BOMBLOG

ART

Miquel Barceló

by Colm Tóibín Nov 18, 2013

Colm Tóibín and Miquel Barceló on Walt Disney, looking like animals and when painting is better than real life.

Colm, 2011. Bleach, chalk, and charcoal on linen. 46 1/2×35 inches. Art © Miquel Barceló, 2011. Photo © Agustí Torres, 2012.

Miquel Barceló was in New York in October for the opening of an exhibition of new paintings at the Acquavella Galleries. One of the upstairs rooms contained portraits he had done using bleach, including a portrait he had done of me in his studio in Mallorca in the summer of 2011. The other galleries contained new work using the color white. On the day after the opening I met him downtown to

talk about his work.

COLM TÓIBÍN In *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, Hans Castorp sees an X-ray of himself for the first time, and it's almost erotic, he sees what really his soul or his body, what the X-ray has done. There's something about your recent paintings that have that element of looking at X-Rays. Could you tell me technically how the paintings are made?

MIQUEL BARCELÓ It's bleached canvas. In the beginning, I used black paper or board and bleach and a little bit of white chalk.

CT Just to get the outline?

MB Yes. And always with the model in front of me. I can't use pictures—I have tried at times but it is not the same. . . something happens with the real model that can never happen with pictures.

CT So you have the black canvas and then you get the bleach. When you were doing the portrait of me, one of the things I noticed was that you had to work very fast.

MB I do it fast because I don't know how to do it slowly.

CT Because it's so thin.

MB Yes, and you don't see what happens until the day after. You believe it happens but you don't know. I now use several canvases. . . linen, cotton, and velvet. Cotton is faster and you only see a little bit, because of the humidity in the air. It's funny, because the day after it is a big surprise—sometimes it is very good and sometimes not so good.

CT It is not like taking a photograph. These portraits are very severe and I love mine, but my friends think, How could you let this happen to you, because you look like an animal and I said, "Well I am an animal!"

MB That is why I can't make self-portraits in this. I've made many self-portraits in the past. But in bleach, I can't. . . I made my mother, my daughter, my son, the people close to me, but not me.

CT Your portrait of your mother is very like you.

MB Yes, I guess it is kind of like a self-portrait.

CT I wonder if the reason why you don't make self-portraits in this system is that you are almost painting somebody as though they are dead, of bone, of flesh falling off.

MB Yes, but I'm not afraid to see that in myself. In paintings in the past, I've made portraits that are very strong, like my skull. To make a self-portrait, I need a mirror. With bleach, it's always the eyes and hands work something like a camera. It is very close to photography, but before photography and painting separate. Photography is a chemical process and my art is like photography but my hand makes the chemistry. There is a point very early, where photography is like a technique of paint. It's okay to be in between, because something interesting happens when photography goes one way and paint another.

CT Yes, your hand is the chemistry, the chemical.

MB And nothing to do with photorealism, it is nothing like that. Just the light, and the insulation.

CT Is it important that you know the person?

MB Yeah, but sometimes no. I think it is important—I make more portraits of

people I know than people I don't know.

Barceló's studio.

CT I don't think you're interested in psychology or in capturing someone's mind so much as their body in a flash.

MB Yes, the most important thing though is what I realize after. Your portrait, this animality. . . I never imagined that. (*laughter*) It's just something that is evident for us after it is finished, the day after I say, "Wow, it's like a wild animal" but I never think, "Colm looks like an animal."

CT We were talking about the most civilized things, and then I come out [in the painting] as this feral animal, all bone, all hunger and actually I feel like that, but usually at night.

When I saw your early notebooks from when you were sixteen—which are in Paris—you've got your algebra lessons, calculus, mathematics, as well as drawings. . . Almost everything that interested you was there in that first notebook. Is that correct? Could you give me a list of the things that interest you?

MB I remember painting the profiles of the girls I liked. Because in school, you always see the profiles. I remember I started at the forehead, but now I start at the chin. I made the same profile many times and you see some change, because profiles change a lot. You see profiles in ceramic, paint, in all the ages from the very young to the very old. I think my sketchbook is very ugly; the animals and the fruit and changing things.

CT Things dying.

In Spain, in those years, everyone had to go and do one year of military service under the dictatorship. People had a really terrible time in that year, and they changed with all the discipline and the uniforms and the guns; it really changed people from very sweet teenagers to quite different adults.

MB That time for me was a nightmare, I knew I could not go through that. I copied paper money and thought that maybe I could make fakes in the future.

CT Oh, right, you could counterfeit money.

MB And I have a bill in blue, but the original is green. I made copies in blue, but in bulk size. It is not so bad, I thought with all the details, maybe I could use it. Otherwise, you know this was a big question in the 1970s, How do you make a living?

CT Was your mother painting at that time?

MB Yes, my mother did oil paintings. She would give me the colors very fast. I had watercolors—I love watercolors, I still use them. My mother would see Paul Klee, Picasso, Manet. I remember we would look at Manet's pictures and say: For that color, to do that thing you need more paint. And with oil you can use the knife, not with watercolor. When I started to paint, she never painted again.

CT When you started she stopped?

MB Yes, yes. Even in the last years I asked her, "Why won't you try this acrylic color?" and I gave her acrylic paints, but she never wants to paint. She just does embroidery, as you know.

CT Your mother makes these extraordinary embroideries, really enormous sheets, like tapestries. She embroiders all these animals—fish and undersea life in these different colors. Exquisite, extremely beautiful.

MB But it is not paint because paint is something forbidden for her. It is very curious. I mean, my mother made copies of Pissaro, things like that. I have many memories of my mother since she stayed at home—she showed me the first paintings I had ever seen. But she decided to be she could not be a painter unless she could continue further into it.

CT When did you see Picasso's work first?

MB Oh when I was very young. Picasso was like a hero. I remember when he died I was very sad, crying. My first hero was Walt Disney, when I was seven or eight.

Miquel Barceló, *Dore*, 2013. Bleach, chalk, and charcoal on velvet. 61×35 7/8 inches. Courtesy Acquavella Galleries. Art © Miquel Barceló, 2013. Photo © André, Morin, 2013.

CT Walt Disney, really?

MB Yes, I loved Walt Disney. It is so modern. Not so much now because it is this big industry, but his first movies, in black and white with Mickey Mouse, were fabulous. When he died I was very sad because the feeling is like that of an

orphan or something. But they put in ice the body of Walt Disney, saying that in some years we can—

CT —bring him back to life.

MB Yes, well maybe it's true. (*laughter*) But in '72 when Picasso died. . . how old was I? Fifteen probably. I didn't like Walt Disney anymore but I loved Picasso. I had just seen Picasso in books, but he was my first hero, much more than any other. For everything. Not just because of his painting, but because he made everything. Cubists, portraits, sculptures, ceramics, crazy projects, everything. Movies… And it was all good.

CT I stayed in your house in Majorca, and if anybody asked me about you, I'd say, "He works incredibly hard. He's up very early, and if he appears in the morning from the studio—always wet with paint—for a quick coffee and nothing else, he runs back to the studio and then has a short lunch." You really work.

MB It's a very physical thing to work in paint. That's the reason why I like the change from paint to clay to portrait because repetition makes me melancholic, and melancholy is static in my case. Because I am more than 50, I know that. If I feel this repetition of things, the same technique and I know a technique perfectly well, I have this feeling to copy myself is akin to depression. Something has collapsed and nothing happens. When in this feeling, this cycle, I learn a new thing and sometimes a new technique too to break this.

CT You get low energy from sadness?

MB Well maybe, but it is not good. Some of my favorite paintings are from a very sad period because my love had left me or something like that. But in that moment, painting was better than my life. That happened many times. (*laughter*)

CT I suppose there are two other things: One of them is that if you, on those days in Majorca, go anywhere, it's in the water. And in the water, you are very like a fish. You can go down under the water for a long time, and almost actually be part of the water.

MB Being in the water is very close to painting. For years, I painted on the floor in the studio.

CT The canvas is flat on the floor, it's not on the wall.

MB I walk in and the movement is like deep in the sea.

CT It's like swimming—it's like diving.

MB Diving. Even probably in the moment that I make a stroke, I take a respiration. (*breathes in*) Like diving, to conserve the energy or something. You go in and out, in and out. The movement of a painter goes in and back. I move this way but more radically.

CT I sort of felt that you were going down into the water looking for colors.

MB Yeah and when I was young I would catch octopus or squid or fish. Now I don't kill anything anymore, but see I will never make peace with them. (*laughter*) When I was fourteen I killed thousands of them. When I was that age I always had a spear, and I killed big fishes every single day, in the morning and in the afternoon. For me, diving is very very close to paint. To float in space, you are parallel; in the sea it happens down. And sometimes we are underwater for more than two minutes; we are still. If you move in that space, you lose oxygen.

CT Tell me about when you went to Paris for the first time and why.

MB I did student travel when I was 15 or 16 and I remember everybody wanted

to go to Greece, and I decided to go to Paris instead to see the museums. I finally went to Paris and I remember the Louvre a little bit, but I remember a Toulouse-Lautrec painting, the ones he did of the prostitute dancer, on treated linen. He made these fantastic pieces, and I remember thinking, Wow this is fantastic. I remember I would see some American paintings—Pollock, and others. Also the work of Dubuffet; I had never seen the real paintings but I had heard things about them and Rauschenberg, very abstract. It was something very real, not like in photographs.

CT When you can see the actual paint?

MB Yes. There is something different than the formal art. The other thing that happened at that time in Paris was not at the museums, but the conceptual art. Much later I saw Beuys and people like that, but when I was 15, I was more interested in Dubuffet, Rauschenberg; that kind of painter. Fontana, I loved Fontana. Even now I love him. I like the violence of Fontana, him working with gray; it is the right thing. On canvas he put a lot of paint in gray, because gray is like flesh. When he made holes, there this is this resistance, but canvas is not resistant, it is too easy to make holes on. But in gray, it is much more effective.

CT And when did you go to live in Paris?

MB In ’83. First I lived for a year in Naples. Because Lucio Amelio invited me, and it was just after the big earthquake, it destroyed the city almost. There were also many small ones, and it was really scary but in that time Amelio invited Andy Warhol, Beuys, and all these transnational artists. I first saw Andy Warhol in Napoli but I met him really in New York some years after, in ’85. But in ’83 I spent one year, or nine months really, in Herculano, in the bay of Napoli. There were all these Roman ruins in the city of Pompeii, I visited there a lot along with the Archaeological Museum, and Cy Twombly visited every weekend. He became a very good friend until he died because he loved paint, and talking about paint, Velazquez. He could spend one afternoon talking about the hands of Michelangelo. He had a very good eye, especially for paint.

CT And did you meet Warhol there as well?

MB No, we knew each other mostly in New York, I met him but not really. With Twombly we were good friends in that way. And Twombly was very interested in my work. He said, “It’s very weird because most painters are gay and you are not. That’s very strange.” (*laughter*) Maybe it’s true because you know all of this group were gay. Very few were heterosexual in the group around Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and the others.

CT Just you and Lucian Freud. (*laughter*)

MB I never ask artists if they are gay or not. Do you think it is relevant to their work?

CT No, no.

MB It is just a fact.

CT Yes. I think it gives you a sort of freedom in your twenties and thirties, a freedom from domestic life, the normal business of having to spend a year with a child waking up in the night, I think it really makes a difference. Whereas if in that year you could do nothing instead, or just go for a walk or go to Naples.

MB Cy Twombly had a family before that.

CT Oh yeah, he had both.

MB But in Naples in this time, it was very good because I started to work in galleries and was able to compare my work to contemporary artists that I liked. That’s more important than to be alone on the island. And after that I went to

Paris just with the idea of spending the summer and making an exhibition with Yvon Lambert in September. But Paris had fantastic studios and they gave me a 5,000 square meter 19th century church; it was huge to me and was like, *wow*. Near the Pantheon.

CT You mean they gave you a church as a studio?

MB Yes, as a studio. In the beginning I was near the Bastille in a big place, but two months after my show was finished, someone proposed that I use this big church for some years, and that's why I stayed in Paris. It's a little bit cold in the winter, but having this church was the best studio I could ever have. I could use the side chapels and the front big one; I could make paintings for the side chapels as well. All the paintings of libraries and Louvre interiors are from that time. Libraries, Louvre interiors, movie theaters, you see the movies paintings with the black screen? (*shows Tóibín the painting in a book*)

CT Ah yes, that's a wonderful painting of the interior of the cinema and the light.

MB That looks very much like a church, which I transformed into a movie theater. That's '84. But Paris, for me, is always likeable. I love movies; I would see more than one movie a day. I loved the bookshops and talking with the owners. I am friends with several of them in Paris. In Barcelona, it is a different town. Paris is a fantastic town for movie theaters, bookstores, museums, flea markets, and bars. I love all those things. New York too, but it is too cold and distant for me.

CT When you began to paint the bullrings or when you made these new portraits, you have a tradition going back very far that so many other people—for example Velazquez or even Picasso—have worked within—

MB Since I just saw the Velazquez show in Madrid, it is very present in my mind. But I think yesterday was the first time I thought, Oh I think my portraits are a little bit like Velazquez, which is probably true, but I never had thought of that.

Marcella, 2012. Bleach, chalk, and charcoal on linen. 29 1/2×21 1/4 inches. Courtesy Acquavella Galleries. Art © Miquel Barceló, 2012. Photo © André Morin, 2013.

CT So when you're working, you don't think? There is never any weight on you?

MB No, never. Now I recognize things from the past in my work. It is never voluntary though, I never make citations.

CT I was thinking more that, say, if a poet writes an elegy, that they have on their mind the other elegies, elegies written in the 16th century, 19th century, or the 20th century. You feel that you're actually part of a tradition of writing an elegy.

MB I think it is very unlike poetry. I never have the feeling to make a citation, and after when they see my paintings my friends say, "Well you can make a relationship with the Jasper Johns targets, etc." But I never consider this in the moment of painting, never.

CT Because you're too busy with your hand?

MB I don't like the idea to make a citation, probably in the beginning. . .

CT When you say a citation do you mean an open visual reference?

MB Yes.

CT You don't do that.

MB No, if something seems too obvious, I remove it.

CT Really.

MB In the beginning the painting of libraries are very obvious—the name of the books, and authors, like Borges. I prefer when it is not so obvious. But there is a lot probably that is involuntary; I like those not-so-evident references more.

CT How do you feel that people who are younger than you, who are visual artists, are not painting?

MB Oh I have many friends that are very curious about paint because it does a magic thing.

CT But there are so many people that just don't paint anymore.

MB Yeah, it's very strange no?

CT That's like saying you write short stories but you don't write novels. Oh come on. You could do it.

MB People make drawings, not paintings. It's funny because one of the artists said, well—you know I am very interested in art from 55,000 years ago, more and more. I think I have a career in the past. I visit these caves all the time and am part of the scientific committee of the Chauvet cave. . .

CT So you go to those caves?

MB Yes, many times. Even for research they are asking me to help to recommend them, and it is a great pleasure for me to go to the caves. Anyways in talking to this young artist I know, a very good friend, they were saying to me, "Well all those caves, they are drawings not paintings." (*laughter*) It's so tricky you know because it is kilograms of color falling down with the hands, they practically are fabulous paintings.

Houlographie, 2012. White titanium pigment and polyvinyl acetate on linen. 48 1/4×69 3/4 inches. Courtesy Acquavella Galleries. Art © Miquel Barceló, 2012. Photo © André Morin, 2013.

CT But you don't work with pencil.

MB With pencil? I do, yes.

CT Oh, in the notebooks, but you are always adding things in the paintings, they are always becoming in paintings.

MB I like to invent the materials. I think it is a part of my job, to invent new techniques. The right technique for everything.

CT Talk to me about the white paintings, the new paintings that are white. Just technically, how you do them.

MB The ones of the waves? I put the color and after I just. . . (*begins flipping through book*) It is simple, always very simple. I just let gravity pull. That's one of the white paintings in the moment that I spread it. Maybe there are twenty kilograms of paint in each line. And after I put the canvas and just tilt it and the paint pours and moves slowly. Sometimes it is so heavy; the painting is so huge so sometimes it is hard to tilt. Here you see the circular paintings, which is another business. It is like an explosion. There is sun and shadow.

CT It is a bullring—sun and shadow, two parts of a bullring. You pay more money for shadow if you are going to a bullfight in Spain.

MB There is very little shadow; it is all sun. The sun is like the Buddhist circles in fire.

CT So what did you use to make the circle. . . your hand?

MB Yes, I love to make circles with my hand. It is not perfect.

CT You don't use a brush?

MB Sometimes. Sometimes I use a brush to finish the work. Here I remember making the circle and turning the canvas.

CT So you turn it around and the paint does the work for you.

MB Yes. This one is sol, sol. Sun, sun. It is half of an arena with sun places.

CT So there is half sand on the top.

MB And it is falling down.

Colm Tóibín is an Irish novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, journalist, critic and poet. He is also a Contributing Editor to BOMB.

Miquel Barceló's show is on view at Aquavella Galleries through November 22, 2013.

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