

The Young Years of Miquel Barceló

Vicenç Altaió. Director of Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona

The works of Miquel Barceló during his youth already contain the elements that will later characterise the career of this artist of reference who, very soon, was chosen and celebrated as a “heroic spirit” of the return to painting. For this, Barceló did not hesitate to immerse himself in the deepest instincts, exploring unseen worlds in a personal struggle without respite, and resurrecting still lifes in which everything has its space. With the work of the Majorcan artist the classical themes of baroque painters reappear, along with aesthetic battles of the artists of the first half of the 20th century. Barceló thus became, from his beginnings, a painter who has gone beyond the limits of his contemporaneity.

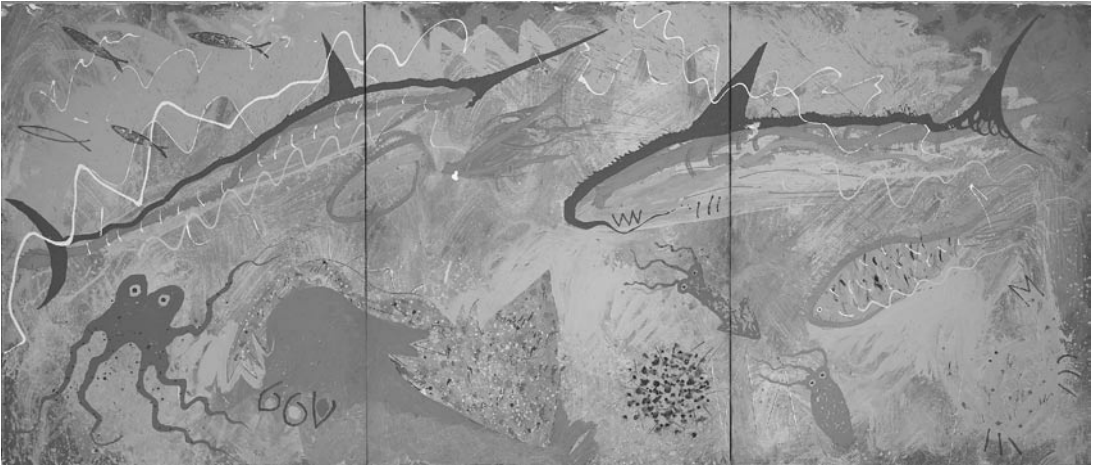
The performance of art, meaning and expressing “the spirit of the times” is notoriously brief. What was once considered equidistant may be, from today’s point of view, closer to the great past than to the immediate present day. Yet in the early work of those considered “benchmarks”, the seeds of what was emerging may always be perceived. In Arts Santa Mònica we have been pleased to exhibit the early work of Miquel Barceló, the youngest of those artists who emerged from the collision between the end of modernity and the dawn of post-modernity, and the first of them who were celebrated, here and there, as the “heroic spirit” of the return to painting.¹

The unseen, retroactive work of Barceló is shown at this exhibition. It is a work that back in its day very few were able to know, and it

constitutes the very matrix of his style. A style that, growing from the carcass of its precedent, is reborn, like its paintings, from the debris. It is the extreme madness of an artist who would portray himself not just as a learned academic, or a painter of heavenly landscapes, but as the one that, diving in the suburban depths of instincts, in search of wisdom, chose to be the urban dog-painter, the noble savage. In his personal, lonely death match, the rebel, rabid, asocial artist would have caused the pictorial surface to be reborn as the scene of an epic, cosmogonical battle between life and death, figuration and composition, culture and nature. In its extreme,¹ it means nothing is without, but within a space of aesthetic fight: still life resurrected.

With him, with young Barceló, many of the

1. Arts Santa Mònica presented a selection of the artist's work created in his youth in the exhibition “Barceló before Barceló. 1973-1982”, from 15th July to 26th September 2010.



Miquel Barceló, untitled, 1981.

classical themes of baroque artists appeared again in this fight, along with the hoarse voice of precedent artists – from Picasso to Twombly, from Pollock to Tàpies – who, in the limits of figuration and abstraction, had witnessed how the survival of painting was in question as useless. It is not so much that Barceló was considered an artist in the classical way, but the fact that, in his fight, what was classical became contemporary.

This story had begun in 1974, when the fodder generation of the late Franco dictatorship, the generation that had lived through May '68, started retreating from the submission of aesthetics to the political arena of the era, and, internationally, from the dry, sterile linguistic conceptual practice. Miquel Barceló, like many young people from the era, would experience with the same intensity the rebellious exploration of low culture from the urban depths (from comic books to drugs) and the integration of the artistic benefits of the avant-garde and radical art performance. It was a turbulent era, in which Rimbaud's young rebellion became a *statu quo* and a *totum revolutum*.

I first visited Barceló in Majorca in July 1978, while preparing an essay about the latest tendencies in Catalan poetry. I felt his radical performance with Josep Albertí, at the Catalan Culture Congress, was very close to the spirit. It was near some members of the magazine *Neon de suro* – which professed an anti-academic, marginal, radical subversion, an attack on the genius and a refusal of the “unique” piece of art, the charge and the vomit – that the early Barceló emerged. But he, still sharing these principles, would hatch from painting and from his own system. The poet Andreu Vidal told me his paintings would rot in the collector's houses. The poet and chemist Àngel Terrón studied inorganic life forms.

Barceló showed us a lot of works in white, all made with thick layers of a dense paint that he would pour, by way of post-drippings, on the surfaces. It was a premonition. He told us how the organic matter, once water evaporated, tended to consolidate in colourful lumps. His free association objectual poems would contrast with the manic distribution of hair pikes that he would spread on a substance. It was

a madman's cave, the place of a young man completely absorbed by painting. Extreme, he would dry his paintbrushes and paint in the few common objects that would solidify, such as cigarette packs, butts or the telephone directory. I was enthusiastic. I offered him the possibility to publish his work in the magazine *Èczema*, full of objectual metaphors, in an issue that would be the telephone directory. The day Barceló came to my place, months later, we had gathered piles of telephone directories for his performance, but instead he suggested we exhibited his art books. We placed the exhibition at the Sala Metrònom, in Barcelona, along with the "Tafal" collection of poetry books. Every time there is a big change in Barceló's work, books appear. One has got to read to be a savage. Thirty years later, Barceló suggested that we produce this catalogue, containing his works from those

days, in a telephone directory. The typical Barceló spirit remains the same.

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The fact that this exhibition follows the early Barceló's personal itinerary, his studios in Palma de Mallorca, the City of Evil, and in that southern Barcelona of the Ramblas, as well as his cross-border projection towards Toulouse – then called the Southern Axis – following the Route of Mysteries, the route taken by exiled Spaniards after the Spanish Civil War, the mythical linguistic space of the troubadour's poetry; and the fact that it established a new cultural model on a land with new art galleries is but an anchorage to what was once a milieu of emerging, explosive pressure.