

Press release

# Miquel Barceló

## *Grisailles*

8 October 2022—7 January 2023  
Opening Saturday 8 October 2022, 3—7pm

Thaddaeus Ropac  
Paris Pantin  
69, Avenue du Général Leclerc, 93500 Pantin



Miquel Barceló, *Taula goliàrdica*, 2021.  
Mixed media on canvas. 235 x 295 cm (92,52 x 116,14 in).

*Grisailles* is an exhibition of paintings by Mallorcan artist Miquel Barceló, featuring his new series of large-scale still lifes with sea creatures, flowers and bones in monochromatic hues. Taking place in the gallery's Pantin space, the exhibition will be punctuated by paintings of bulls and wild animals, all rendered in translucent layers of colour that pay homage to the tradition of *grisaille* painting.

One of Spain's most acclaimed contemporary artists, Barceló's practice is influenced by his Mallorcan surroundings, as well as his deep knowledge of the history of art. In the series on view in the exhibition, he draws on 17th-century Dutch painting and the Spanish *bodegón* to offer a new interpretation of still life painting that is anchored in his own relationship to the sea,

sustenance and the cycle of life. Reprising the genre's traditional codes, he bisects his canvases with life-sized tables, inviting visitors to participate in the curious banquet before them where they might contemplate their relationship with abundance.

Known for the richly textured, sedimented surfaces of his works, Barceló takes a different approach in this exhibition, adopting a variation on the traditional *grisaille* technique, where translucent layers of colour are applied over a monochromatic underpainting. The result is a group of paintings that are airier and more loosely composed than the artist's previous treatment of still lifes, allowing the grain of the canvas to show behind the thin layers of ink and acrylic red, pink, blue and yellow. The absence of relief and the blurred outlines of the objects depicted

by the artist give the paintings a sense of mystery and timelessness, suspending them somewhere between a dream and reality. Like an afterimage, they might evoke, as Barceló describes it, ‘a table from Pompeii [...] or the frozen ashes of things.’

Among the objects and creatures on display can be found a number of highly symbolic elements reminiscent of the *vanitas* genre that became popular in the Renaissance as a warning against overindulgence. Empty shells, skulls and open books act as *memento mori*, reminding viewers of their own mortality. They are contrasted by the vegetal elements on the tables: bouquets of flowers and dried palm leaves, which symbolise life and rebirth. Across the works on view, the feast is populated with creatures that the artist fishes himself on the island where he lives and works. Eels and octopi, shrimp and lobsters – they connect the scene to nature, suggesting a comment on the precarity of plenitude and on the value of a profound connection with the land.

*Music from far-away parties, today’s banquets and those from long ago – all on the same very long table. — Miquel Barceló*

At various points throughout the exhibition, improbable pairings of exotic creatures such as leopards and crocodiles, zebras and swordfish, replace the victuals on the table. ‘A combination as bizarre as the mixture of rum and coke,’ states Barceló, who has always resisted giving a definitive explanation for his use of animals as subjects throughout his work. Like fantastical heraldries carrying



Miquel Barceló, *Bodegón groc*, 2021.  
Mixed media on canvas. 190 x 240 cm (74.8 x 94.49 in).



Miquel Barceló, *El cabrón*, 2022  
Mixed media on canvas. 235 x 375 cm (92,52 x 147,64 in).

a multitude of mysterious associations, they complete the cornucopia, while at the same time challenging our assumption that the still life will depict inanimate objects. ‘It’s obvious that both elements are alive and well,’ says Barceló of the interlocking zebra and swordfish.

Barceló compares the act of painting to ‘breathing life’ into his canvases. Although less dense and layered than his previous work, this life infuses the delicate materiality of the *grisaille* paintings. As what he describes as the ‘dusty and sizzling’ charcoal mingles with vibrant pigment blown directly onto the canvas, elsewhere, gentle impasto accumulates like sea foam or lichen in the white underlay. Presence is balanced with absence, colour with monochrome, abundance with scarcity, life with death. Inviting viewers into this suspension, Barceló’s still lifes encourage us to engage with the renewal and decay at the heart of some of the most pressing questions of contemporary life.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue with an original essay by Alberto Manguel.

*Grisaille à l’espadon* (2022) from the artist’s new series of still lifes will be on view at the Louvre from 12 October 2022, as part of the unprecedented *Les Choses* exhibition dedicated to the genre.



### About the artist

Mallorcan artist Miquel Barceló is known for his relief-like mixed-media paintings, expressive bronze sculptures and ceramics. An artistic nomad, his fascination with the natural world has inspired richly textured canvases that evoke the earthy materiality of Art Informel, as well as compositions that study the effects of light and the ever-changing colours of the sea. Always experimenting with non-traditional materials such as volcanic ash, food, seaweed, sediments and homemade pigments, his works carry the traces of the fierce energy that animates his creative process.

In the mid 1980s, Barceló began eliminating narrative elements from his works, creating an increasingly unreal space punctuated by holes, cracks and transparencies. This process of simplification culminated in 1988, a year in which he travelled across the Sahara and created his white paintings. Relying on cultural and geographical diversity for inspiration, his time in Mali, where he established a studio, was a formative experience. For Barceló, painting is a visceral way of relating himself to the world and, as such, his art connects with the entire spectrum of the history of art, from prehistory to the present day. He expands the technical boundaries of representation, while remaining rooted in the grand tradition of painting, following in the footsteps of Picasso or Goya when representing bullfight scenes or Baroque painters when completing a commission for the Cathedral in Palma de Mallorca.

Born in 1957 in Felanitx, Mallorca, Barceló lives and works between Paris and Mallorca. In 1974, he was

admitted to Palma de Mallorca's Fine Arts School, before joining the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Barcelona. In 1976, he was involved in the happenings and protests of Taller Llunatic, an avant-garde conceptual group. Despite his deep-rooted connection to Spain, he draws inspiration from his time spent in various locations, having lived and worked in Barcelona, Portugal, Palermo, Paris, Geneva, New York, the Himalayas and West Africa. He gained international recognition after his participation in the São Paulo Biennial (1981) and documenta 7 in Kassel (1982). In 2009, he represented Spain at the 53rd Venice Biennale.

His work has been exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (1996); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (1999); Musée du Louvre, Paris, where he showed over 300 drawings illustrating Dante's *Divine Comedy* (2004); Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (2005); Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana Lugano, Switzerland (2006); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2008); CAC Málaga (2008); Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien, Vienna (2012); Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (2016); and Musée Picasso, Paris (2016). In 2021 his exhibition *Metamorphosis* was held at the Museo Picasso Málaga, followed by a retrospective at the National Museum of Art, Osaka, which travelled throughout Japan. Barceló's public commissions include large-scale sculptural installations for the Chapel of Saint Peter in the Cathedral of Palma de Mallorca (2001-06) and the Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Chamber at the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva (2008).

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