



*DRAWING RESTRAINT*

MATTHEW BARNEY

Art Gallery of Ontario  
317 Dundas Street, M5T 1G4 West Toronto, Ontario, CA  
May 31, 2014 - September 28, 2014

## ***EFFECTIVELY INEFFECTIVE: MATTHEW BARNEY'S DRAWING RESTRAINT AT THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO***

BY YOLI (YOANNA) TERZIYSKA

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) is currently holding an exhibition of video works by American artist, Matthew Barney. The works belong to *Drawing Restraint*—a long-term, ongoing project Barney started in 1987. Thus far, he has produced nineteen installments in the series, of which three—*Drawing Restraint 2* (1988), *6* (1989) and *17* (2010)—are looped on display. The exhibition similarly unfolds in three parts.

### **The Show**

The gallery's visitors may harbor the expectation to immerse themselves in the hyper-visual cinematic experience for which Barney's video works are commonly known. On first impression, entering the space delivers the opposite: The venue is large, with tall white looming walls, a row of chairs placed in the floor's middle. From where the viewer is sitting, about six feet above eye level, four television screens are installed on three adjacent walls. *Drawing Restraint 2* and *6* sit opposite of one another, and *Drawing Restraint 17* lies on the central wall, shown on two flat screens. The installation's lack of audio adds to the sensory scarcity in the exhibit that one notices immediately. After watching the three works, it is clear that this choice of curation is ideal—while I might not have walked into an exaggerated cinematic display, each video here stands out, breathes, and reinforces Barney's voice. In addition to emphasizing the conceptual merit of the *Drawing Restraint* series, this choice allows us to draw common threads between the formal elements of these particular three works, despite their narrative differences.



Matthew Barney, *DRAWING RESTRAINT 6*, 1989, Documentation still; © Matthew Barney / Photo: Chris Winget. Jointly owned by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, Basel; and The Museum Of Modern Art, New York, Richard S. Zeisler Bequest and The Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund (both by exchange)

## The Task

*Drawing Restraint*, going on its twenty-seventh year of production, proposes the process of art making as parallel to athletic training. Barney expresses that *something* gains form through resistance, whether that is the human body, or a work of art. This output is in art as it is in physical struggle; through repetition, a task can be conducted or (perhaps even) completed. Each video displays cast members, including Barney himself, engaging in strenuous activities that at times seem impossible to complete. In *Drawing Restraint 2*, Barney is shown in an energetic and sporadic battle against gravity and his own physical abilities to draw while harnessed. The gritty black and white video (5 min. 1 sec. loop) represents Barney—bound with ropes—in an attempt to draw whilst climbing and jumping on wooden planks placed at awkward angles within the room. The obstacles he confronts act as physical restrictions, rendering his aim to draw nearly impossible. *Drawing Restraint* is, tongue-in-cheek, an appropriate title for this video work.

That is further conveyed in *Drawing Restraint 6*. Barney is shown jumping on a small trampoline, which is placed on the floor of a room with white walls. The artist extends both arms up in an attempt to peel paint chipping from the ceiling above. The video (3 min. 57 sec. loop) presents a tenuous, seemingly endless, and fruitless exercise. Barney transforms a mundane act into a complex goal, stressing the presence of the body as at once a vehicle and an obstruction.

The two aforementioned installments share the common quality of futility; the tasks that Barney engages in are never actually completed, nor are they intended to be completed. A woman standing behind me in the gallery whispers to someone, “*What is this guy doing?*” in a muffled chuckle.

This persistent ineffectiveness, as a common quality between these videos, is an unobvious characteristic in the more recent installment in the series. 2010's *Drawing Restraint 17* (32 minute loop), displayed on two high definition flat screens, develops a longer and more suspenseful narrative. The crisp images in the video involve Barney and a number of other participants. Each member is always shown in the midst of an activity; the main

character, a blond young woman, conducts the most difficult tasks—whether it be digging the earth with a heavy shovel or climbing the walls of the Schaulager museum in Basel, Switzerland. What sets this later installment of *Drawing Restraint* apart from Barney’s earlier work for the series is the suggestion of a grand ending—a final closing to the loop of physical exertion, otherwise done in vain.



Matthew Barney, *DRAWING RESTRAINT 17*, 2010, Production still; © Matthew Barney / Photo: Hugo Glendinning. Jointly owned by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, Basel; and The Museum Of Modern Art, New York, Richard S. Zeisler Bequest and The Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund (both by exchange)

### The Commitment

The goal of *Drawing Restraint* is not to conclude a set task, but instead to demonstrate that there is indeed an ongoing struggle, and that both the body and art will be given shape only through resistance. Emphasized in the absurd physicality and strenuous tasks that Barney and the participants engage in, the commitment they make with their bodies is parallel to the very commitment required for the project’s longevity.

An aesthetic divide that the audience may appreciate in this exhibition is the emphasis of time’s passage shown in the choice of technology. The first two videos (made in 1988 and 1989) are played on two old, bulky TVs. The technology immediately locates the works within a particular point in history. The installation of the old TVs contains a certain honesty—metal wall-mounts and thick, black wires are visible to its viewers. Conversely, *Drawing Restraint 17* is presented on two large flat screen TVs—while the installation is visually true to its time of production, the display is seamless. Unlike the grainy black and white images shown in the previous two works, the latest part in the series is presented in high resolution, colored images. The presentation’s high quality technology more closely resembles an impressive feature film, which is perhaps why most visitors in the gallery have their heads turned towards *Drawing Restraint 17*. The passage in time, evident in even the simplest modes of display, brings the viewers’ attention to chronology, creating its own narrative channel.

Just as the performers in the works, watching Barney’s series involves a deal of commitment as well. The repetition, the exhaustion, and the ultimate lack of resolution resist giving viewers what they crave: a reward, closure. But after all, that was never the point.

—Yoanna Terziyska

[Image on top: **Matthew Barney**, *DRAWING RESTRAINT 2*, 1988, Documentation still; © Matthew Barney / Photo: Michael Rees/ Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Jointly owned by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, Basel; and The Museum Of Modern Art, New York, Richard S. Zeisler Bequest and The Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Fund (both by exchange)]

Posted by Yoli (Yoanna) Terziyska on 9/12/14

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