

Miquel Barceló: the canvas as landscape

Miquel Barceló (Felanitx, Mallorca, Spain, 1957 – Felanitx, Mallorca, Spain and Paris, France, currently)

Barceló's birthplace on the island of Mallorca, the deserts and rivers of Africa, the beaches of Portugal, his Paris studio might be the memories of places that these works try to transport us to, but it is, in fact, to the paintings themselves, in their materiality and energy, that the artist takes us. His paintings are themselves the destinations, just as he has said, "the space between things and the picture." A place to encounter in the present.

In reviewing three decades of Miquel Barceló's work, one therefore realizes chronology is not of the utmost importance. The experiences and travels that have fed his creativity over time are an ever-present influence, in fact, just like his paintings, they are layered in a timeless way. And although the exhibition is non-sequential, the earliest works (*Naufrage*, 1984 and *La Soupe*, 1983) behave as bookends, the starting and ending points of the presentation, aiming to bring a sense of containment instead of trajectory within this broad timeframe of Barceló's artistic output.

We are guided through the exhibition with excerpts of a text by Dore Ashton that she wrote for *Arte Español para el Exterior*, *Sociedad Estatal para la Acción Cultural Exterior* to accompany a retrospective of Miquel Barceló's work, with the addition of a few other supporting references, many quoting Barceló himself. While Ashton's impressions were informed by the paintings she saw at the time, this exhibition reverses the process, bringing some of Ashton's words back to visual life by putting them in context with the paintings and sculptures gathered here. In our way, we also celebrate her exceptional essay and, with this presentation, bring it full circle.

'My painting is the opposite of the virtual, it is the thing itself. There is nothing hyperrealist about it. It is the paint that creates this reality. The rapport of matter-support with the image that it presents, and no longer represents. All painting is in that space between things and the picture. It is life, and also the way of "un-dying"....'
- Interview with Marie-Laure Bernadec, Mallorca, September 1995, "Miquel Barceló", Editions Jeu de Paume, RMN, 1996, p. 124



“Naufrage”, 1984

With each departure, whether into the heart of a book or into the heart of Africa, Barceló’s imagination is engaged and rendered visual. He leaves traces everywhere, above all in the cascade of works – paintings, watercolors, pots, sculptures, scenic designs for theater, and even church decoration.

Barceló, too, knows that one should not leave a single place blank. One has to fill it with the representation of one’s own body in order to define what the body of the artist is capable of embracing. The study, the library, the boat, the ocean view from the window, the river. In sum, the spaces he occupies in the world for a definition of himself. - *“The Seine flows out at Felanitx”*, Marga Paz (excerpt) – *Miquel Barceló Paintings from 1983-1985*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1986



“La vie du fleuve”, 1988 / “Sec i mouille Nr.31”, 1988

The river carries intrinsically connected with itself the idea of the journey a space of time traveled through a given lapse of time. In Barceló’s case, it is not only a pictorial space, but also a space in the real sense of the word, with its topography and peculiarities of terrain – a dynamic which conditions his work and lifestyle. In fact, as the nomad that he is, Barceló moves from city to city, from studio to studio... and in this way he lives from fragment to fragment.... - *“The Seine flows out at Felanitx”, Marga Paz (excerpt) – Miquel Barceló Paintings from 1983-1985, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1986*



Untitled, 1994
“Vendeuse de bananes”, 2004
“Pene-Dà”, 1997

For long stretches after his initial trip to Africa in 1988, Barceló made liberal use of earth pigments, ocher, and burnt umber, that inevitably recalled the ambiance he encountered both in settlements and in the deserts. (He had, over a period of eight months, made a grueling itinerary in which he crossed the Sahara from Algeria to Gao.) During the trip he had also documented his days in sketch books and journals in which he recorded not only landscapes but human activities....

‘I very much like the gestures of the people selling and the gestures of the people looking and buying – it’s a real ballet.’ – Enrique Juncosa, Op. cit.,p.IV



“L’horizon chimérique”, 1989

Barceló was preoccupied with making metaphors for the desert – white canvases in which the subject, as he said, was light itself.

‘The light in the desert is so intense that things disappear, and the shadows are more intense than the things themselves... what is not has more intensity than what is.’ – Enrique Juncosa, “The Earthly Cycles”, p.IV, Miquel Barceló, Obra sobre papel, 1979-1999, MNCARS, Madrid, 1999



“Animal de 34 anys”, 1992
“Projecte de Crucifixió Nr.2”, 1992

Such an interest in the particular matter of particular places is a natural consequence of Barceló’s concern with natural processes and life cycles.

‘... how the jungle is constantly in a state of change, of how things live and die in unison, the living live on the dying; saplings grow from rotting trees, ants form colonies from the produce of a carcass – there is constant replenishment.’ – Tony Godfrey, Miquel Barceló, Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, 2001, p.9



"Brots i garroves", 2010
"Pintura peristaltica", 1991
"Projecte d'encuadrament Nr.3", 1992

Barceló has also incorporated vegetal materials in the thick matter of his paint, and sometimes even the fruits and vegetables themselves – a literalism he uses to invoke paradox.... His attention to textures of the world is compulsive....



*“Cartel de toros”, 1990
Untitled, 1990 / Untitled, 1990
“Monumental”, 2020-2021*

‘As in bullfighting, I believe, one doesn’t paint with ideas. The painting happens outside ideas, in contradiction to ideas even, generating ideas. That is why such silent art forms spawn so many words. This is where painting and bullfighting resemble each other, in the verbosity which accompanies them, as though their own silence was so unbearable that it needed pasodobles and infinite pages. Exorcisms for the bedazzled. After all, it is a simple exercise, like a bird eating ants from a skull.’ - Miquel Barceló quoted in ‘Miquel Barceló 1987-1997’, exh. Cat., Barcelona 1998, p. 112



*“Cabra”, ca.1993
Untitled VII, 1994 / Untitled IV, 1994
“Ligne Noir”, 1998*

The same preoccupation with the nature of matter he manipulates can be found when Barceló works with the third dimension.... an extension of his usual practices on the picture plane. That is why there are frequent allusions in all commentary on his work to the difficult definitions: are the paintings really bas-reliefs or are they paintings? Barceló clearly does not care. Call them what you will. He will continue on his way pulling up from undifferentiated matter his own evaluations of materials and beings, and establishing his own nomenclature.

‘It is not for the use of the holes made in my canvases and papers by termites that I paint here, nor is it for the patina of dust left on all my canvases as well as my books, clothes, etc. Nor is it for my models, for the people, the donkeys, the papayas... all that can be found elsewhere. Is there something here that can’t be found anywhere else? Not sure. Nor is it for the difficulties either. In Paris or New York, the difficulties are enormous and are the same. It is to make paintings, one painting that has meaning, that gives a meaning to all that.’ - Miquel Barceló, Gogoly, Mali February 29, 2000



Untitled, 1995
“Eugène en chemise blanche”, 1994

Yes, the Paris studio in the Marais – once a working-class quarter of Paris, and one of the most active sectors during the troubles of 1968 – bespeaks the artist’s temperament. Huge, cavernous, divided into areas that the painter has inhabited for specific purposes, this studio has struck many commentators as either a labyrinth of mythological dimensions, or the caves that used to house prophets and mystics. There are islands of order, as in the room in which Barceló’s many notebooks are neatly stacked, and great archipelagos of seeming disorder where the artist creates the vast grottoes he needs for whatever techniques he is using, whether sculpture or paintings so charged with matter that they become bas-reliefs. There is even a space near a large window where Barceló has placed an old-fashioned easel. When he paints portraits in Paris, he does so in the most conventional of ways: facing his sitter and working in the same position as any master in the history of art.



“La soupe”, 1983

‘I think that, through the shitty thickness of my paintings, through the superposition of material and these strange formless blends, through this paste that I don’t always control, through the secret alchemy of the materials, I swallow, I hold in all of my cultural attainments and obsessions. That is how the scenes of soups which often recur in my work combine the active and organic effect of soup itself with this troubling metaphor of painting as matter. Some of my paintings, more or less hard to come to a head, end “in soup”, in a circular drawing of a plate. The soup represents a little bit the image of cultural chaos; it is the last image to create when nothing else is possible. And through this sort of pleasure that makes me stir the thick materials at length in overflowing pots – for I cannot work well unless I have an excess of elements and materials around me -, I memorize a great deal of iconographic and sensual emotions which will appear in the painting.’ - Miquel Barceló quoted in “Romance”, Jean-Louis Froment (excerpt) - Miquel Barceló Paintings from 1983-1985, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1986

All texts and references unless otherwise noted:
“Barceló”, Dore Ashton, catalog published by
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