

**Miquel  
Barceló**

**1987**

**1997**

EXHIBITION

**MIQUEL BARCELÓ. 1987-1997**

2nd April - 21st June 1998

The Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) will present, from April to June 1998, an extensive exhibition of works by Miquel Barceló (Majorca, Spain, 1957). Apart from the reference point of a few early works produced between 1983 and 1987, the exhibition is centred on the artist's output of the last ten years, a period in which he is regarded as having come to full maturity, while retaining an attitude of constant investigation and experimentation.

These chronological limits do not constitute an arbitrary option, nor are they determined exclusively by the circumstance that a major exhibition of the artist's work was held in Barcelona in 1987. Of equal or greater importance is the fact that that year marked a highly significant point of inflection in Barceló's work, closely associated with his immersion in the material and cultural world of the Sahara and the Sahel.

In the words of Pep Subirós, curator of the show, 'up until that moment, and above all during the first half of the 80s, his work had been characterized in large part as an investigation and a dialogue about, from, within, around, against the cultural legacy he had been brought up on, on the basis of which he had made himself an artist; in other words, the great Mediterranean and Western tradition, with which he maintains an intense relationship, at once passionate and problematic, continually oscillating between homage and rejection'.

The shift, both geographical and of cultural context, implied by his stays in Africa, has brought about a renewal not only of terms, and even of techniques, but also a shift of perspective. The experience of Africa, Subirós observes, 'reveals the relativity of those essentially Eurocentric references that had until then dominated his work. It leads him not to wipe out the earlier inheritance, but rather to go back to the deeper origins, not to nothing, but rather to the essentials of art, of the artist's life and work. It invites him to strip himself of veneers and varnishes, to free himself from pressures and from fashions... To rediscover not the weight of the natural substratum — which he has never lost sight of — but rather the artificiality, the limits, the precariousness of all culture'.

The exhibition in the MACBA is conceived as a journey through the main thematic series produced by the artist in the course of this period; works in which Barceló's two great concerns are brought together: on the one hand, the obsession with the organic and material nature of the creative process, through its incorporation of time and of life, and on the other hand, the reflection on the meaning of art and the role of the artist, on painting as the production of meaning.

The backbone of the exhibition will thus be made up of 90 canvases — most of them large-format — of landscapes, deserts, rain, boats, everyday scenes of African life, bulls, artists' studios, still-lives, portraits... In other words, relatively classic genres which Barceló invests with new life.

Around this central structure, the exhibition will offer a very extensive selection of works on paper — 75 drawings, gouaches and water-colours, 24 travel notebooks and sketchbooks, etc.. — as well as 20 sculptures and ceramic pieces, which constitute a significant part of the artist's most recent output.

The exhibition will also include a major section of bibliographic and videographic documentation, to enable visitors to complete their vision of the artist in terms of his career as a whole.

Finally, the exhibition catalogue, published in conjunction with ACTAR, will include texts by John Berger, Bernard Goy, Hervé Landry and Pep Subirós. A collection of Miquel Barceló's writings and travel notes will also be published in it, together with a selection of reflections and observations by the artist.

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**Exhibition produced by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)**  
**Curator: Pep Subirós**

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## Miquel Barceló: Return from Africa

PEP SUBIRÓS

*"This painting (The Triumph of Death by Brueghel), which I often stopped to look at, taught me what hatred is. I had already experienced hatred at an early age, too early –five years old– when I tried killing my playmate with an axe. But that didn't mean I became aware of what I was experiencing; in order to fully recognize an experience, you have to see it in other people. Only then does it acquire a real consistency. At first the original experience lies dormant inside one, without being named. Then, it pops up unexpectedly as an image, and what happens to others opens up inside oneself as a memory. Then it is something real."*

Elias Canetti, *The Torch in my Ear*.

### I. Ten Years After

At the end of 1987, the former theatre of the old Casa de la Caritat in Barcelona housed what was then the most important exhibition to date of the work of Miquel Barceló. The show was called "Barceló, Barcelona."

Neither the title, the date, the exhibition space, nor the scope of the show were arbitrary, or innocent.

Despite his youth, Barceló was already an artist with a surprisingly solid and mature body of work, which since his participation in *Documenta 82* had received international acclaim.

The title of the show –"Barceló, Barcelona"– was in part a political title. It stressed the relationship between the artist and our city. The six years Barceló lived in Barcelona –from 1976 to 1982– had been of decisive importance in his artistic development. A significant part of the exhibition, brilliantly organized by Jean-Louis Froment, reconstructed this period in a poetic and imaginative way, creating a dialogue between the artist's works and the pieces borrowed from different museums in Barcelona. "Barceló, Barcelona" sought to demonstrate and to strengthen this relationship between Barceló and the city, so that the artist would not "escape us," as had some other great artists in the past.

This is why neither the place nor the occasion were accidental. At that time, plans were beginning to take shape to create a Contemporary Art Museum, a place that would bring audiences and artists together, and would serve both to disseminate and to conserve the art work.

Together with the "Triangle Workshop" –a show organized by Anthony Caro in April of that same year, which featured many important Catalan artists– "Barceló, Barcelona" inaugurated the new use of the former Casa de la Caritat.

The decision had been made to transform it into a cultural complex, which would eventually include the MACBA.

These two initiatives revealed the old building to the wider public and demonstrated the excellent central location of the site and the rich possibilities of the spaces within.

Many things have changed since then.

The cracked and ramshackle rooms of the Casa de la Caritat now house the Centre de Cultura Contemporània of Barcelona. On what ten years ago was an abandoned lot covered with trash, the MACBA building now stands.

And as is to be expected of any great artist, Miquel Barceló's work has also changed.

What remains unaltered, however, is the quality and solvency of his artistic project.

If ten years ago Barceló was an artist of precocious maturity who ran the risk of being a shooting star in the so-called *return to painting* phenomenon of the eighties, today he is an artist with a fully consolidated development well beyond the fashions and upheavals of the art scene. In Barceló's evolution, lived experience and creative adventure are often mixed and fused.

In the last few years, prestigious institutions such as the Whitechapel Gallery in London (1994), the IVAM in Valencia (1995), the Centre George Pompidou and the Jeu de Paume in Paris (1996) have organized significant shows of Barceló's work.

The MACBA exhibition, however, presents three important new perspectives. First, the works belong to the 1987-1997 period, focusing therefore on the effect the artist's immersion in the desert and the Sahel has had on his art. Second, this exhibition offers an unusually wide selection –more than two hundred pieces– and includes all the genres and the supporting materials the artist has used over these years: large canvases, works on paper, books and travel note-books, portraits, sculptures and terra cotta, which represent a significant part of his most recent output.

And third, the present exhibition includes an important number of works that are little known or have never been exhibited, and which belong to different private collections, including the artist's.

Although it is very different from "Barceló, Barcelona" ten years ago, the current exhibition expresses the same will to consolidate the relationship between the artist and Barcelona, and to bet on a strong and continuing presence of his works among us.

## II. History as Cooking

*"It should never be said that the genius is a hundred years ahead of his time. It would probably be more exact and pedagogical to say that most people are living a hundred years behind their era."*

Robert Musil, *Aphorisms*.

Without us knowing it at the time, the exhibition curated by Jean-Louis Froment for the Casa de la Caritat can now be seen as marking the end of a cycle in Barceló's work. Until then his art was developing in two distinct, though complementary directions. On the one hand, Barceló's work has from the beginning been closely linked to his need to integrate art and life, to bring organicity and temporality to artistic creation, not to *observe* and *re-present*, but to *penetrate* and *present* reality -and thus time, change, and death.

Consequently, paintings such as *The Man With the Golden Helmet*, attributed to Rembrandt, and the terrifying *Finis Gloriae Mundi* by Valdés Leal, have fascinated him, as have the still lifes of 16th and 17th century Spanish painting, or, much closer to us, the paintings of Soutine. In all of these, life and death, splendour and corruption, strike the spectator as two inseparable sides of the same reality.

Barceló considers the work of art a privileged stage upon which to enact life's drama. There hasn't been a clearer or more radical example of this than the exhibition *Cadaverina 15* (1976), at the Museu de Mallorca. Here, the artist carried to an extreme his tenacious impulse to incorporate the essential aspects of existence into his work: creation, perpetual transformation, decomposition.

The second, parallel line of Barceló's development, especially during the first half of the eighties, was characterized by research into, and a dialogue on, from, around and against the cultural legacy he grew up with: the western, Mediterranean tradition with which he maintains an intense, passionate, conflictual relationship, continually oscillating between homage and rejection.

This dialogue and struggle often produced works dominated by explicit references to the major issues and technical problems of classical painting -composition, perspective, the treatment of light- in a constant reappropriation and re-elaboration of the history of art.

This process, however, was not a postmodern exercise in rhetorical quotation, a manipulation of art as a historical end-game. Instead, the artist digested history by situating himself clearly within it.

Already, then, the young Miquel Barceló saw that the best way to be contemporary was to learn deeply from the past, to cook it and chew it to the bone, with all the means and ingredients at his disposal, with knowledge and distance, yes, but also with rage and desire. For Barceló painting is more than a creative exercise or an occupation; it is a vital impulse, as basic as breathing or making love, a visceral way of acting and relating himself to the world, of knowing it and of knowing himself.

This can be seen in many of his works of the period –such as *Peintre peignant le tableau* (Painter Painting a Picture, 1983), *Giorgione a Felanitx* (Giorgione in Felanitx, 1984), *L'amour fou* (Mad Love, 1984), or *Ink* (1985)– in which the figure of the painter occupies a central position in a silent interrogation of the meaning of art and the role of the artist.

Barceló embarked on a kind of pictorial binge, digging into and devouring the major themes and masters that interested him, from Titian, Caravaggio and Tintoretto, to Courbet, Soutine, Picasso and Marcel Duchamp. From each outing, each sacrifice, he emerged with discoveries of the first order.

It shouldn't be forgotten, however, that even during these years when the paintings were full of cultural references –literature, libraries, museums, cinema, the role of the painter– there were also many dedicated to animals, kitchens, and soups. Works such as *Carn fa carn* (Flesh Begets Flesh), *Fum de cuina* (Kitchen Smoke) or *Sopa Marina* (Marine Soup), all 1984, were evidence of Barceló's continuing interest in the realities underlying the crust of high culture, in the same way that *Memorial Soup* (1987) or *Sistole, diastole* (Systole, Diastole, 1987) suggest the molten mixtures underlying even the most sophisticated historical formations.

What both lines of Barceló's development had in common were study, experimentation, and constant innovation.

He thoroughly explored composition, perspective, color, light, materials and textures, coming to command all of these with an indisputable mastery. Barceló became a young chef of painting who not only had learned the recipes of the Great Masters but had also improvised his own. The success was striking and illuminating, until the game became too easy, that is to say, dangerous for an artist. Especially one who was only thirty. At the end of 1987, famous and critically acclaimed, with his work sought after by the most important galleries in Paris, Zurich and New York, Barceló suddenly disappeared. He headed for Africa. With a Land Rover and a few friends, he travelled into the Sahara.

This would not be just one more trip. The geographical, cultural and physical displacement brought about by this first trans-Saharan immersion –which he would subsequently repeat, with long stays in different regions, especially in the Dogon Country of Mali– would not only inspire new perspectives, but would also lead to new subject matters and even techniques. It would also be an authentic rite of passage, giving rise to a synthesis of what up to that point had been relatively disparate elements of his work.

### III. A Universal Africa

*"... (Civilization) is an embarrassing state, with flattery everywhere, waves without wires, with the presumptuous graphical language of chemical formulas and mathematics, with political economy, with experimental investigation, and with the incapacity for humane coexistence, simple but more decent.*

Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*.

Shortly after the exhibition at the Casa de la Caritat, Miquel Barceló literally crossed the great desert in a voyage that would lead him to establish a deep relation with the physical and cultural landscape of western Africa. Free of any kind of condescension, this relation would indelibly leave its mark on the subsequent development of his work.

Barceló's interest in Africa had nothing to do with exoticism, nor with a search for the noble savage nor with a nostalgia for a paradise lost. Above all, he wanted to abandon what was easy and known; he went in search of insecurity, to regain uncertainty.

Barceló set out for Africa, but it could have been the Amazon, Patagonia or the Gobi Desert. It wasn't so much that he was going somewhere in particular as that he was leaving Barcelona, Paris, or New York. He was fleeing from the known, from intellectual conformity, from the temptation of repetition and what was easy.

To go to Africa, or to some "Africa", was for Barceló to doubt himself and everything he had done to that point. It was to refuse to limit art to the technical mastery he had acquired. It was also to leave behind a predictable career in established art circles, in which art can rapidly become a commodity or a decorative object. To go to Africa was to refuse to paint on demand; it was to reject the limitations of the art market.

In some ways, then, Africa presented itself to Barceló as chance destiny. But Africa also made sense as a natural destination, because in many of its most penetrating aspects, Africa for Miquel Barceló was not an alien world. It was not only the attraction of the unknown that drew him there. Africa was a world that had been physically exterior, but which, whether he was conscious of it or not, had always formed part of his interior universe. Africa was in part the recuperation of spontaneity, the time of adolescent confusion. To go to Africa was also to submerge himself in a *Cadaverina 15* of natural size and on a continental scale.



Nevertheless, this first encounter would come as an abrupt shock. Physical and mental, biological and cultural, this jolt would be immediately reflected in his work. The African world confirmed for Barceló the relativity of the eurocentric references that had until then dominated his work. It did not prompt him to wipe the slate clean of his previous cultural legacy, but to return to deeper origins; not to nothingness but to the essence of art and life, and to the role of the artist. Africa invited Barceló to strip himself of the crust and veneers, to liberate himself from the pressures and dictates of fashion. He rediscovered not so much the importance of a natural substratum – which he had never lost sight of – but the artificiality, the limits, the precariousness of all culture.

The upheaval Barceló first expressed in the form of notes, travel note-books, drawings and sketches, was surely not only the result of the undeniable physical difficulties involved in trying to paint in Mali, at 40 or 50°C, and with none of the materials or the conveniences of Europe. The shock was stronger than that.

The African reality is extreme and severe, and Barceló lived it, as he does everything, with a visceral intensity, almost obsessively, something that isn't easy or comfortable, or even healthy, for a European stomach.

Certainly the condition of displacement, of being a stranger, is inherent in the work of all great artists, whatever their roots or actual residence. Since the last century there have been many artists who have undergone this experience of a physical displacement, a change of context that renews their vision. What isn't so common is to submerge oneself as radically in other lands and ways of life as Barceló has in Africa.

One needs to have travelled with him, seen him feverish with dysentery, to fully grasp the extent to which this is true. But if one manages to survive, physical suffering makes the spirit stronger; suffering sharpens one's ability to distinguish what is more important and what is less so. In this respect, Africa is an unbeatable university. The learning Barceló did in it decisively affected his work.

Despite his visceral nature, Barceló's painting has also always been, and will continue to be, deeply reflective, inquisitive, in constant dialogue with the material and cultural world around it. In Africa Barceló couldn't continue painting as if everything were the same as before, as if he were still living in Paris or New York. For almost a year, he took notes, wrote, drew. A stranger everywhere, he wrote in French, opting again to struggle against what came most easily.

During this period, in his work on paper, whether it be his writing, his drawings, his watercolors or his gouaches, with pigments gathered on the banks of the Niger or bought in some market, for the first time the two worlds he'd moved

in internally began to integrate. On the one side was his obsession with the organicity and materiality of the creative act, with the incorporation of the pulsing rhythms of time and life. On the other was his reflection upon the roles of art and the artist, upon how painting generates meaning.

The experience of everyday life in the Sahel brought these two worlds together in an almost obligatory way. And the explosion of this contact, of this reencounter and recognition, was tremendous.

Barceló's manuscript notes and sketches from this period are keen and clever observations and reflections. Sparkling with provocative wit, they attest to the intensity and the breadth of his gaze and thought. Despite their natural modesty, his works on paper have the quality and force of the essential.

Only later, on his return to Europe, would this experience be expressed on large canvases.

Completing the process begun in New York –although now with very different motivations– Barceló purged his canvases of the once frequent and explicit cultural and autobiographical references. These disappeared in favor of vast, off-white landscapes, desolate, devoid of anecdote. But the paintings are not decadent; they are charged with energy, questions and suggestions. They exude an overwhelming physicality, with absolute narrative and expressive economy, but at the same time they serve as panoramas of the reflective spirit, open-ended critical questions. *Piedra blanca sobre una piedra negra* (White Stone on a Black Stone, 1988), *Taula amb productes europeus* (Table With European Products, 1988) and *Horizon d'évènements* (Event Horizon, 1989), are some examples of the most impressive and best realized work ever made by the artist.

From this point on, Barceló's painting will be an accelerated recuperation of the reality principle. But his reality is now rich in new cultural and experiential references, and is much more complex than the one he had perceived previously. The Africa that interests Barceló –and which saturates all his subsequent work– is not the Africa of ancestral culture, supposedly uncontaminated, but a contradictory mosaic in which all the eras of history coexist, all conflicts are acted out, all languages spoken. This is an Africa where not only the past is encountered but also, through a kind of prophetic play, the human future.

Barceló captures this conflation of past and future in pictures such as *Pluja contracorrent* (Rain Against the Current, 1991) and *Kulu be ba Kan* (1991), inspired by the gigantic canoes that routinely traverse the Niger, laden with dangers and hopes.

These impressive images convey to us, with great force, the epic dimension of the human adventure.

Finally, in contrast with the apathetic character of much of postmodern culture, Africa instigated in Barceló a recuperation of a morally militant attitude toward basic social questions. Paintings like *Somàlia 92* (Somalia 92) constitute a lesson and a dramatic counterpoint with respect to some celebrations the artist considers almost sacrilegious.

The artist is also a citizen and art a political and moral act.

This is not a doctrinaire stance or a manifesto, but an expression of everything western man, coddled by material and intellectual comforts, needs to ignore.

Embodying these experiences and recognitions, Barceló returns, with a renewed strength and freedom, to more classical, and seemingly more conventional, themes in the history of painting: landscapes, still lifes, the artist's studio, studies of light and shade, portraits, and so on, bringing to all of them the imprint of Africa. The images and themes are not as important as the dust, the land, the hunger, pain and laughter, the guts of time, the fragility, the conflict between what endures and what changes. Barceló confirms what he had intuited from the beginning. Everything is at once old and new again. Africa is everywhere. Africa is the grandeur and drama of natural forces, the intensity of experience, the direct confrontation with the basic dimensions of life and death. This Africa exists in the glaciers of the Alps, in the bullfights, in the studio of the artist, in the kitchens serving the world's most refined tables. This Africa brings us into contact with much we would like to deny or try to forget.

Some of Barceló's most interesting recent works are his portraits. A genre practically discarded by contemporary painting –with some notable exceptions like Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon or Lucien Freud– Barceló uses the portrait as a privileged space in which he can initiate, with all the intensity possible, an encounter between the painter and his model, at once straightforward and rich with new dramatic possibilities. The results are some captivating portraits, such as *Cecile de 9 mesos* (Cecile at Nine Months, 1992), *Portrait de Bruno Bischofberger* (Portrait of Bruno Bischofberger, 1993), or the series of portraits on paper done in Mali in 1996.

#### **IV. Art, Experience, Thought**

*"One of the means of access to reality passes through paintings. I don't think there is a better one. We hold on to what is immutable, and in doing so we separate it from what is always changing. Paintings are nets; what appears in them is the fish we want to keep. Many fish slip away and others rot, but we try again. We carry those nets everywhere, casting them over and over, and they themselves become stronger with the fishing."*

Elias Canetti, *The Torch in my Ear*.

Barceló denies that he is a painter of ideas and, in a way, he is right. If a painting could be translated in its entirety into words, it would be an irrelevant work. But his painting is full of thought provoking and generating more thought. He puts it this way: "My painting generates ideas, and then it sweeps them aside and they settle around the canvas, on the floor, with the roaches and the orange rinds. What holds the painting is not ideas, it's something else, a kind of big ultimate idea: unutterable. What is needed is to demolish it at the moment it could verbalize itself. Before it is said, before it becomes a system."

Maybe Barceló's painting is not made with ideas, but it is a painting made of attitudes and affirmations; and these imply ideas. In an age dominated by appearance, by simulation, by the virtual, Barceló's painting offers the viewer much more than a mere fiction or representation. For Barceló, the canvas is much more than a support for an image. His paintings incorporate and recreate matter, organic life, time. His paintings make themselves present as another form of reality, more real, it might be said, than the referents inspiring them. In this sense, his obsession with painting is an obsession for the truth, not for a pure, eternal, ethereal truth, but for the fragile and interpenetrating truths of life and death, of creation, of change and decay.

He is not preoccupied with genre, material or techniques. He commands them all with an almost insulting ease. The question is to know where all of these stand, to discover the new in the old and the old in what's new, the enduring substratum submitted to accelerated change and the changes in what may look inert. And to know what to do with all of this. Again, Miquel puts it this way: "I am ready and dazzled by the stretch of what still needs to be done, as though nothing had been painted, nothing therefore seen or named. One must snatch all things, one by one, from the Berlusconi misery and lay them out again, fresh and clean, exhibit them throbbing or in their on sweet rot," he wrote in 1995 in a note book.

In recent years, Barceló's work has gone further towards strengthening this physical and organic relationship between the reality portrayed and the art object itself. In contrast to flat, pasteurized images, Barceló's pictorial works –including many of his drawings– are almost three-dimensional: the canvases and papers of a tortured orography, modeled after the rocks of the Dogón Country; the sketches and drawings encrusted with bones, rocks, seeds, straw and cast-off objects, often chewed through by termites. But these are not works abandoned to natural chance; they are forged by the hand and intelligence of the artist,<sup>9</sup> violently engendered in an aggressive and implacable struggle –though full of respect– with the conditions of life in the surrounding environment.

Some of his paintings, like the monumental *Ball de la carn* (Dance of the Flesh, 1994), threaten to erupt, as if the life beating in them –a life not only reflected and represented, but captured and presented– were rebelling.

Barceló is rebelling against the insipidness of a culture and an art more often concerned with licking its own wounds and fortifying its borders than with hearing the cries, the songs of love and war, of creation and destruction that come to us from outside, above all from the Africas of the world, where everything, absolutely everything, is made use of.

Barceló unsettles many pseudo-critics of a certain pseudo-vanguard, because he is not interested in being novel for novelty's sake. His work has little to do with the in-group soliloquies to which we have grown accustomed in much contemporary art. With relative ease, he brings his work to a much larger public than some supposedly more innovative efforts, which in fact are often perfectly conventional. His art is neither academic nor conformist, nor does it follow established standards of good taste; it does not lend itself to easy classification.

His work is a constant, probing exploration –full of discovery– of new territories and new mediums. One of these is as old as terra cotta, with which Barceló has worked since 1995. First in Mali and more recently in Mallorca, he has been exploring all that this medium evokes and reveals, beyond the appearances and stereotypical images, the splendours and miseries of our time.

At the same time, however, Barceló's painting is, like all great art, an impossible and tragic project: to recover and present reality where there can't be more than a representation; to reproduce movement and change where there is only space for what remains fixed; to struggle against death where death always has the last word.

Barceló's project is impossible, yes, just as it has always been for all great artists capable of extending the limits of appearance, of modifying our perception of reality, of revealing aspects of the world that were previously hidden.

But such a project is today as necessary as ever, or more.

## Fresh Still Lives

BERNARD GOY

In a film by Léos Carax <sup>(1)</sup>, the hero, a very young man, says he must remake his life. He also says he is going to put a fresh shirt on, takes off the one he is wearing, and puts it back on, inside out.

In 1984, after an opening of young French artists in the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, some young people met for a drink in the area. Miquel Barceló was wearing a long black padded raincoat and seemed to have just arrived or to be about to leave, in transit through the old capital in which, we were convinced, the destiny of painting was being decided for the years to come. Nevertheless, the works bearing evidence of a project were rare, and in this Parisian exhibition there was only one painter, from Lyon, who kept his distance with an elegant irony which we feared would kill the beginning of a new figuration in Europe <sup>(2)</sup>, even though Barceló's visit that evening was already a sign of the rebirth of an artistic scene on the old continent. (How did he come to know about this opening? We are led to think of those artists, writers, philosophers or mystics of the Middle Ages, always well informed, who travelled incessantly and gathered in defiance of the official world.) Barceló had taken irony as his subject. Characters without a face –themselves non-entities–, breathing culture, were absorbed in confined spaces treated in ochre and grey tones, where books and paintings piled up as if they were skies. All this could have been no more than just another commentary, activating the big nonsense wheel in which a contemporary art was beginning to bury our desire.

But this was painting and it was more significant, fresher in its impossible apparent freshness, than the "records" that filled galleries and museums, such as those academic steles erected in the name of absence and, it would seem to us, competing with insignificance.

Better, the acid salt of a "nada" ("nothing"), deeply felt at the time by most of us, produced the contrary: paintings, rich in matter, the images of apparent poverty. Joy was still alive beneath the ashes.

The man himself was surprising, already encouraged by a real recognition and conscious of playing a leading role in the battle of the deaf concerning the suspect use of turpentine essence, and concerning the image especially and the need for durable works of art.

The conversation was long, although punctuated with delirious images, such as the evocation by a stranger (who we never saw again) of a midnight bath which he would have taken in a swimming pool after having emptied dozens of tubes of aspirin into it... dreamy effervescence in tune with our enthusiastic ideas, and our tiredness at that late hour.

In the small hours the densest words rose to the surface of conversation like bubbles.

*"Usually, first comes the pillar of raw wood, then the white ants which nourish themselves on it. But, as I see it, the white ants were there from the beginning and the pillar of raw wood appeared last, already half eaten"*

Mishima, *Sun and Steel*.

One wonders whether Rimbaud, in his Abyssinian quest, was bothered by termites –those primitive ants– he who in running away from words found the sun, another solvent for things.

In Mali, Miquel Barceló has offered them a book –supreme irony, but at the second degree; it is a dream of the German Romantics finally come true. A kind of direct and underground graphy –a pagan *skiagraphia*<sup>(3)</sup> records a vibration of the world, devilishly telluric, but attested to by the act of representation, by the artist's intervention.

The holes produced in this manner by the papyrus-devouring insects are points that make no sense except in connection with one another, like the fill-in drawings of our childhood. Some artists, so convinced of their demiurgical power that they distrust it, effect a generous withdrawal, offering the spectator the task of finishing the work, or even of creating it... Barceló is less prudent and is distrustful of the potential virtues of the virtual image.

The work, above all beautiful, is also unique and unpublished: the water-colours present landscapes starting from the cartographical itineraries of these voracious geniuses of the earth. The painter's art finds in it the freedom sometimes characteristic of sketch-books or prints, such as Manet's *Black Cat*, an almost abstract water- colour, an ink half way between a drawing and a poem, between intention and chance. We will leave for future curators the task of interpreting the termite runes traced on these pages. We have here a "Treasure Book" in the Tibetan sense of the term.

A second volume is written and painted in braille. What in the "termite book" was a mystery of depth, a hidden hieroglyph, becomes in the "blind man's book" a mystery of surface. It may be that one day it will be exhibited under a glass case. One should first show it in semi-darkness, candle-lit, so that it offers to the eye the substance of its indented surface, so that between surface and depth, the painting affirms itself as the site of the necessary imperviousness between vision and caress, and so that the secret is kept of what, from one language to another, is communicable only through a rare communion.

*"A dream of dark and troublesome things where the spirit fights with matter." David Lynch, Eraserhead*

After the books, in another room of the Paris studio, there is a soup, <sup>4</sup>lightly polychrome, whitish and as if prepared with sea water, dry, although with a slender thread of water in the background. It's a sculpture, of a realism that evokes a plate thrown into the sink in a hurry and forgotten there, or some Pompeian fragment, the constituents of which have undergone a brutal sedimentation. There are other sculptures, often white as newborn things, which threaten to betray the words emboldened by the pleasure of describing them.

Lastly, there are the paintings, only a few, often very big, always recent. I know they are going to leave the studio shortly and I am therefore measuring even more the complexity of the sensations they provoke.

Barceló is excess, an excess of everything but above all matter, whose inertia resists the movements imposed on it by the painter's gestures, in order not to become an image; rather as a heavy meal swallowed too quickly and piping hot resists the coercive actions of the gastric juices, and attacks the body as much as it sustains it, provokes in it the energy to absorb and distends its walls -here, the beaten surface of the canvas in certain paintings- in order finally to nourish a distant meaning kilometres of ( as yet formulated ) thought away from the initial project.

It seems that, in order to escape these white ants and their conceptual acid that freezes sensations, covering them with a coat of marble before they appear, there is only one solution: to overtake them, to lift the stone and take by surprise the fresh surface on which they make their nest, but which they haven't started eating yet, or at worst, haven't devoured entirely. Cloaked in acceptable images, mortuary masks or sarcophagus decorations, the mummified or rotting corpses of High Antiquity thus continued teaching their people. In this way our televisual images speak of (or distill) glorious death, because it is linked to the unavoidable progress in the world of the myth of modern democracy right into what in our opinion are its most sombre corners.

I see *Somalia 92* by Miquel Barceló as an inverted image. Its acceptable surface, pre-conceptualized (predigested) by our media, is not shown; but the hidden surface, which was once in contact with the crime and which the recto hid on our screens and which the verso has traced, is.

Andy Warhol traced the images of things, thereby implying we never saw the things themselves. Barceló, whose work is at least as subversive, turns them inside out. And false glory quickly gives way to humiliation. Exposing the soles of the century's march, the painter also distances himself from the journalism prevalent in contemporary art, in order to resort to an iconography which goes back beyond modern culture, evoking other epochs and other symbolic codes, which were once ours and still talk to Europe. The donkey which bore Christ, but which, on the pediment of a cathedral, carries a bishop, is an example of this. Painting empty flooded surfaces, seen from the air, going to work in Mali, sculpting images which seem to have emerged from the paintings and which integrate painting again, like *L'anguille* (The Eel) for example, are possibilities. But painting a nude...

*"Their general form matches the accidents of the rock and the colours have retained all their splendour."*

Robert des noms propres *Dictionary*, article: *Altamira*.

So, the protuberances of the canvas must rise before one's eyes, and its indentations must deepen under the feigned "hot flushes" <sup>(4)</sup> of an epidermis. In the organic order of Barceló's painting, the support may abandon a certain neutrality to enter into the figuration process, as though the rosy or greenish nuances emanated from the model, being painted near her,



very near. With evidence of her social status as her garment, Manet's *Olympia* was more scandalous than her mere nudity, perhaps unthinkable at the time.

In a nude by Barceló there is no other beauty than the memory of a carnal presence, of the particular exactitude of a body whose actuality will always oppose itself to all ideas, a body often covered in skin stretched by life, sweating perhaps, and the next instant motionless, the inexact restoration of which, because of the random surface of the canvas, remains, by an ephemeral miracle, the amiable ruin.

Finally come the portraits. The first, an absolute challenge, which often come last in the chronology of genres in contemporary painting. There were those of Hervé Guibert which he himself had trouble describing in a book <sup>(5)</sup> and others, more recent. The big exteriors without sky, the deserts crossed for years in the paintings – none of these spaces imply as big a leap as that which brings the brush close to the human face.

The temptation of the image is there, of course, even stronger, matter more resistant, and, in matter, the death-impulse which is consubstantial with it, more apparent. The uniqueness of the painting, what essentially separates it from the “filthy” imagery of our time, – modern gargoyles through which, as though at skylights, nothingness grimaces –, is concentrated in the imperviousness of a portrait: strict encounter between a gaze and a face. A portrait is the guarantee of a possible truth in painting.

In this way de-neutralized, the support gives the painting a plastic equivalent of those layers of thoughts, dreams and fears which construct unceasingly, behind our bones, the meaning of words pronounced by our lips and our eyes.

In his portraits, Barceló once again invents an imitation which is particular to him: far from all psychology, he corners, in the fortuitous formations of the canvas, what is unique in a face, that is to say, its history and its combat to get out of it. We know today that this uniqueness is menaced by the generalized recycling which no longer spares the originality of the individual. There was a time when illiterate people saw in painting the promise of their salvation, the truth of texts which they adored without understanding them; whilst others, who were often their masters, condemned themselves without shame. These latter are the same persons who are today taking fragments of identity from molecules of desoxyribonucleic acid in order to copy their forms. Damnation has lost a lot of its sensuality and science its meaning. As regards art, most often it searches for itself.

Barceló doesn't search and knows there is nothing left to find. He invents something which others manage to make disappear, and he is the only one to do it the way he does it. This invention is a particular fiction opposed to postmodern phantasms of all types. This fiction is his and yet we find in it all that lives: I call it “being in the world”.

Text published in 1995 in the revue *Lieux Extrêmes*, taken up again by the author in 1998 for the catalogue of the Barceló exhibition.

(1) *Mauvais sang*

(2) Patrice Giorda

(3) Incision called “writing in the shade”, practiced by icon painters on the wooden plaque before painting on it.

(4) The word is Barceló's.

(5) *L'homme au chapeau rouge* (Miquel Barceló appears in it under the figure of the painter Iannis)

## Studio talk

JOHN BERGER

A scrap of paper crumpled up and thrown on the studio floor amongst unstretched canvasses on which you stand, pails of pigment— some mixed with clay, the odd saucepan, broken sticks of charcoal, rags, discarded drawing, two empty cups. On the scrap of paper are written two words: FACE and PLACE.

The studio was once a bicycle factory, no? You work here in your painting shoes and clothes. The shirt and trousers were originally striped. Now, like the shoes, they are encrusted with pigment. So I picture you as two people: a man about to ride away on his bicycle and a convict.

However, the only thing which matters, when the day is done, is what lies painted on the floor or leaning against the walls, waiting to be seen the next day. What matters is what the changing light can never quite reveal – the thing, to which one is nearest when one fears one has probably lost it.

Face. Whatever the painter is looking for, he's looking for its face. All the search and the losing and the re-finding is about that, isn't it? And "its face" means what? He's looking for its return gaze and he's looking for its expression – a slight sign of its inner life. And this is true whether he's painting a cherry, a bicycle wheel, a blue rectangle, a carcass, a river, a bush, a hill or his own reflection in a mirror.

Photos, videos, films never find the face; at their best they find memories of appearances and likenesses. The face, by contrast, is always new: something never before seen and yet familiar. (Familiar because, when asleep, we dream of the face of the whole world, into which at birth we were blindly thrown.) We see a face only if it looks at us. (Like Vincent's sunflower.) A profile is never a face, and cameras turn all faces into profiles.

When we have to stop before a finished painting, we stop as before an animal who is looking at us. Yes, this is ever true for Antonello de Messina's *Pieta with an Angel*. The paint laid or brushed or smeared on to the surface is the animal, and its "look" is its face. Think of the face of Vermeer's *View of Delft*. Later the animal may hide, but it's always there when it first stops us and won't allow us to go on. An old story that goes back to the caves.

Place, place in the sense of *lieu, luogo, ort, mestopolojenie*. The last Russian word also means situation and this is worth remembering. A place is more than an area. A place surrounds something. A place is the extension of a presence or the consequence of an action. A place is the opposite of empty space. A place is where an event has or is taking place.

The painter is continually trying to discover, to stumble upon, the place which will contain and surround his present act of painting. Ideally there should be as many places as there are paintings. The trouble is that a painting often fails to become a place. When it fails to become a place, a painting remains a re-presentation or a decoration- a furnishing. How does a painting become a place? It's no good the painter looking for the place in nature- it wasn't in Delft that Vermeer found it ! Nor can he search for it in art - because, despite the belief of certain post-modernists, references don't make a place. When a place is found it is found somewhere on the frontier between nature and art. It is like a hollow in the sand within which the frontier has been wiped out. The place of the painting begins in this hollow. Begins with a practice, with something being done by the hands, and the hands then seeking the approval of the eye, until the whole body is involved in the hollow. Then there's a chance of it becoming a place. A slim chance.

Two examples. In Manet's *Olympia* the hollow, the place, ( which of course has nothing to do with the *boudoir* in which the woman is lying) began in the folds of the bed-cover by her left foot.

In a drawing by you of a mango and a knife - they are black and about life-size on a sheet of yellowish paper on to which dust has blown - the place began when you lay the fruit in the curve of the knife's blade. The paper became its own place at that moment.

The Renaissance notion of perspective, with its predilection for an outside view point, hid for many people during several centuries the really of painting-as-place. Instead, a painting was said to represent the "view" of a place.

Yet this was only theory. In practice the painters themselves knew better. Tintoretto, great late master of perspective, turned the theory on its head time and again.

In his *Carrying of the Body of Saint Mark* the painting as place has nothing to do with the perspective of the immense *piazza* with its arcades and marble paving stones, and everything to do with the haphazard pile of logs in the middle distance on which the saint was going to be cremated. From the brush strokes of those painted branches of wood everything else on the canvas stems- the fleeing figures, the camel's coat of hair, the lightening in the sky, the saint's foreshortened limbs.... Or, to put it another way, it is from the wood pile that the web of the whole colossal painting was spun.

And since Jacopo Robusti pursues us both as Tintoretto, here is another example. In his London *Susannah and the Elders* the painting-as-place did not begin with her incomparable body or with the artful mirror or with water coming up to her knee, no, it began in the strange artificial flowering hedge which she is facing and behind which the Elders hide.

When Jacopo, with a full brush, began touching the hedge's flowers, he was arranging the place to which everything else had to come. The hedge took over as host and master.

Working alone, the painter knows that far from being able to control the painting from the outside, he has to inhabit it and find shelter in it. He works by touch in the dark. (The all-seeing Master was a teacher's legend.)

In your studio the light, towards evening, changes, and the canvasses change more than anything else which can be seen. (Far more than the crumpled paper with the two words). Exactly what changes in them? It is hard to say.

Their temperature perhaps and their air pressure. For they do not change in this light like paintings.

Each changes like a familiar terrain outside a door. Like places.

How does a painter work in the dark? He has to submit. Often he has to turn around in circles instead of advancing. He prays for collaboration from somewhere else. (In your case from the wind, the termites, the desert sand.)


He builds a shelter from which to make forays so as to discover the lie of the land. And all this he does with pigment, brush strokes, rags, a knife, his fingers. The process is highly tactile. Yet what he is hoping to touch is not normally tangible. This is the only real mystery. This is why some – like you – become painters.

When a painting becomes a place, there is a chance that the face of what the painter is looking for will show itself there. The longed-for "return look" can never come directly to him, it can only come through a place.

If the face does come, it is partly pigment, coloured dirt: partly drawn forms always being corrected: but, most importantly, it is the becoming, the coming-towards-being of what he was searching for. And this becoming is not yet –and, in fact, never will be– tangible, just as the bison on the walls of the canvas were never edible.

What any true painting touches is an absence –an absence of which, without the painting, we might be unaware.

And that would be our loss. The painter's continual search is for a place to welcome the absent. If he finds a place, he arranges it and prays for the face of the absent to appear.

As you know, the face of the absent can be the backside of a mule! 

There are no hierarchies, thank God.

Has something been saved?

This time, yes.

What?

A part, Miguel, of what begins again and again.

# Miquel Barceló 1987 1997



## Exhibition notes

The *Miquel Barceló, 1987-1997* exhibition is designed as a journey through the main thematic series which the artist has produced in this period, and in which one may see Miquel Barceló's two main concerns: on the one hand, his obsession with the organic and the material dimensions of creation —into which he incorporates the pulse of time and life; on the other hand, his meditation on the meaning of art and on the role of the artist— on painting as a manifestation of meaning.

As prologue to the exhibition, we present here some works already shown at the *Barceló, Barcelona* show (Casa de la Caritat, 1987), to which this first room leads directly.

All these paintings have a strong autobiographical component; in them the artist paints himself in the places that have made him who he is: museums, cinemas, libraries... The paintings include both the memory of the books he has read, the films he has seen and the hours he has spent in the Louvre, and the craft of the painter who gropes in the dark until he reveals the material qualities of painting, which are at the same time its starting point and its mystery.

For Miquel Barceló the eighties are years of intense search and constant experimentation. He moves very often from country to country and from studio to studio, making of perpetual travel a constant in his life. Whatever chance happening may be the beginning of a new discovery.

# Miquel Barceló

1987

1997

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Little by little, Barceló's painting rids itself of anecdotes and narrative.

Slowly, cleansed of the objects which formed it, memory manifests as deposit, as sediment, as a magma from which to paint. The figure of the painter himself has become engulfed in this process, as a result of which his constant image is no longer necessary on the canvas. And everything turns into a big soup, into a broth in which, depending on how it boils, the ingredients float or hide. The original whirlpool capturing time.

The traces of the objects are only holes which may be seen as containers or as releasers: as places where the past is accumulated, if we look at their concavity; or as primal moments of an uncertain future, if we stress their convexity.

If on his pilgrimage through the museums of the world he discovered Caravaggio, Tintoretto, Velázquez and Goya, and having been influenced by them, incorporated their use of chiaroscuro and perspective in his paintings, now he is interested, above all, in working with matter and light as transparencies.

# Miquel Barceló

1987  
1997

3

First the Sahara, then the Sahel. In 1988 Barceló travels to Africa for the first time and from then on Africa will become part of his imagery.

The landscape -the light, the land, the sky- and the people open radically new perspectives for him. Excursions through his own internal geography -the main theme of the paintings we have seen until now- give way to external horizons, to landscapes perceived almost as cosmogonic events in which matter is born time and again before his eyes.

Miquel Barceló experiences the desert, or, as Blai Bonet says, "experiences himself in the desert".

The white paintings reveal a new dimension of the pleasure with which Barceló works with the pictorial paste. The colours are trapped under the first coats of the paintings. They are reduced to the buried patina that only reappears in isolated fragments of the painting. The white cleanses the initial anecdotes of colour and becomes present as the colour which contains all colours.

# Miquel Barceló

1987  
1997

4

The desert provokes a longing for the river. The Niger is reborn each year with the rainy season and becomes the vital artery of the villages assembled on its banks.

The canvases which Miquel Barceló dedicates to the rains have an aftertaste of the purifying deluge. The brush, transformed into a knife, transmits to the spectator the intensity of the moment, the importance of the water which will make life possible around the black lake one more year. The cracking apart of the earth due to persistent drought finds an equivalent in the desmemberment the rain provokes in the sky.

Africa is once again the primaeval moment. Africa becomes the place.

After the rains, boats once again shape Barceló's African landscape. The elegance of their design, together with the frailty with which they glide on the river, speak of the different forms of human life which surround Barceló during his stays in Mali. Once again, the pictorial paste of his paintings is tinged by the matter the river carries with the strength of its current.

The boats full of people hint both at the frailty and the wisdom of the lives of men in nature. The painting immortalizes this renewed gesture of survival.



# Miquel Barceló

1987

1997

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Since 1988 Miquel Barceló has returned to Africa every year. First Ségou, and then the Dogon Country are incorporated into the circuit of Barceló's journeys with the changing seasons: Farrutx in the summer till mid-autumn; Mali in the winter; and Paris from spring to the following summer.

The long stays in Mali allow him to combine the note-books and the works on paper with the small canvases. The different mediums are adequate to the diversity of that daily life of which he becomes a part during a few months every year.

The instantaneous quality of the paintings in this part of the exhibition contrasts with the multiplicity of artistic resources in play. The artist seems to think all the materials featuring in the chosen scenes must necessarily be suited to their representation. So it is that slime, straw, branches, leaves, stones... all become a part of painting and transmit the essence sought for in their representation.

Everything is material for painting and drawing, everything is nourishment for the painter's tirelessly attentive eyes.

# Miquel Barceló

1987

1997

6

The work on paper comes neither before nor after the big canvases. It is the result of another moment, another situation. The drawings are of rapid execution; they are nourishment for the memory, the interiorization of a world which will never stop to be painted. The work on paper, with its immediacy, is the work which most resembles painting with a branch on wet mud.

Barceló returns again and again to the same images. All of them alike and each one unique. Seen together they well exemplify the artist who understands the reality in front of him while he works.

In this room the need to pay attention to small differences becomes apparent in order to unravel the vital rhythm which links some works to others.

He himself does this when he paints big canvases with African themes in his studios in Mallorca or Paris. It is his memories and his drawings which allow him to shape the Africa he has been interiorizing. In fact, Barceló has always rejected photography so as not to confuse the memory, which is made more of sensations than of mechanical precisions.

# Miquel Barceló

1987

1997

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For Miquel Barceló studios are not only the physical place for his work but also the matrix where painting is generated. The studio confirms his position as a painter and enables him to become part of the history of painting. The studio as painting creates a place for accumulated artistic memory.

The studios are collector's studies. Deposits of sensations. Store rooms of life-on-the-watch.

The paintings of studios allow for a survey of Barceló's imagery. All kinds of models are clustered in small but dense spaces. Full of superimposed objects, the sculptures there reach us as pictorial images, the books seem sketches, the canvases against the wall give depth to the space. Nothing is what it seems. Once again the interior geography seeks to locate itself in a place that will make it comprehensible: the space of art.

In the studios one may trace the presence of the artist even if his image has disappeared from the centre of the painting. His interest in matter is one of the traits most evident in this series of canvases, perhaps because it is also the activity which justifies the studio: painting eager to be painted.

# Miquel Barceló

1987  
1997

∞

On the border between his interior geography and the physical presence of the exterior world, Barceló discovers the image of the other. The series of portraits is a constant search for what is hidden beneath appearances.

He himself, his own image, appears now next to that of the people who surround him. Oil paintings to represent his European friends, compressed layers of paper —as through they were sculptures— to portray his African friends, and in other cases, terracottas...

Whenever possible he begins with the presence of a model. He searches with the brushes for the singularity of each person. He mixes the special features he discovers in the face of the person portrayed with what he knows about him/her. An important part of his African experience is concentrated in the portraits of his Dogon friends. An important part of his European experience struggles to find a place in the features of his European friends.

# Miquel Barceló

1987

1997

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In the same way as the studio was the artist's place, the *taules* (tables) are places on which life is celebrated. They are the places of sacrifice; places of ritual; places where everything starts anew.

It is on the table that dead animals show their entrails, the place where the Greeks already suspected the secret of the great mysteries was hidden. It is on the table that the past becomes food for the future.

With this series of paintings Miquel Barceló connects with the tradition known in the history of painting under the name of *still lifes*. And yet, there is so much life gathered on these slaughter tables that, once again, there is a confusion between what feeds us physically and what permits us to live as human beings amongst other human beings.

The *place* of the soup has been replaced by the *place* of the *taula* on which land and sea animals coexist with vegetables and fruit, paper and knives... everything mixed as though it were an imaginary digestive process. Objects and food which will soon exceed the surface of the table and occupy the whole painting, like in his painting *De Rerum Natura*, which seems to extend beyond its frame, as in his first paintings of the desert.

# Miquel Barceló

1987  
1997

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The *plaza* is a key element in the Mediterranean cultural tradition. The Greek agoras inaugurated the space of collective life, already free from the weight of institutional representation in the palaces and temples.

Miquel Barceló is well aware of the continuity between these village squares and the bullring where the superiority of man must be reaffirmed.

The *plaza* in itself is an artificial space created for performances, but inside it life and death are a bleak reality. It is not only a simple simulation. In the naked reality suggested by the *plaza*, Barceló, like Picasso, Matisse, Miró and so many others, finds the familiarity of art.

The battle arena provokes the reaction of the brush, in the same way as the bull-fight requires music, blindfolded horses and gaudy dress.

In Barceló's paintings the *plaza* concentrates all the strength of the pictorial paste; even if the centre is almost void, the colours invade the rows round the bullring, where the tension between man and animal is expressed.

In the centre of the arena there is a whirlpool the colour of both *soup* and *taula*. The serenity of the moment is achieved with the ranging of the traces towards the steps.

# Miquel Barceló

1987  
1997

11

In this space you may see another selection of drawings on paper created between 1992 and 1997.

The quality the drawing has of connecting the artist to daily reality is accentuated with the preparation of the paper he wants to paint on. Recovering, in a way, the natural ridged walls of cave painting, we recognize in these drawings a gesture integrating signs in a background more suitable to nature than art.

As vestiges of a constant reinterpretation, fruit, tubers, animals and persons accompany Barceló in the articulation of certain organic compositions which represent all of us. The new *Mapes de carn* (Maps of Flesh) can already be intuited in these drawings.

In the same way as Barceló uses river sediments and pigments discovered at random to paint, the local animals also leave their imprint on the paper. Many drawings begin around the holes the termites have been making in the paper and which remind us today of the big white canvases at the end of the eighties, in which some cultural craters were covering the first memories of our Western historical tradition.

# Miquel Barceló

12

1987  
1997

From death to sacrifice. From the *taula* to crucifixion. From the process implicit in nature to history's interpretation of it.

*Setze penjats* (Sixteen hanged), *Ball de penjats* (Dance of the hanged), *Ball de carn* (Dance of the Flesh), *Somàlia 92* (Somalia 92) are singular moments in a pictorial search engaged with the most intimate aspects of painting. Barceló is not a reporter of events. He is an integral part of the events. Because they happen to him also. The hanged are present to him to the point that they damage the canvas that will be their medium.

In all these images the human figure is deliberately absent. Only a dog is present at the scene in *Somàlia 92*. Only the remains of what once was survives in *In extremis*.

The dramatic weight of these paintings demonstrates once again the strength of art in front of reality. The expressive power of painting which incarnates the human experience of events. The power of the sought image over the mere anecdotic reproduction of events.



# Miquel Barceló

1987

1997

13

This room houses Miquel Barceló's recent work. The bottom of the sea seems to accompany the bottom of the earth. All of them are landscapes in which animals and vegetables are totally integrated into the pictorial surface where they appear. They are an inseparable part of the surroundings in which Barceló situates primordial life; the life in which everything born and growing under the sun participates.

The fact that fruit and vegetables always appear in slices suggests that they are completed with the earth around them and that they are not complete until they root themselves in a wider surrounding. Even the human figures hinted at seem to be natural accidents, part of a primaeval landscape.

The colours, obtained once again by superimposing different coats of paint mixed with earths, continue to constitute the crust of the canvas on which small accidents redepict the small landscapes of memory.

# Miquel Barceló

1987  
1997

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Miquel Barceló's pictorial activity very often has a strong sculptural resonance. The thickness of the paint, as well as the denial of the limits imposed by the canvas, contribute to his interest in sculpture.

Terracottas, ceramics and bronzes add new perspectives to some of the recurrent themes in Barceló's work: mountains of books next to bunches of brushes, animals, portraits and self-portraits, skulls and skeletons, stony looking figures that evoke indistinctly either vegetables or animals...

The pictorial paste itself is turned into a sculptural theme. Miquel Barceló's eye doesn't get lost in his 3-dimensional works, only now he seems to combine the different perspectives and the numerous possibilities which were already visible in his paintings.

The malleability of the terracotta accompanies the soberness of bronze and creates a favourable surrounding for the book for blind people, which also combines the frailty of the paper with the orographic depth of a hidden meaning.

The note-books are another constant in Barceló's work: the frenetic writing of everything that happens around him and to him, and that may even happen to us.



1957

Miquel Barceló is born on January 8 in Felanitx, Mallorca.

His first contact with art comes through his mother, a painter in the Mallorquin landscape tradition.

1967

His childhood and adolescence are spent in Felanitx, until he graduates from high school with a degree in the sciences.

1974

Barceló travels for the first time to Paris, where he visits the exhibition *Jean Paulhan à travers ses peintres*. He discovers the work of Paul Klee, Fautrier, Wols and Dubuffet, as well as *Art brut*, in which he feels a special interest.

Attends the School of Arts and Crafts in Palma, Mallorca, where he takes classes in drawing and modelling.

First individual exhibition, in the Galeria d'Art Picarol, Cala d'Or, Mallorca.

1975

Enters the Sant Jordi Art School in Barcelona. Stays enrolled until spring of 1978, but only attends classes during the first few months.

Reads extensively from diverse works, such as the writings of Breton and the surrealists, *The White Manifesto* by Lucio Fontana, and *The Social History of Literature and Art* by Arnold Hauser.

In the field of painting, is interested in the work of Fontana and Rothko.



**1976**

Participates in the happenings and the protest actions of the group *Taller Llunàtic*, e.g., the action against the *Salón de Otoño*. The *Taller* edits the magazine *Neó de Suro* and No. 6 is headed by Barceló, under the title of *Jeroglífics muts* (Silent Hieroglyphics).

*Cadaverina 15*, first solo exhibition in a museum. In this exhibition, as in many other projects realized during this period, metamorphosis plays a central role.

**1977**

In summer, Barceló joins the ecological and anarchist groups occupying the island of Dragonera, in an attempt to prevent its urbanization.

Once this objective is achieved, the group leaves the island, with the exception of Barceló, who stays two weeks longer. He lives in the lighthouse and works with materials he finds *in situ*.

First exhibition in Barcelona, in the *Galeria Mec-Mec*, with the members of *Neó de Suro*. There he meets Javier Mariscal, who will become one of his best friends in the city.

**1978**

Exhibition in the *Galeria Sa Pleta Freda*, Son Cervera (Mallorca), of numerous drawings, small boxes, and canvases

covered with paint incorporating organic elements. For the first time a gallery buys a painting and makes sales to collectors.

Second trip to Paris, where he visits the collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne. He is impressed by the works of American Abstract Impressionism. In the Louvre, he is primarily interested in baroque painting.

## 1979

Visits exhibition commemorating 50 years of MoMA, in the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Madrid. Particularly attracted by works of Pollock, De Kooning, Ryman and Cy Twombly.

Experiments with the use of large amounts of paint on canvases exposed to the sun and open air, in order to produce spontaneous reactions--oxidation, shrinkage, cracking -that reveal the underlying layers.



## 1980

His interest in Pollock prompts him to use the technique of *dripping* on canvases he then covers with white paint.

Completes a series of painted books and one of iron that he will exhibit the following year in the Galeria Metrònom.

Visits Joan Miró in his studio in Palma.

Illustrates a book by Andreu Morell, *l'Ésser fosc*.

Relocates to Barcelona in a studio on Calle Cotoners. In addition to Javier Mariscal, his colleagues are the painters Lluís Claramunt, Bruno Fonseca, Xavier Grau, Broto and García Sevilla.

The first figurative images appear in his paintings: columns of smoke, books, zoomorphic figures.



**1981**

His work is consolidated around a return to a kind of figuration, in which zoomorphic motifs dominate.

Makes collages with discarded cartons and drawings that he then pastes on top of each other, mounting them on canvas.

Exhibition "Other Figurations", curated by María Corral, in the Fundació "La Caixa" in Madrid. There, Rudi Fuchs see his work and invites him to participate in the Kassel Documenta the following year.

**1982**

First individual exhibition of a foreign resident, in the Galerie Axe Art Actuel in Toulouse. There he meets the gallery owner Yvon Lambert and Jean-Louis Froment, director of the capcMusée in Burdeos. Froment buys various works for the museum.

Only Spanish artist invited to Documenta VII in Kassel, where he meets Joseph Beuys, Lucio Amelio, Francesco Clemente, Dokoupil, Walter Dahn, Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat. He establishes a friendship with Basquiat.

Lucio Amelio and Yvon Lambert propose individual exhibitions in their galleries in Naples and Paris respectively.

Trips to Italy, Greece, Turkey and Austria.



BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES (1983-1987)

1983

Barceló resides in Naples for five months, preparing an exhibition for the gallery of Lucio Amelio. He uses ashes from Vesuvius and local pigments similar to those in the frescos of Pompeii. He also completes a monumental painting, *Lombra che trema* (The Shadow That Trembles), 300 x 600cm), which the following year will form part of the exhibition *Terrae Motus* in the Villa Campolieto.

Exhibition in Paris, at the Galerie Yvon Lambert, where among other things he shows a group of paintings of libraries. He meets Bruno Bishofberger, who buys most of the work in the show. He also meets Bob Calle, who acquires the painting *Le Jugement of Salomon* (The Judgement of Solomon) for the Société d'Amis du Musée National d'Art Moderne MNAM del Centre Georges Pompidou.

Bob Calle proposes that Barceló paint in an old abandoned church on the rue d'Ulm.

Travels to New York where he meets Andy Warhol, who does a portrait of him.

Visits Cy Twombly in Rome and for a time sees him regularly.

1984

Barceló goes to the Vila Nova de Milfontes (Portugal), where he spends four months with Javier Mariscal. Works in the



open air, mixing the paint with sand, algae and other material found on the beach.

Meets Cécile Franken, who he will marry years later.

Upon his return to Paris, moves into his studio-church on the rue d'Ulm. There he completes a series of canvases on the Louvre.

Exhibits for the first time in the gallery of Bruno Bischofberger, in Zurich. Bischofberger becomes his art dealer.

He is invited to *Aperto* in the Venice Biennale, where he meets with Enzo Cucci and Francesco Clemente.

During the summer he returns to Mallorca where Jean Michel Basquiat visits him. He paints *L'amour fou* (Mad Love).

Completes the cover of the book of poems, *Necrópsia* by Andreu Vidal.

Kynaston McShine chooses Barceló to be part of an exhibition at the MoMA (New York), in a show presenting the most interesting artists of the moment.

## 1985

Leo Castelli visits Barceló in the church on the rue d'Ulm and offers to represent him in the United States.

Exhibitions commissioned by Jean Louis Froment in the capcMusée d'Art Contemporain in Burdeos, in the Palacio de Valázquez in Madrid and at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

The church on the rue d'Ulm is demolished. Barceló moves his studio in Paris to the rue de Breteuil.



The photographer Jean Marie del Moral takes a series of photographs of Barceló in his studio, making a continuous record of his work up to this point.

## 1986

Barceló buys an old hunting lodge in Cap Farrutx (Mallorca) and sets it up as residence and studio.

The Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo acquires *Big Spanish Dinner*, now owned by the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

During the summer he paints, at the request of Pep Subirós, the copula, 12 meters in diameter, of the new theater space for the Mercat de les Flors.

In November he goes to New York where he has his first exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery. He rents a studio in Greenwich Village, where he works until the following summer. After a series of paintings centering on the theme of light, his work is stripped of anecdote and narrative.

The Ministeri de Cultura awards him the Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas.



## 1987

In July he leaves New York and returns to Paris, where he rents a new studio on the rue David d'Angers.

In the old Casa de la Caritat in Barcelona, the exhibition "Barceló, Barcelona" is presented. It demonstrates the relation between different works by Barceló and various objects from the city's museums.

The Galeria Eude (Barcelona) presents a compilation of photographs of Barceló taken by Jean Marie del Moral. Some of

them also appear in the book *Le temps du peintre* published the same year by the Musée de la Ville de Niort.



### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES (1988-1992)

**1988**

First trip to Africa, with Javier Mariscal, Pilar Tomás and Jordi Brió. Having crossed the desert, he stays in Gao (Mali). There he meets the sculptor Amahigueré Dolo, who soon becomes a collaborator and friend. The stay extends to half a year and during this time Barceló travels through Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso.

Completes numerous works on paper using local pigment and river sediment.

Upon returning to Europe, the landscapes and the mirages of the desert become central images in his paintings.

He begins to divide his time between Paris, Mallorca and Mali.

**1989**

The Galeria Dau al Set in Barcelona presents a selection of works on paper and small canvases made in Africa. At the same time, Bruno Bischofberger publishes the book *Miquel Barceló in Mali*, which gathers a wide selection of his works on paper. The

book also includes some of the texts Barceló wrote during his first stay in Mali.

Visits Japan for the opening of the exhibition *Spanish Art Today*.

Makes a poster protesting the construction of an urban complex on the beach Sa Canova (Mallorca), a campaign in which he obtains the collaboration of Tàpies, Sicilia, Mariscal, Broto and Campano.

Spends the winter in Ségou (Mali). Stays in Africa six months, during which time he visits the Ivory Coast.

## 1990

Completes the set for *Retablo de Maese Pedro* by Manuel de Falla for a production directed by Jean-Louis Martinoty, in the Opéra Comique de Paris, on February 13.

Stays for two weeks in a hut in the Swiss alps, at an elevation of four thousand meters. He paints a series of landscapes whose theme is the glaciers.

Meets the writer Hervé Guibert, who becomes a good friend.

During the summer, Guibert visits Barceló in Mallorca while the artist works on a series of paintings on the theme of bullfighting.

The French and Spanish police seize 35 works falsely attributed to Barceló.

Travels again to Mali.



## 1991

Traverses by canoe, with Amahigueré Dolo, the 1500 kilometers separating the Ségou de Gao from the Niger River.



Upon returning to Europe, he paints a series of canvases whose central motifs are the large canoes of the Niger and the life of the river.

Participates in the exhibition *El museo del Prado visto por doce artistas contemporáneos*, organized by Francisco Calvo Serraller. Coinciding with this exhibition, Barceló delivers a lecture called "Pradoxismo," which is published by the Asociación of Amigos of the Prado.

Together with Sicilia and Broto, Barceló participates in a commemorative exhibition on the occasion of the 400th birthday of San Juan de la Cruz. It is organized by the poet José Miguel Ullán, titled *Al aire de su vuelo*, and is celebrated in the Pabellón Mudéjar de la Exposición Universal in Seville. During his stay in Andalucía, Barceló meets the flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla, for whom he will do the cover of the CD *Potro de rabia y miel*. He also meets the singer Rancapino and the matador Curro Romero.

Bruno Bischofberger edits the series of bullfights with texts by the Guatemalan writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa and photographs by Lucien Clergue.

Begins to work in his new studio in Paris in the neighborhood of Marais. During the following two years, a large part of his work will be dedicated to still lifes that, on some occasions, will become the large *taules digestives* (digestive tables).

Guibert, in the terminal phase of AIDS, commits suicide in December in Paris.

In ARCO (Madrid) Bruno Bischofberger presents Barceló's first sculptures in bronze.

Exhibition in the First Gallery (Moscow), where he meets young Russian artists.

Barceló marries Cécile Franken. Shortly afterwards their daughter Marcel.la is born.

Makes the poster for the Festival d'Automne de París.

Bruno Bischofberger publishes *Too Far From Home*, by Paul Bowles, a story inspired by the life of Barceló in Gao, with illustrations by the painter.

Collaboration with Evgen Bavcar, writer and blind photographer, on *Les tentes demontées ou le monde inconnu des perceptions*, an erotic book in Braille, with lithographs and prints in relief, published in January 1993 by Item éditions.

Upon returning to Mali, stays with Gogolí in his house and studio (Dogon Country, Mali). Beginning with the some accidental episodes, he experiments with the participation of termites in his works on paper.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES (1993-1997)



1993

A film about Barceló's work, by Jean-Marie del Moral, is presented in Paris. Filmed in Mali, Paris and Mallorca, it covers the different creative stages of the artist.



Begins a series of portraits on canvases whose surfaces are modeled with metal structures: of Cécile, Bischofberger, Evgen Bavcar, Castor Seibel ...

Visits the caves of Altamira during a seminar on the last fifty years of Spanish art, organized by the Universidad Internacional Menéndez y Pelayo (Santander). The visit reaffirms his interest in painting on canvases in relief.

Extensive series treating the artists' studios.

#### **1994**

The Whitechapel Art Gallery in London organizes an important retrospective, *Miquel Barceló: 1984-1994*. Commissioned by Enrique Juncosa, the exhibition will be presented at the beginning of the following year in the IVAM in Valencia.

Another stay in Mali, where he does a series of drawings in relief and others on paper chewed through by termites.

In Madrid, he presents a new series of sculptures and paintings in relief.

During the summer in Mallorca he begins a series of still lifes, *In Extremis*, and completes the large painting *Ball de la carn* (Dance of the Flesh, 285 x 725 cm).

#### **1995**

Participates in the Venice Biennale. Exhibits in the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, where he presents *Ball de la carn* along with various sculptures and pieces from terra cotta made during his last stay in Mali.

Shows the portraits in the Bruno Bischofberger Gallery in Zurich.

Illustrates the cover of the new CD of the singer Rancapino.

## 1996

Another trip to Mali, where he does large-format portraits, on paper, of his Dogonese friends.

His second child, Joaquim, is born.

La Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume and the Centre Georges Pompidou each present exhibitions of Barceló's work.

Begins a series of paintings inspired by deep-sea views.

Travels to Egypt.

At the end of the year he stays in the workshop of the ceramist Jeroni Ginard in Artà where he experiments with the traditional techniques of terra cotta and ceramics.

## 1997

Travels again to Mali where for the first time he paints medium-sized canvases, mixing earth, mud and natural pigments with the paint.

In Paris, does a portrait of John Berger. Afterwards, Barceló visits him in his house in the French Saboya.

During the summer, alternates between painting and ceramics made in the workshop of Jeroni Ginard.

Travels to Patagonia on the occasion of the exhibition in the Centro Recoleta in Buenos Aires.

Upon returning to Mallorca, continues working intensely in ceramics, producing large pieces which are then cast in bronze.

