

Miquel Barceló

Grisailles: Banquet of Light

9 March—15 April 2023

Thaddaeus Ropac
Seoul Fort Hill
2F, 122-1, Dokseodang-ro, Yongsan-gu, Seoul



Miquel Barceló, *La petite bête*, 2021. Mixed media on canvas, 235 x 235 cm (92.52 x 92.52 in).
Photo: Charles Duprat

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

The exhibition *Grisailles: Banquet of Light* will present Miquel Barceló's new series of large-scale still lifes, featuring banquets made up of sea life, flowers and ossified creatures. Rendered in monochromatic hues overlaid with translucent layers of colour, the artist's new body of works pays homage to the tradition of *grisaille* painting. The exhibition, which takes place in Thaddaeus Ropac's Seoul space, will be punctuated by paintings of bulls, a symbol of strength.

For Miquel Barceló, one of Spain's most acclaimed contemporary artists, painting is a visceral way of relating himself to the world. Still life has been present in his work since the 1980s. The genre allows him to explore the objects and visual codes of the natural world around him, in particular the sea life that surrounds him on his native island of Mallorca, in the Mediterranean Sea. His practice is also grounded in a 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.

Throughout the exhibition, Miquel Barceló adopts a variation on the traditional *grisaille* technique, applying translucent layers of colour over a monochromatic underpainting. The result is an airy and loosely composed treatment of still life, which allows the grain of the canvas to show behind the thin layers of ink and acrylic in red, pink, blue and yellow. The soft outlines of the elements depicted by the artist evoke the interconnectedness of the natural world, but also its interdependence, as each creature plays a fundamental structural role in the fragile scenes. Somewhere between dream and reality, they look ready to float away if any one component should fall. Like afterimages, the paintings might evoke, as Miquel 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 Europe in the Renaissance as a warning against overindulgence. Knives, skulls and books act as *memento mori*, reminding viewers of their own mortality. They are contrasted by the vegetal elements: bouquets of flowers and bowls of fruit, which symbolise life and rebirth. Across the works on view, the feast is populated with the sea creatures – eels and octopi, shrimp and sea urchins –



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



Miquel Barceló, *Quadro color de gos que fuig*, 2022.
Mixed media on canvas, 205 x 248 cm (80.71 x 97.64 in).
Photo: David Bonet

that the artist encounters daily on the island where he lives and works. For Miquel Barceló, the intertwined creatures spilling out of one another suggest a comment on the precarity of plenitude and on the value of a profound connection with nature. An activist and advocate for the environment, Miquel Barceló encourages the viewer to revalorise the treasures we find on our tables.

One can imagine a bustling human presence around the set tables, but the human is absent. Yet the works are animated with a vital energy, challenging the assumption that still lifes always depict inanimate objects. ‘It’s obvious that they are alive and well,’ says the artist of his creatures. In one painting, a dog sits by the table, observing the scene hungrily, while in others, red grounds seem to be rolling in constant movement, like seas of wine teeming with swimming marine life. Elsewhere, bulls recall the animals painted on the walls of prehistoric caves, which have long been a source of fascination for Miquel Barceló. With their backs laid out like tables, they stare out at the viewer with one wide eye, as if inviting them to participate in the feast, which is poised between the conviviality of a living banquet and the fragility of a scene suspended in time and space.

Miquel Barceló compares the act of painting to ‘breathing life’ into his canvases. 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, harmony with precarity, abundance with scarcity, life with death. Inviting viewers into this suspension, the exhibition encourages 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 essay by Alberto Manguel, as well as reflections by the artist on each work illustrated.

About the artist

Mallorcan artist Miquel Barceló is known for his expressive paintings, bronze sculptures and ceramics. An artistic nomad, his fascination with the natural world has inspired richly textured canvases that evoke the earthy materiality of the Art Informel movement that developed in Europe in the 1940s and 50s. 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. Despite his deep-rooted connection to Spain, he draws inspiration from his time spent in various locations, notably in New York in the 1980s with Andy Warhol, and in Mali, West Africa, where he established a studio in the early 1990s. There, he was introduced to the ancient Dogon earthenware methods, and began working with clay. Miquel Barceló's practice connects with the entire spectrum of the history of art, from prehistory to the present day. Expanding the technical boundaries of representation, he nonetheless remains rooted in the tradition of painting, following in the footsteps of great artists including Francisco de Goya, Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso.

Born in 1957 in Felanitx, Mallorca, Miquel Barceló lives and works between Paris and Mallorca. He studied at Palma de Mallorca Fine Arts School, and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Barcelona. In 1976, he was involved in the protests of Taller Llnàtic, an avant-garde conceptual group with an environmental focus. 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 Venice Biennale. His work has been exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (1996); Musée du Louvre, Paris (2004); Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (2005); Bibliothèque nationale de France; and the Picasso Museums of Paris (2016) and Málaga (2021). A retrospective was dedicated to the artist at the National Museum of Art, Osaka in 2021, and over the course of the following year travelled throughout Japan to Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum, Nagasaki; Mie Prefectural Art Museum, Tsu; and Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Tokyo.

Miquel Barceló's public commissions include large-scale installations for the Cathedral of Palma de Mallorca (2001–06) and the United Nations, Geneva (2008). His work is part of important international collections including Centre Pompidou and Musée du Louvre, Paris; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Guggenheim, Bilbao; British Museum, London; and Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. A painting from the *Grisailles* series was exhibited at the Louvre in Paris (2022–23).



Miquel Barceló, 2022. Photo: Charles Duprat

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