

Miquel Barceló

1987
1997

1

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.

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.

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.



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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.



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'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.

Miquel Barceló

1987
1997

LIST OF FILMS

Monitor 1

In this video programme, certain complementary information is provided concerning the work of Miquel Barceló.

1. *Barceló and the cupola of the Mercat de les Flors, 1986*

A documentary produced by the City Council of Barcelona
29:30 min, colour.

This video documents the construction process of the cupola in the Mercat de les Flors. Miquel Barceló explains his project, together with the ideas -and doubts- that he had while creating this work. Of special interest are the images of the artist painting, as they give an impression of the gradual transformations achieved.

2. *Barceló's 'ateliers', 1992.*

Video directed by Jean Marie del Moral
Produced by Arkadin
26 min, colour.

Jean Marie del Moral's personal vision of the development of Barceló and his work. Using a survey of the artist's different 'ateliers' as a starting point, some of the most important stages in his development are shown.

3. *Miquel Barceló, 1995*

Video directed by Paloma Chamorro
Produced by TVE
57 min, colour

An interview in which Miquel Barceló explains his ideas regarding his own work and art in general. The painter's meticulous analysis, together with the camera shots which show details from his paintings, make up the most noteworthy part of this report.

MUSICAL SELECTION

Music is another artistic manifestation which went through a process of redefinition during the 1980s. Live sound became especially important at this time, and concerts turned more and more into performance events, while losing to some extent the socio-political dimension they had had in the previous decade.

With the aim of recreating the typical musical atmosphere of the 1980s, and following up suggestions made by Miquel Barceló himself, the following musical selection has been made, which can serve as a starting point not only for understanding the musical tastes of the artist himself, but also those of the artists of his generation during that period.

Iggy Pop

"Soldiers", 1980

"The Best of live", 1996

Rolling Stones

"Under Cover", 1983

"The Best of Rolling Stones", 1993

Ramones

"End of the Century", 1980

Lou Reed

"Transformer", 1982

"The blue mask", 1982

The Velvet Underground

"Another View", 1986