



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Over the past two decades, Matthew Barney has created a distinctive universe using a multitude of media, from sculpture and photography to drawing and film. Informed by his careful study of recent art history, the human body, and biological development, his work reveals a keen interest in process and the evolution of form.”

-From SF MOMA brochure, “Matthew Barney: Drawing Restraint” June 23 – Aug. 17, 2006

I recently went to the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. There I walked from floor to floor, even nervously crossing that beautiful bridge which brings me a rush of vertigo if I accidentally look down past my feet to the floor far below.

One of the exhibits I saw was Matthew Barney’s *Drawing Restraint* – a combination of work that is difficult to categorize or even describe. I had been warned that it is different and that it is. Initially, I was put off by what I was seeing, because the first room I visited was mainly video screens hanging from the ceiling, playing short videos of the artist in his studio. I kept telling myself it was simply a form of performance art and that I should be more open-minded and willing to accept a new kind of artistic expression.

However, when I moved into the larger rooms, where masses of what looked like ice were mounded, carved, shaped and positioned, I started to un-

derstand the attraction of this man’s work. The bright lighting, the size of the pieces and something else – the art of it all? – moved and pressed on me, leaving me with thoughts and feelings I hadn’t expected.

So, what does this have to do with libraries and books? Well, it made me think about the experimental children’s books I have seen over the years – in particular, David Wiesner’s *The Three Little Pigs*. When I first saw this book, I was taken aback and not really sure I liked it. The story begins the way most Three Little Pigs stories do: the little pigs go out to seek their fortune. But after that it becomes a story within a story – or maybe I should say, a story outside of a story. Because when the wolf blows down the first little pig’s house, he blows so hard he blows the pig out of the story. As the tale continues, the other pigs leave, too – confusing the wolf, who can’t find them anywhere. It is an amazingly inventive book and I rec-

continued on page 2

commend taking a look at it.

But the real question for me is whether or not this is a book that children will respond to. Is it just a clever idea or does it make them think about illustrations and art and stories in a different way? Is it one-time entertainment or is it a book they will return to, again and again? Because if it holds them and challenges them – the way Barney’s work held me – then I would consider it art. If not – well, I don’t know what it is.

I know the idea of experimental art, whether it is sculpture, music or a children’s book, is a huge topic, encompassing years of passionate opinions, and in one short column I can’t even begin to address it. However, as I watched myself adjust to Barney’s work it made me think about the excitement of discovering a new concept or a new way to look at something. I appreciate that children’s book authors and illustrators have taken this on. I appreciate that

they don’t underestimate a child’s ability to laugh at skewed reality or to be challenged. And I appreciate that modern artists give us the chance to reexamine our expectations and perhaps expand our understanding of the world.