

Miquel Barceló

La Grotte Chaumont

Permanent exhibition | Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, France

Miquel Barceló is a multifaceted artist whose artistic ability and vital appetite are somewhat reminiscent of Pablo Picasso's. He is a popular artist on the international contemporary art circuit. Painting is at the core of this great traveller's work. 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.

He is well known for his experimental approach and enjoys inventing materials and techniques. Barceló's style explores decomposition, light and natural landscapes through the use of bleach, organic matter and even living insects. He graduated from the School of Decorative Arts in Palma de Mallorca in 1973 and travelled to Paris the same year, which is where he first discovered Art Brut and Art Informel thanks to artworks by Jean Dubuffet, Antoni Tàpies, Jean Fautrier and Wols, who were his first sources of artistic inspiration.

"Just like Cervantès, Barceló loves to travel, speaks several languages, is a joker, is influenced by Arabia, is obsessed by the body and its wounds, is both epic and intimate and plays with death in all shapes and sizes, with extreme seriousness. His work is vast, a blend of tacit expression and tactile discoveries, and can be summarised in two paintings: *Gran Animal Europeu* (1991) and *Memorial Soup* (1987). The first piece is an African buffalo or Sevillian bull whose tortured and torn skin reveals a furious disarray of mixed colours. The second is a painting with silhouettes that almost resemble cave art, allowing the texture of the materials, the instability of the elements and an uncertain luminosity to emerge." explained art critic Maxime Prodromidès for the *Encyclopedia Universalis*.

From the 1990s, Miquel Barceló turned to sculpture and ceramics. That is when his very unique animals emerged, as well as zoomorphic atmospheres with a captivating oddness. An unrepentant researcher and observer of nature both on land and underwater — the artist is a keen diver —, Barceló has collected many items which he then uses in his work in diverse, varied shapes and sizes, often presented as protrusions.

His work frequently portrays Prehistoric cave art and invents shapes that the very first humans might have used. "I often believe that my career is a race back in time. In 1982-1983, my painting resembled that of a European contemporary artist, but now I consider my work to be much closer to cave art from 15,000 or 20,000 years ago. Because time is not a concept and everything is contemporary, I classify myself as 'as contemporary as the Chauvet caves,'" he said in an interview for France Culture in December 2022.

Miquel Barceló is obsessed with the practical aspect of his work and spends hours "doing, undoing and redoing" so that "things start happening". He believes that ceramic is a type of paint and enjoys treating them as equals. His highly physical approach to creation can be applied equally to both. Using this approach to work with clay was an obvious choice. He has followed Picasso, Fontana and Miró on this path, but started at a much younger age. Everything is dead and alive at the same time. It is a sort of vanitas that is renewed over and over again.

At the heart of a thicket, the monster of *La Grotte Chaumont* shows visitors the back of its throat, presented to resemble an underwater cave. Its stalactite-like teeth threaten to close down in an instant, creating before us the concept of a world that is either just forming or being swallowed up. Could that be Jonah standing on the edge of the whale? The hieratic figure, nude like Adam, seems to be waiting to be regurgitated onto dry land. And what does the red colour between two of its teeth represent? A tongue? Certainly not! Maybe an item of clothing like in the scene painted by Pieter Lastman in 1621. Yet more proof that the artist never stops painting, and that his artwork represents the vast thread of art history that connects Chauvet cave to Chaumont's very own cave.