisational one. He does it in equal parts.

**OE:** And how did the mix of different musical genres come about, from the mariachi band to the marching band to the free jazz to the blues singers?

**MB:** In part, I think that's something that developed out of our collaboration on *CREMASTER*. For each of those films, we were working with a site, a place, and with that awareness of place came possibilities for working with the genres and styles of music that come from that place.

**OE:** Like *CREMASTER 5*.

**MB:** Exactly. Budapest and the operatic form influenced that one, and the archetype of the western in *CREMASTER 2*. Out of the writing and out of the site come a number of musical possibilities. I think Jonathan embraces that; to leap from a Los Angeles-based drum and bugle corps to a mariachi band in the same scene, placing two dissimilar sounds side by side, is very similar to the way I work visually. We both take things that are unlike and bring them together and wait for a kind of third space to form between those two things.

**OE:** Can you talk about the other sculptures in the show? The *Boat of Ra*. Is it still called that?

**MB:** I think I'm changing the title of that piece to *River of Fundament*.

**OE:** Because it seems so central, it's where the drama plays out: the boat as a setting but also as the vessel that carries the narrative to its conclusion.

**MB:** Yes, I think what you were saying earlier about the relationship between the museum and the mausoleum is certainly true in that piece. It's both a burial chamber in terms of the way the Egyptians used these sloping corridors to lower the body of the deceased into place, and by plugging that corridor so it could be sealed. It has that logic as a sand mold, a mold for casting metal. So, impaling the house is a large sand mold with a casting cone, and the plug that blocks the casting cone is a chunk of graphite, which is often used in metal casting as a heat-resistant material that can line the walls of the sand mold. At the same time, it is an exact



Installation view of *DJED*, 2011. Cast iron and graphite blocks.

OPPOSITE: Production still from *River of Fundament: Khu*.

replica of the upper floor of Mailer's brownstone where he used to write, turned upside down as if it were the hull of a ship, and it's up on blocks the way a boat would be in a shipyard for restoration work. The contents of the house are thrown into the boat in disarray to suggest that the tomb has been invaded and the plug has been removed from the casting cone. At the bottom of the sand mold, you have Mailer's writing desk cast in bronze and a gold-plated straitjacket at the top of the writing desk. There are three narratives within that piece.

**OE:** Moving on to the other sculptures, what about the sarcophagus, the three car hoods?

**MB:** *The Imperial Mask*. In a way, that is the first piece—there are elements in that piece that were the very first things we made in the project. It dates from 2007 to the present, as far as the work that's gone into it. Inside this container you have a mask. It's the front end of an Imperial inlaid with lapis, carnelian, turquoise, and gold plating. As a mask,







it's worn by the three automobile protagonists—the Chrysler Imperial, the Trans Am, and the Crown Victoria—just before each of these automobiles is annihilated in the film. So the mask is passed from one body to the next. In this piece you have the front end of the Imperial inside a cast tomb. The lid of the tomb is propped open so that you can glimpse the mask, and on the floor next to it you have what resembles the inner, middle, and outer lids to the sarcophagus. And those are cast hoods from the Imperial, the Trans Am, and the Crown Victoria in copper, bronze, and brass.

**OE:** Do you think that the viewer who goes into the exhibition will grasp this narrative? Is that your intention that they grasp it, or are you suggesting and proposing a relationship but also making an abstraction out of it?

**MB:** It's an abstraction. That piece in particular is probably the most literal of all the pieces. The sarcophagus—the form is very familiar. But more generally with this body of work, it's about abstracting that structure. No, I would not expect somebody to read that narrative in a direct way but, rather, to connect to it in an abstract way.

**OE:** And what about the drawings? You said the mask is one of the earliest sculptures, but what is the earliest work in the project?

**MB:** It would be the drawings, which are part of the mapping of the story, part of the storyboarding. I tend to start with these, to plot out the structure for the story. So those aren't drawings that are usually exhibited, but they belong to those storyboards, which will be installed in one of the first rooms in the exhibition.

**MP:** Would someone who's read *Ancient Evenings* and seen your film recognize the book in it? Or is it so abstracted?

**MB:** Good question. I'm not sure. The spirit of the novel, and the way it abstracts mythology, was more influential than the narration itself. But there are a few scenes where the dialogue has been adapted, and the action comes from the book, though not often enough that we can really call this piece an adaptation. If someone knew the text really well, then they would recognize it.

**MP:** Did you option *Ancient Evenings* for this project or is it more indirect?

**MB:** I asked Mailer's permission to use it in this capacity, and at the time I thought it would depend much more on live performance. The film ended up in the middle between a live performance and a cinematic project.

**OE:** When you look at the film, especially the wake, it is as much a portrait of Norman Mailer as it is a portrait of pharaonic politics, and I think those two things converge there. Can you talk about how you conceive of these convergences, between pharaonic politics and the portrait of Mailer and all the contending forces, the testimony of boxers, pornographic actors, an actress like Elaine Stritch, and writers like Salman Rushdie? How were these groups of people assembled to bear testimony to this incredible figure?

**MB:** It's not unlike the balance in Detroit between place and mythology. Around the time we started developing the wake scene, I landed on the Harold Bloom review and thought that by putting Mailer himself in the center of it as the protagonist, it

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Production still from *River of Fundament: Ren*. The annihilation of one of the automobile protagonists.

Production still from *River of Fundament: Khu*. A scene filmed in Brooklyn.

Production still from *River of Fundament: Set* of Norman Mailer's studio on a barge on the East River.

would give me access to New York as a place. Setting the center of the story in New York was important both as a work-around to the problem of how to deal with such a well-known narrative (Egyptian mythology) but also as a way of giving me what I needed as a sculptor, which is site-specificity. In New York it became quite easy to fill in voices and personalities from Mailer's social circle.

New York has a very strong character in the logic of the piece, from the perspective of the waterways—we used Newtown Creek quite extensively and the East River, of course. It was important for me to carry the thread of the river through the entire story, from the Nile to the aqueducts in L.A. and the Rouge River in Detroit to the Detroit River to the East River in New York, and then in the epilogue where the path of the spawning salmon is traced, from the Columbia to the Snake to the Salmon River to the spawning grounds in Idaho near Hemingway's house, where he committed suicide.

**OE:** Where do you see this project going? Is this all contained within the novel or are there other off-gassings?

**MB:** After *CREMASTER* toured, there was a project I did in London at a cinema where we took the form of the Masonic plumb level and made a big mold in the lobby of the cinema, filled it with molten petroleum jelly, and let it cool. We hadn't cast anything in jelly at that scale before, and although I knew that it would collapse under its own weight to a certain extent, I had no idea how far it would spread when the walls of the mold were removed. What ended up happening was that it filled the entire cinema lobby. There was something performative about that piece that created a bridge to the projects that followed [*De Lama Lamina*, *DR9*], which had a lot to do with failure and collapse. It led me to a new level of experimentation, but in some way it was still a part of *The CREMASTER Cycle*. I would imagine the same kind of thing could happen with this project, too. I think there are still a lot of untapped resources in it, for sure. **MP**

**“CASTING SCULPTURE HAS BEEN A PART OF MY PRACTICE FOR A LONG TIME. BUT THIS NOTION OF INVESTMENT IS DIFFERENT, BURNING THE SOUL OUT OF THE FORM AND INVESTING IT WITH METAL.”**