



Matthew Barney's "River of Fundament" plays Saturday.

Provided by Clyfford Still Museum

Six-hour epic film is an opera-inspired journey

By Ray Mark Rinaldi

Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

Saturday night's screening of Matthew Barney's "River of Fundament" presents the biggest art challenge of this week's Biennial of the Americas.

A six-hour, cinematic opera.

Based on a 709-page Norman Mailer novel. Set mostly in ancient Egypt. Do you dare?

Of course you do. Epic art films are rare in these parts and this one comes via two credible co-presenters, the Denver Art Museum and the Clyfford Still Museum. Barney's film has shown in just three U.S. cities since it premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last year.

The film brings a little East Coast flair to a cultural festival aimed otherwise toward the south, with art from Mexico



Barney

and points beyond. Barney, known both for gallery exhibitions and films, like his surreal five-part "Cremaster" series, is one of the most important artists in the U.S.: a sculptor, installationist, performer and director whose work is both cerebral and personal, lusty, lofty and demanding.

"River of Fundament" travels from Egypt to Detroit, interpreting Mailer's dreamy tale of gods and men as a story about the author himself on a search for immortality. It stars known actors, such as Ellen Burstyn, Elaine Stritch and Paul Giamatti, but also — and equally — classic automobiles, like a 1967 Chrysler Crown Imperial and a 1979 Pontiac

"RIVER OF FUNDAMENT"

The film by Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepko is co-presented by the Denver Art Museum and the Clyfford Still Museum 5:30 p.m. Saturday at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, 14th and Curtis streets. \$20. \$10 for students.

Info at biennialoftheamericas.org. Tickets at axs.com.

Firebird Trans Am, who become characters in a daunting narrative.

Barney explained this week that he didn't set out to make a long-ish film seven years ago when the creative process for "River of Fundament" began. Just the opposite.

"It started with a kind of discontent with where I was with filmmaking. I wanted to change up my process, and at the time I really didn't think I had another film in me."

The artist and his long-time collaborator and composer Jonathan Bepko had Mailer's novel as an inspiration and set about creating music-based performance pieces that were produced live.

Ultimately, Barney found that limiting. He began envisioning the pieces on location and seeing the action from various angles that weren't available to audiences in fixed seats. "Slowly, the script became more of a hybrid and not just a work that could be contained on the stage," he said.

"As a sculptor, it's a little bit hard for me to get behind something that has a fixed perspective. For me, it's important to be able to move around

an object or to place an object in a space where people can move around it."

As a medium, film made that possible. "River of Fundament" unfolds on a grand scale, moving across factories and fields, inside skyscrapers and in front of concrete dams. It has costumes, movement, more than enough visuals to last a half-day.

And it has music. It's an opera, after all, and screening at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House. Though it doesn't fit the form in a traditional, European sense, with parts assigned to certain voices and a plot that unfolds in structured acts as an audience passively watches.

Barney dismisses that, as it were for an era that has passed. "I'm certainly drawn to opera as a model for the collision of different mediums," but he's "a little disappointed by its limitations at the same time."

Of course, six-hour art films come with their own limitations. Showing them requires an adventurous mind on the part of the presenter, and more than a little fortitude from the viewer.

A Hollywood film might draw hundreds of thousands of viewers just on its opening weekend. "River of Fundament" will be lucky to get that in a century. For his part, Barney is willing to wait.

"It just works on a different scale," he said. "Commercial cinema tends to have to expose itself in the moment. This has the potential to last longer, as a piece that can be presented and re-presented for years."

Ray Mark Rinaldi: 303-954-1540, rrinaldi@denverpost.com or twitter.com/rayrinaldi